ADA CAMBRIDGE

THE RETROSPECT

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
COMING HOME

There was a gap of thirty-eight years, almost to a day, between my departure from England (1870), a five-weeks-old young bride, and my return thither (1908), an old woman. And for about seven-eighths of that long time in Australia, while succeeding very well in making the best of things, I was never without a subconscious sense of exile, a chronic nostalgia, that could hardly bear the sight of a homeward-bound ship. This often-tantalised but ever-unappeased desire to be back in my native land wore the air of a secret sorrow gently shadowing an otherwise happy life, while in point of fact it was a considerable source of happiness in itself, as I now perceive. For where would be the interest and inspiration of life without something to want that you cannot get, but that it is open to you to try for? I tried hard to bridge the distance to my goal for over thirty years, working, planning, failing, starting again, building a thousand air-castles, more or less, and seeing them burst like soap-bubbles as soon as they began to materialise; then I gave up. The children had grown too old to be taken; moreover, they had attained to wills of their own and did not wish to go. One had fallen to the scythe of the indiscriminate Reaper, and that immense loss dwindled all other losses to nothing at all. I cared no more where I lived, so long as the rest were with me. In England my father and mother, who had so longed for me, as I for them, were in their graves; no old home was left to go back to. I was myself a grandmother, in spite of kindly and even vehement assurances that I did not look it; more than that, I *could* have been a great-grandmother without violating the laws of nature. At any rate, I felt that I was past the age for enterprises. It was too late now, I concluded, and so what was the use of fussing any more? In short, I sat down to content myself with the inevitable.

I was doing it. I had been doing it for several years. The time had come when I could look out of window any Tuesday morning, watch a homeward-bound mail-boat put her nose to sea, and turn from the spectacle without a pang. The business of building air-castles flourished, as of yore, but their bases now rested on Australian soil. What was left of the future was all planned out, satisfactorily, even delightfully, and England was not in it.

Then was the time for the unexpected to happen, and it did. A totally undreamed-of family legacy, with legal business attached to it, called my husband home. Even then it did not strike me that I was called too; for quite a considerable time it did not strike him either. But there befell a period of burning summer heat, the intensity and duration of which broke all past records of our State and established it as a historic event for future Government meteorologists; the weaklings of the community succumbed to it outright or emerged from it physically prostrate, and I, who had encountered it in a "run-down" condition, was of the latter company. The question: "Was I fit to be left?" obtruded itself into the settled policy: it logically resolved itself into the further question: "Was I fit to go?" There was nothing whatever to prevent my going if I could "stand" it, and a long sea-voyage had been doctors' prescription for me for years. Mysteriously and, as it were, automatically, I brisked up from the moment the second question was propounded, and before I knew it found myself enrolled as a member of the expedition. The two-berth cabin was engaged; travelling trunks, and clothes to put in them, bestrewed my bedroom floor. I was going home – at last!

And was it too late? Had I outlived my long, long hope? Not a bit of it. I had outlived nothing, and it was exactly and ideally the right time. "You will be disappointed," said more than one of my travelled old friends, who had known the extravagance of my anticipations. "It will be sad for you,

finding all so strange and changed." "You will feel dreadfully out of it, after so many years." "You will be very lonely" – thus was I compassionately warned not to let a too sanguine spirit run away with me. They were all wrong. I never had a disappointment: nothing was sad for me, of all the change; no one could have been less out of it, or less lonely. Every English day of the whole six months was full of pleasure; I was not even bored for an hour. At no time of my life could I have made the trip with a lighter heart (being assured weekly that all was well behind me). Children would have meant a burden, however precious a burden, and had I gone in my parents' lifetime it would have been with them and me as our ship's captain said it was with his wife during his brief sojourns with her; for half the time she was overwrought with the joy of his return, and for the other half miserable in anticipation of his departure, so that he never knew her in her normal state. That my father and mother had long been dead, and that the tragedies of home love and loss, with which I was so familiar, were not pressing close about me, probably accounted more than anything else for my being so well and happy. Also, it is not until a woman is sixty, or thereabouts, that she is really free to enjoy herself.

Well! I never was so well since I was born. The long sea-voyage did all that was asked of it, and incidentally brought home to me the truth of the old adage that silver lines all clouds. "If only we were not so far away!" had been my inward wail for eight and thirty years. "If only we had emigrated to Canada, or South Africa, or almost any part of the British Empire but this! Then we might have flown home every few years as easily as we now go from Melbourne to Sydney, and at no more expense." I have the same regret, intensified, now that I am back in Australia again. But there is no gain without its corresponding loss. Not only might the joys of England after exile have become staled by this time, but a voyage of a week or two would not have prepared me to make the most of them. I am convinced that years of health and life are given to those who, at the right juncture, can afford six weeks of sea-travel at a stretch, and they may have been given to me and my companion; I quite believe so. Each of us was a stone heavier at the end of our holiday than at the beginning, and in the interval we forgot that we were a day over twenty-five.

Consider for a moment the perfect adjustment of the conditions to the needs of the invalid with no disease but exhaustion. I pass over the special favours vouchsafed to me, in idyllic weather and tranquil seas, and the mothering of a devoted stewardess who is my friend for life; also in finding quiet and pleasant company in a saloon party of but eighteen. That sort of luck cannot be purchased even with a first-class steamer ticket, nor is it necessary to the efficacy of the treatment. Take only the itinerary – that of the Suez route at a suitable season – as it may be observed by anybody.

First, the run across the Indian Ocean – in the case of the mail-steamers from Adelaide to Colombo, in our case from Adelaide to Aden. Three whole weeks, without a break, without an incident, if all goes well. I had never imagined the sea could be so blank as it presented itself to us on this first section of our voyage. Ships may have passed in the night, but I saw none by day; no land, no birds, no whales, no phosphorescent wakes, no anything, except sea and sky and lovely sunsets. It may have been monotonous, but it was monotony in the right place. It brought to me, at the outset, that complete rest from all effort and excitement which was the necessary preliminary to recovery and repair. I reposed on my comfortable lounge from morn till eve, playing with a trifle of needlework (too stupid with blissful torpor to read, while the strangeness of quite idle hands would have induced the fidgets, sea-drugged as I was). I ate, and slept, and basked, like a soulless animal; forgot there were such things as posts and newspapers, as dinner-planning and stocking-mending, as calls and committee-meetings; forgot that I was the mother of a family, and had abandoned it for the first time in history; forgot whether I was ill or well, or had nerves or not; and thus soaked and steeped and soddened in peace, insensibly renewed and established my strength, not patching it anyhow just to carry on with, as one does on land, with a casual week at a watering-place or in the mountains, but unhurriedly, uninterruptedly, solidly, rebuilding it from the bottom up.

Then, when strength becomes aware that it is ready for use – at the moment when one begins to feel that the monotony has lasted long enough – then back comes the delightful world, with a new

face of beauty to match the new ardour of love for it that has been silently generating within us. All the light of enterprising and romantic youth was in the gaze I levelled through my binoculars (given to me for my voyage in 1870) at the first substantial token that I was in the gorgeous East, one of the fairylands of imagination (comprising, roughly, all the unknown earth) from the days of infancy when I learned to read. It was an Arab dhow. I knew that pointed wing as well as I knew the shape of chimney-pots, but the wonder that I was seeing it with my bodily eyes, even as a speck upon the horizon, was overwhelming. I stared and stared, but could not speak.

The rest was pure enchantment. As we drew near to the magnificent rock of Aden – hateful place, I know, to its white inhabitants, and an old tale not worth mentioning to the average Australian tourist – I said, in my ecstasy: "This pays for the voyage, if we see nothing more." The first white-awninged launch that bustled up to us, manned by two nondescripts, one huge Nubian negro and one beautiful Somali boy, bore through the brilliant air and water an official gentleman who probably would have sold his soul for a London fog; it was not he, but another official gentleman who swallowed nearly a bottle of ship's brandy while attending to ship's business, and was presented with another bottle on his departure by a sympathiser who understood his case. It was a hot morning in the middle of May, and I had been accustomed from my youth to atmospheric light and colour as glorious as the radiant setting of this strange outpost of Empire in the East. Evidently it is in the eye (backed by a strong imagination) of the gazer that poetic beauty lies.

After this, the unspeakable experiences followed thick and fast. Night in the Straits, with Venus so bright that she cast a reflection like moonlight across the water; the Red Sea in the morning – minarets on the horizon, and those rocks of desolation, with the loneliest human dwelling conceivable (the arcaded lighthouse) on the top of one of the most impressively desolate; that other lighthouse at the gulf entrance, with its flashing rays of red and white, its rock-base velvety purple against a solemn sunset sky; Mount Sinai amongst the hills of Holy Land; the majestic desert of so many dreams. Time was when I sniffed at the colour of Holman Hunt's "Scapegoat" landscape, but here it was, translated into living light, but no fainter in tint than the dead paint had made it. Sapphires were not in it with that blue-green sea at Suez, in which the jostling bumboats floated as in clearest glass. The rocky shores to left were mauve, the right-hand desert and Holman-Hunty hummocks salmon-pink, and no mortal painter was ever born, or ever will be, to "get" the bloomy glow and fairy delicacy of Nature's textures and technique. The Eastern sun blazed broadly over the scene, the temperature at noon was ninety-nine degrees in the shade; the composition was perfect.

Between tea-time and dinner we passed out of the city and close to its domestic doorsteps – the closest I had yet come to Eastern life; and long after we were in the canal it was a picture to look back upon from which I could not tear my eyes. Low on the gleaming water – the two towns linked by the dark thread of the railway embankment, brooded over by that majestic mauve and violet hill – it was a vision of beauty indeed as the light effects changed from moment to moment with the sinking of the gorgeous sun. I could afford no time to dress that night. In my hat, as I was, I snatched a mouthful of dinner, and was up again on deck, to make the most of the short twilight; and so I saw the shadowy last of Suez and more than I expected to see of the canal.

"Just a little ditch in the sand," somebody had told me, as one might say, a primrose by the river's brim was nothing more. Apart from its otherwise tremendous significance, that narrow watercourse was a highway of romance to me. Egypt – Arabia – the very names set one's heart thumping. It would be thrilling to be there even if one were blind. The silence of the desert is more eloquent than any sound. But from the most unsentimental point of view it was a ditch of varied aspects, that only the dullest traveller could call uninteresting.

The Canal Company, it appeared, was widening it to double its original measure across, top and bottom – something like a ten years' job, with millions of money and priceless brain-matter in it – and we saw the engineers at work. That is to say, they were not at work at the moment, because the day's task was done; but there were their excavations and machinery, fine and effective, and I

can never look at such, apprehending their meaning, without a lifting of the heart, a sense of the beauty that is in the world unrecognised by that name. What, I wondered, did my schoolgirl idol and apostle of beauty, Ruskin, think of this ditch when it was a-making? Did he say? If, to my knowledge, he had called it a desecration of Nature, I should instantly have agreed with him. Now, to my life-educated eyes and soul, the very Holy Land was sanctified by the faithful endeavour and achievement evidenced in haulage-trucks and pipe-lines and those twin steel rails that he hated so much, telling all their serious story to whoever could understand it.

It was indeed a beautiful as well as an instructive picture, that left bank, as we moved beside it. The native labourers, after their work, squatted in their little camps and dug-outs, and in the sand, or stood statue-like to watch our passing, sharply silhouetted figures and groups against the translucent sky, each a "study" that, if in a gallery, one would go miles to see. Strings of camels were being led to water or were wending homeward with their loads. Little encampments straight out of the Bible, desert palm-trees, desert distances, all in the golden afterglow, the clear-shining twilight, the evening peace that was too peaceful for words, were gems for the collector of poetic impressions, to be for ever cherished and preserved. And then how striking was the rare glimpse of a Saxon face, the glance at us of grave eyes that one knew had the all-governing brain behind them. The British Occupation in Egypt – there it was, in the person of that lonely man in tent or boat-house, advance agent of the Civilisation that spells Prosperity in whatever part of the world it goes. One of these, out riding with a lady, rode down to the water's edge to watch us pass. In their white garb they were perfectly groomed, like their beautiful Arab horses, which they sat in a style that was good to see; but they were pathetic figures, with that lonely waste around them. I divined a deadly homesickness in the eyes that followed our progress as long as we could be seen, the same ache of the heart that afflicted me, for so many years, whenever I saw a ship going to England without me. Yet one could be quite sure that they never dreamed of slipping cables on their own account as long as duty to the Empire held them where they were. Not the man, at any rate.

And so it grew too dark to see anything beyond the edge of our searchlight, which showed only post-heads in the water, and I went to bed.

I was asleep when we passed Ismailia, contrary to my intentions, but I got up at four o'clock, to lose no more. Still unbroken desert to the right; to the left a well-made embankment with a roadway atop, and behind that a belt of bamboos and greenery, telegraph lines and a railway, broken at intervals by the oases of the *gares*. An American navy-boat made way for us at one of these, a pair of submarines conspicuous on her deck. At a little before five the sun of a lovely morning rose on our starboard side, and one saw the desert wet and dark, yielding its immemorial savagery to the civilising hand and brain. One of the fine up-to-date dredges, amongst the many dredges, was pumping the mud up on the land as it sucked it from the canal bottom. In the shining sun-flushed pools of its creation black forms of storks moved statelily, apparently finding nourishment already where there had been none before. On the left bank there was the embodied spirit of progress again, doubtless looking at his work and on the way to expedite it; white-clothed, white-helmeted, enthroned on a railway trolly, which a bare-legged native ran along the line as it were a perambulator on ball bearings, two more natives sitting upon it, ready to take turns with him at the job. Lifting the eye slightly, one saw open water along the sky behind them, a flashing, glittering strip, studded with forty-two lateen sails that might have been carved of mother o' pearl; and almost immediately, straight ahead, a low mass of something as yet misty and formless in the dazzling rose and gold of the morning, reminiscent of Suez in its sunset transfiguration – Port Said, less than an hour from us.

It was Sunday, and divine service in the reading-room had been arranged. Soon after six, at about the time of passing the Gare de Naz-el-ech, passengers began to come up, a few with prayer-book in hand. But divine service was "off," by order of the captain – a religious man, very regular in his attendance at public worship. He knew how it would be at seven-thirty, when we were going to drop anchor in the port at seven, and that was exactly how it was – every inch of ship overrun with

ardent pedlars, while coaling from the great lighters, three or four lashed abreast, was in full swing. I may as well say at once that for me, as for nearly all the passengers (my own companion, who declared himself quite happy in his choice, being the only member of the saloon party to stay at home), that Sunday, as a Sunday, has to be wiped off the slate entirely, posted as missing amongst the Sabbath days of life. I must confess further that it was the most delightful (so called) Sunday I ever spent. At last I did more than see the Gorgeous East of lifelong dreams; I felt it, I had speech with it. In a select party, headed by the dear woman who, apart from her solid social position, was the chief pillar of the church on board, I was permitted to go ashore. I had the free use of six hours to do what I liked in.

In the half-hour before breakfast I did exciting business with the bumboatmen. I bought a piece of tapestry, representing camels, palm-trees, mosques and the like, which the native vendor assured me was handmade in Egyptian prisons, though in my heart of hearts I knew better; also brooches and bracelets which seemed dirt cheap at two and three shillings apiece, the exact counterparts of which I afterwards bought at William Whiteley's for sixpence ha'penny. As soon after breakfast as we could get our letters ready, I was rowed through the jewel-bright water into the world of fairy tales. Oh, I know what Port Said is to those familiar with it, and I could have seen for myself, had I wished to see, that the Gorgeous East could be flimsy and tawdry, even ugly, here and there; but it *was* the East, and that was enough; the glamour of the rosy spectacles beautified all. Nothing was easier than to forget and ignore what would doubtless be impossible to overlook on a second visit, and impossible to put up with on a third or fourth.

Having arrived at the centre of things, we appointed an hour for luncheon at the Hotel Continental, and split our party into twos and threes. An unattached man took charge of me and another unattached lady, and escorted us about the town and to the shops which alone attracted her (for she knew Port Said already). Wonderful shops, too, some of them were, and it was no wasted time I spent roaming about them, while she gave her attention to spangled scarves and lace; but the lattice-veiled windows of the mysterious dwelling-rooms above them, and the flowing and glowing life of the narrow streets, were what I had come to see. It was delightful to return to the pavement under the Continental, and there sit, with a cold and bubbling lemon drink, in one of the low chairs which so hospitably invite the wayfarer, to watch the stream of mingling East and West go by, and its eddies around one – the veiled native lady touching skirts with the breezy English girl; the turbaned sherbet seller, his remarkable brazen ewer under his arm, dodging the swift bicycle; the oily-eyed and sodden rapscallion of the Levant, or the bejewelled and bepowdered person no better than she should be, elbowing the spare young cleric slipping through these dangerous places on his way to the Pan-Anglican Congress. And the stranger contrasts on the wide, tiled side-walk, a continuous outdoor café rather than a promenade – Frenchmen playing dominoes, swarthy traders doing secret business over their drinks; passengers from the various ships in port, mothers and aunts with children by the hand; here and there the habitual tourist, easily identified; here and there the impeccably clothed, clean-limbed white figure, whose high bearing and bluff dignity proclaimed the important person – soldier of distinction, big-game-hunting lord of leisure, powerful Government official, as the case might be. All up and down, around the low tables, faces of all nations, speech of all languages, and, as an undercurrent, the incessantly made gentle appeal for notice from the dark-skinned pedlars sinuously navigating the narrow channels between the chairs, with their cheap jewellery and picture post-cards and puzzle walking-sticks, trying how far they could go under the eye of the Egyptian policeman, standing ready to order them over the curb at the first sign of unwelcome pertinacity.

For a good half-hour we sat at ease, in the middle of this picture, and I enjoyed myself surpassingly. Then a little more shopping on behalf of my still unsatisfied lady companion, and then the gathering of the whole seven of our landing party at the appointed rendezvous for luncheon. We were ready for the meal, and it was not the least memorable of the æsthetic pleasures of that "Sunday out." I am told it was simply as a meal ashore, after many meals at sea, that I found it so delectable, but in justice to the courteous French proprietor, as he seemed to be, who himself took charge of our

table, and for my own credit as a connoisseur, I deny that assertion, made only by those who were not there. I declare, on my honour, that, apart from the good cookery, the bread, butter and beer of the Hotel Continental at Port Said – such a seemingly unlikely place in which to find them so – were the best I ever tasted. Particularly the bread. One of the remaining ambitions of my life is to find out whether that bread was French, or Egyptian, or Turkish, or what (the reader bears in mind that this is the story of an innocent abroad), and to get some more of it, if possible.

We sat outside the house again, to repose after our repast, and I should think there was no more contented person in the world than I was then. I bought a little more Brummagem rubbish that palmed itself off as of Oriental manufacture, of the softly persistent pedlars circulating about my chair; and our escort settled the hotel bill, which worked out at four-and-sixpence for each of us. Never did I grudge hard-earned money for sensual indulgence less. I would not now take pounds for my recollections of that meal, because the day could not have been perfect without it.

So it drew on for four o'clock, when leave expired. Tired, hot and happy, we wandered back to the quay, dropped our threepenny pieces into official hands before the tantalised boatmen, stepped into our cushioned barge and were rowed to the ship. There we found coaling done, afternoon tea prepared for us, everything ready for the start. And, again in the decline of the brilliant day, we saw the whole place bathed in celestially rosy light, a last impression of the gorgeous East as one loves to imagine it, to be hung on the line of the picture gallery of memory alongside Aden and Suez. Because decks were being washed down, the captain allowed a few of us to survey the scene from his bridge, and while we rested weary bones we gazed from that commanding altitude upon the unforgettable panorama – the houses of the sea-front, the casino, the famous lighthouse, the bathing-beach with its white surf and its machines, the long breakwater walling the exit from the canal, and – farewelling us, as it seemed – the impressive statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, pointing back to his great work. At sunset we fetched up the coats so long unworn, and in the fresh air of the Mediterranean watched the flushing and fading of the distant city, low on the water like another Venice, until the evening bugle called us down. Too tired to dress, we ate our dinner perfunctorily, took a last look at the spacious, cool-breathing night, saw the Damietta light twinkling, and went to bed early. No one so much as mentioned church.

Then came three quiet days, sunny and cool, in which the right thing to do was to lie on one's long chair and recover from excitements. Meditation was so sweet, and I was so grateful to Port Said, that I could not grumble at losing Malta, where the ship had no engagements. A far-off, faint reflection of what was supposed to be a flashlight in Valetta harbour consoled me on my way to bed one night with its suggestion that Templars really lived, and that the old cathedral and the old steep streets were still there, awaiting the future pilgrim. No more did I set foot in "foreign parts," but what I further saw of them sufficed to make each remaining day of the voyage memorable. "The Bay of Tunis," says the captain, and: "Old Carthage lies behind that hill."

We were so close to the African shore that we could see the occasional town, the lonely farm, the lonelier fort or monastery, very distinctly; and the little unfenced, unshaped patches of tillage scratched out of the wilderness, and the little roadways meandering through the gaps of the crowding rock-ranges, otherwise so savagely desolate; and the evening lights sparsely scattered along the shore, and the early morning camp-fires on the seaward declivities, so high up and isolated as to suggest the fastnesses of the pirates of bygone days. A horn of the Bay of Algiers stole out of twilight mist, and lit up its clustering lamps as we looked at it; and the following day revealed the face of Spain, frowning at her *vis-à-vis*, but splendid in a stormy sunset, a velvety violet mass against a flaming sky.

At four o'clock again on Sunday morning I was up and dressed, summoned by the captain stamping overhead. And out of the dawn came majestic Gibraltar – the sun was up before five – and Algeciras of recent fame, ships and warships, hills, houses, hamlets, windmills, roads and Tarifa Point transfixing a wrecked steamer, sad detail of a picture full of life and charm. Another red-letter

Sunday, but not quite so red as the last. Divine service was duly celebrated in the saloon after dinner – our last on board.

The captain stamped again at five A.M. on Monday, and I saw the Castle of Cintra on its rocky headland, and more of the interesting life of the country as we slid along its shores. I cut breakfast short to feast on the historic landscape (in youth I had devoured the literature of the Cid, the Peninsular War, and Don Quixote, in a score of weighty tomes), to study the contours of Spanish houses, to count the number of visible Spanish windmills, all twirling their sails for business, in the good old Mediæval style. Until the sailors at their work of holystoning and sluicing drove us from the last inch of deck, and rain – almost the only rain we had on that blessed voyage – drew a grey curtain over the scene.

The Bay of Biscay was an angel. Summer-blue sea and sky, blushing gloriously when sunset interfused them, a young horned moon, with its attendant star, hanging over the saffron afterglow and making night heavenly; hardly a breaking wave. And the East was all behind us, and Malta and Spain, even Australia, which still held the kernel of one's heart; their memories were put away like precious pictures in their packing-cases, until presently one would have time to hang them in the light again. Nothing could be thought of now but that which we were to see to-morrow – England, the Mecca of our pilgrimage – after thirty-eight years.

It was Thursday, the 4th of June, at nine in the morning, when it happened. Of all the lovely mornings we had at sea that was the loveliest. A little hazy on the sky-line, but sunny, breezy, bracing, absolutely perfect. I ran upstairs after breakfast, to find a group of men focussing their glasses upon a distant spot. One of them turned and pointed to it. "There she is," said he. "That's Beachy Head."

There she was indeed, a white speck shining out of the melting fog. I pressed my own good glasses to my eyes, but just at first, although she was so plain to see, I was too blind to see her.

CHAPTER II
ABOUT TOWN

How beautiful England is! The home-stayers do not know it, nor the stranger within her gates. One must have been long enough absent from her in a sharply contrasting environment to have become an outsider, a cosmopolitan connoisseur, while still not an alien but native to her soil – at any rate, imbued with her maternal influence – to appreciate her consummate charm. I think that Australians and Americans, her elder and younger offspring, who have so many points of view in common, do so more fully than other peoples of the world, although we "swear by" the lands where we have our ampler homes and opportunities – perhaps for that very reason. It is an impression I have gained from the literature of the States, which has supplied my chief reading for many years. Whether right or wrong, I shall feel, when I fall into rhapsodies on the subject – and really I cannot help it – that my American readers will understand me before them all.

That it is not a case of the rose-coloured spectacles is proved by the fact that we no sooner set foot in the beloved Old Country than we begin to sniff at a number of her little ways – little ways that are quite all right to less impartial critics. We even feel that we could teach our grandmother something about the sucking of eggs with good warrant for reversing the orthodox procedure; only that she is our grandmother, bless her, with the natural attributes of her time of life, and we do not want her different. Were she "younged up," as a member of my household describes the old lady who dresses to conceal her age, we should not love her more, and we might respect her less. Twice as "smart," she would not be half as beautiful.

The matter stands thus: The Family of the British Empire is like other families. The children who go out into the world have, and must have, a wider grip of affairs than the parent who stops at home. They are better able, as well as willing, to keep up with the times; and, as in other families, it is the elder-sisterly leadership that the younger sister follows. Although we Australians have cherished the belief that England, in all her manifestations, sets the perfect standard for us, I see now that it is America we have copied, insensibly to ourselves, in the arts that make for the comfort and convenience and contingent elegance of everyday life. I did not know where we stood in the scale of domestic civilisation until I began to frequent the rural districts where I was born and bred, and found the situation as I had left it, and myself so grown away from it that I might have come from another planet. It is not, of course, our merit in any way but our luck that we have, in addition to our birthright in her, a land of plenty, which ensures easy circumstances, connoting a high average of culture, to her unburdened and unjostled people, and no deep-worn groove to shut us in, and shut out from our vision the movements of the world. It would be gross taste for a cadet of the family, and one so juvenile, to give itself airs in the ancestral house; but it does cause some slight annoyance now and then to be treated as one who does not know the ropes at all. That in the great journals that came into my hands of a morning in London there was rarely so much as a mention of Australia, while every little tinpot dependency of a foreign power had its trifling affairs attended to, was nothing – our own fault as much as anybody's. But when those who never look at a London journal, who hardly know even Emperor William by name, since he does not live in the parish, want to teach you to suck eggs that have been rotten for years without their knowing it – on the theory that you have had no eggs where you have been living – you do get a little tired. And if young Australia feels that way small wonder at America not liking the grandmotherly tutelage, so long after knowing herself the leader of the world. Our old darling cannot understand why one who by every tie of nature should be devoted to her flouts her authority and turns a cold shoulder to her endearments, but the other children understand.

Well, America can afford to forgive everything, and she has forgiven everything, now, while only gratitude is due from us who, remaining in the bosom of the family, are so faithfully done by

and cared for. All I am trying to say is that experience teaches knowledge, that love which is not blind is the love best worth having, and that we, with that knowledge and that love, are more competent to appreciate England than she to appreciate us. She thinks we do not know what's what, because people in the dark can think anything; but when we judge her beautiful, it is with the judgment that compares and discriminates. We know what we are talking about. It may be taken that she is beautiful, and no mistake.

We had embarked for Australia in 1870 from Plymouth, having travelled to that port from London in the night. Coming back in 1908 England met me with a face I had not seen before. Beachy Head was as new to my eyes as the rock of Aden; so was Dover Castle and all that sunny coast; so was the Thames of commerce. In the perfect June weather, and with its historical suggestions, even that last bit of the way was glorified. Perhaps the critical faculty had not quite steadied down, but even between the marshes I was thinking: "How beautiful England is!" Altogether the interval between nine A.M. and seven P.M. was a culmination of the voyage worthy of all that had led up to it. By the way, we dropped anchor at Gravesend in a violent thunderstorm.

We spent one more short night on the ship. In the small hours of the morning a steward informed us that the first caller had arrived, a near relation born during our long absence, now a man over thirty, who had enterprisingly boarded us by the pilot's ladder at the locks. With this efficient courier, who spared us all landing troubles, we passed from our sea-home to a quiet hotel in a quiet square near Liverpool Street Station, whence we were to pass out to the country on the following day; a house to be affectionately remembered, for its treatment of us. There we dumped our bags and made our walking toilets, feeling already as English as could be; then started forth to celebrate the day with (naturally) a first-rate luncheon to begin with. Thereafter we proposed to "do" as much of London as we could cover by dinner-time.

We did have a first-rate luncheon, from the point of view of unfashionable persons newly off the sea. But it was right here that we began to sniff. No, not to sniff, of course, but to set the critical faculty in order. At home, we informed our relative, a meal of that quality would be just about half the price, and such trifles as vegetables, rolls, butter, tea and coffee, would be thrown in gratis. The skimpy little curl of butter, that had to be separately paid for, in place of the heaped balls to which you could freely help yourself, was a particular one amongst the pinpoint grievances that London restaurants of the middle class supplied us with. At that first meal on English soil we remembered the first we had taken in Collins Street after landing in Melbourne so long ago – our astonishment at its ample excellence and small cost; and at each subsequent entertainment in London paid for by ourselves we were tempted to make odious comparisons when there was nobody to overhear. Australia is a land of plenty to all her people, high and low, but we forget it until we go away from her. Then we know.

After luncheon my husband went off to his bankers, his tailors (whose clothes he had worn uninterruptedly for thirty-eight years, with some modification of measurements from time to time), and otherwise to poke about by himself in a London that he declared he knew every inch of, although afterwards he confessed to having been once or twice at fault; and my nephew-in-law escorted me to my once favourite draper's, where I had bought the gems of my modest bridal trousseau. Ever since that long-past day I had sworn by the famous firm as authorities on and purveyors of the absolutely correct thing in women's wear, and now thought to render myself immune to English criticism by the surest method and with no waste of time.

I was out of that shop almost as soon as I was in, and distractedly flitting through other emporiums of the West End, wishing I had completed my outfit where I began it. I should have saved money and suited myself better. In pity for my companion, patiently awaiting my pleasure on the pavements outside – dropping asleep as he stood, poor boy, for he had not seen a bed for between thirty and forty hours – I confined myself to the one indispensable purchase, and that was a compromise between what I liked and what I could get.

Not that I suggest any rivalry between our best drapery shops and these best of Oxford and Regent Streets; it would be absurd to compare them. But I certainly realised as I had never done before how good the former are. I understood why a friend of mine with whom I once went clothes-buying in Bourke Street, immediately after her return from a year in England, plumping down on a chair by a familiar counter, said, with a luxurious sigh: "What a comfort to get back to our own shops again!" She did not "know her way about" in London; nor did I. And I cannot say that, at the six months' end, I had done any better for myself there than I should have done if I had supplied all my wants at home. I found no material difference in cost, and as regards the correct thing we are quite up to date. The new fashions are passed on to us for the corresponding season, winter or summer, that they belong to in England; and there is no doubt in my mind that, taking English women in the bulk and Australian women in the bulk, the latter are the better dressed by far. It is not what I expected would be the case.

Tea – that essential feature of afternoon shoppings in Melbourne, where a tea-room is to your hand wherever you may happen to be – was the one thought in my head when I rejoined my drowsy escort, although it could not have been more than three o'clock. "Let us find a nice place," said I, craving easy-chairs as well as tea; and we found one. It had no shop to it, inviting us by a mere label on an open street door and a glimpse of inner staircase. Privacy and repose were indicated, and I unhesitatingly turned in.

It was the very thing. A pretty little drawing-room, all to ourselves, cushioned basket-chairs, tea and cakes and bread-and-butter and toasted things, all as good as I was accustomed to, although by no means so cheap (but expense was no matter on this festive day), and the courteous attendance that I must confess is not to be counted on in Australia as I learned to count upon it in England. With us officialdom is so disproportionately powerful throughout the land (nothing can be in proportion if the main base of population is inadequate) that the so-called servants of the public are virtually in the position of masters, and, knowing it, are inclined to wait upon you condescendingly, as if conferring a favour, or to be abrupt and off-hand with you, or to leave you to take your chance. It is quite natural.

So here, in this very nice little room, I revelled in my tea – the first good cup since Hobart (Adelaide was a disappointment in this respect, and at Port Said I did not ask for it) – and we rested in our comfortable chairs for the best part of an hour. Then, my escort being again wide-awake and active, and myself refreshed and fit for anything, I suggested a drive through London in any direction on the top of a motor 'bus.

That was an exciting drive. Unlike my husband, I did not know my London. Years and years and years ago I had been accustomed to pay an annual visit to my eldest aunt, who was my godmother, and then I was driven from what was Shoreditch Station to her house in Notting Hill (which she grieved was not, as it so nearly was, Kensington), and in a few weeks driven back again in a straw-carpeted four-wheeled cab, from the closed windows of which I had my only peeps at the city – a forbidden city to a well-brought-up young lady of tender years. Between whiles my diversions were confined to West End picture galleries and museums, a few West End shoppings, drives in the Park, walks to the neighbouring church. Only to the latter, and that but occasionally and in exceptional circumstances, was I ever allowed to go unattended, even after I was engaged to be married, while she was responsible for me. Darling that she was, I am not going to laugh at her for being so ridiculous, especially as I have my doubts as to whether she was ridiculous at all – whether there is not still something to be said for the clearly defined social status of children, and the careful chaperonage of growing-up girls, that were matter of course to us, young and old, in those far-distant days.

My thoughts were full of her as we drove towards our old haunts, when the absorbing fascination of the narrow, crowded streets and the marvellous interweaving of the wheeled traffic through them gave place to the enchantment of the "Park" once more, the charm beyond expression of English trees and grass, the stately roadways and perspectives of our old walking and driving quarter, so unexpectedly familiar and remembered – the only London life I had to remember – after such a gap of time and change!

The Marble Arch – oh, the Marble Arch! The new gates behind it were approaching completion; the greatly improved arrangement was pointed out to me by my courier, how the old blocking of carriages was done away with – I believe that very day inaugurated the new use. But for me there was only the old bottle-neck which had annoyed generations of carriage folk, and which had given my young girlhood one of its first woman dreams.

It will be understood that the best-beloved and most loving of maiden aunts became even as Andromeda's dragon at the approach of an unauthorised young man. The very thought of him in connection with her god-daughter made her hair rise. Well, I was driving with her one afternoon, and just within the Marble Arch we were so wedged in a block of carriages that the occupant of one – truly a most charming fellow – had to sit facing me at arm's length for quite a minute. With the best will in the world, and I believe we both tried to help it, it was impossible after some embarrassing seconds to prevent the twinkle of a smile. In spite of its ravaging effects upon me (all her fault, for I never saw him before or since), it was no more than a twinkle, behind a gravity of demeanour as gentlemanly as could be. But what could evade the lynx-eyed vigilance of the duenna of old? No sooner were we disentangled than my aunt, almost as flustered as I was, sternly demanded of me: "Did you see that?" On my confessing that I did she put up the window of our jobbed brougham and never afterwards allowed me to have it down while in the Row or other dangerous places; and I had to rub holes in the film of breath lining the glass to see anything at all. Small wonder that in my seclusion I nursed the memory of a momentary adventure with a young man until it grew to the proportion of a personal romance. In all my subsequent walks and drives with her I was thinking of him, looking for him; and as a respectable mother of a family have not forgotten the spiritual freemasonry (as it was idealised into) of his passing twinkle of a smile. How handsome he was! And how well we understood each other!

Only once did I escape out of my cage and fly at large in London. It was with a young widowed cousin, who, as a married woman, was allowed to take me out. We did not dare to report that we had eaten lunch at a railway buffet, ridden in omnibuses (a thing no gentlewoman of those days was supposed to do – she was expected to walk rather), and even trodden a pavement overlooked by club windows, when we returned to Notting Hill at nightfall. The widowed cousin, too, was one of three motherless bairns whom the aunt had brought up from infancy. However, with all the risks of reaction, it seems to many of us old stagers that it is good to have borne the yoke in our youth, and that some modification of the apparatus would be better for our children than none at all. Of course they do not agree with us, which makes it very likely that we are wrong.

Old and new met together at our journey's end – the gates of the Anglo-French Exhibition at Shepherd's Bush. The place had just been opened to the public, and was the sensation of the hour, even more interesting to my companion than to me, drowned as I was in associations of the past. The supposed object of our drive was to locate it, the beautiful imitation-alabaster city that held promise for both of us, amply redeemed in due course, of happy days to come. This accomplished, we returned to our hotel stupefied with fatigue. The two men were able to enjoy a good dinner and a fairly late sit-up talk. I tumbled straightway into a comfortable bed, and sighed and sighed, too tired to eat or speak, but as blissfully satisfied with the state of things as it was possible to be. A nice little tea-tray came to my bedside presently, and after it the kind landlady herself to see what else she could do for me, just like the thoughtful hostess who has been one's friend for years. I slept little, that first night in England, but there was every inducement to repose. The little city square was as quiet as the Bush. I could hear the soft and mellow chime of a distant clock at intervals – very far away it seemed – and that was the only sound. We had an open window, as usual, and could not understand how the heart of London could be so still.

A cheerful and quiet coffee-room welcomed us to an excellent breakfast next day. We had promised ourselves "real" Yarmouth bloaters (one of a few long-cherished gastronomical dreams brought over with other luggage); the maid apologised for giving us broiled mackerel instead, but

that was memorably delicious. I cannot help mentioning it. I may as well mention also, while I am about it, that the plentiful Australian table is not to be compared with the English in the matter of fish and game.

Breakfast over, our courier was set free to roam the White City at Shepherd's Bush until tea-time, and my husband and I set forth on an aimless ramble together, merely to see London and amuse ourselves, all business barred. What a time we had! More drives on motor 'buses; more English delicacies for our voracious appetites at luncheon (sausages, which G. had always declared they did not know how to make in Australia); St Paul's, inside and out; lovely Staples Inn, which I could hardly tear myself away from; and the commoner lions of the city, such as the Mansion House and the Bank – all new to me. I felt quite an old Londoner by four o'clock, when it was time to reunite our party, get a cup of tea, and start on our journey to Cambridgeshire.

Only a few days later I discovered another London I had not known. I returned to spend a week with a many-years-old friend, a personage of distinction, even to her royal kinsfolk, but never other than the dearest of the dear. Instead of riding motor 'buses I sat behind ducal liveries. In the way of entertainment privileges were accorded me that no money could buy. It was the brilliant episode of my trip, and that, to my regret (as the author), is all I can say about it in this book. What a pity that considerations of taste and decorum should compel the autobiographer, as considerations of imperial policy compel the Russian press censor, to "black out" the very bits that would be most interesting to read. If one could throw delicate scruples to the winds and tell the *whole* story of any human life, or portion of life, however small, the long reign of the work of fiction would be over.

June was still less than a fortnight old when this happy week began – with a satisfying drive from Liverpool Street Station to the heart of Belgravia in a hansom all to myself – just when I preferred no company. A drive, I must add, as cheap as it was delightful. Half-a-crown! It was hard to believe the driver serious. I could not have done the distance in a Melbourne hansom under half-a-sovereign. According to my prevailing luck the weather was perfect, and every inch of the way for me was packed with interest. The Thames Embankment was a-making when I left in 1870; now I saw it and its stately precincts in their modern character. And, in addition to the features of what was but background to London life, I saw a great procession of the Protesting Women, coming upon it in the very nick of time, as if I had planned to do so. I passed its whole length, seemingly of miles, from end to end, sometimes at a foot's pace, sometimes blocked for several minutes at a time, the ordinary traffic having but half the road; and I rejoiced in my slow progress and was profoundly impressed with the spectacle. Not having heard about it beforehand I was puzzled to account for the immense lines of carriages filled with women – many of the carriages very smart, and a number of the women in academic dress, wearing the hoods of their degrees – massed in Whitehall and thereabouts; but the significance of the demonstration was soon made evident – before the army on foot, with its multitudinous banners came upon the scene, led by the aged and honoured ladies who had been fighting the same battle half-a-century ago.

In view of all I have since heard and read of the antics of what the newspapers call the militant suffragettes, I am glad I had this opportunity to gauge the strength and seriousness of the movement behind them, which – unless their actions are grossly misreported – they pitifully misrepresent. So long as my eye was on it, at any rate, the march of the countless women was as dignified as anything I ever saw; nor could a funeral procession have been treated by the bystanders with more respect. That was the most striking thing about it. The half-width of the street, congested with the traffic of the whole, blocked to a standstill every few yards, neither murmured nor jeered – not by a single voice that I could hear. While here and there a man stood to give dumb homage, his hat in his hand.

But, oh, what a Mediæval sort of business it all seemed! To be struggling so long, and with such pain and passion, for mere liberty – in our England of all places – at this time of day! How strange to one long outside the groove, the limitation of vision of those within! If it were permissible to teach our grandmother to suck eggs, we could tell her that the tremendous controversy is but a

mountain labouring of mouse. In our young country overseas "votes for women" were given to us as naturally as they give licences to respectable lady innkeepers; after due discussion in parliament, of course, and some "say" at public meetings of the party chiefly concerned, but with no vulgar altercation or unseemly fuss of any kind. And we quietly go forth to the nearest polling-place on (the very infrequent) election mornings, being supposed to have glanced at the family newspaper from day to day, and come back to our domestic avocations (most of us like to get the small job over as soon as possible after breakfast); and the world goes on with no sign of damage. Not being necessarily the adversaries of man, because not unjustly suffering from his rule, and having had no devil of vindictiveness put into us we do not interfere with him in Parliament or on the Bench, or attempt to upset his dignity in any way. We have public work enough managing the hospitals, and such things, where we have the free hand to save him a world of trouble. Though, if a woman *should* turn up in a legislative assembly some fine day – and it might be any day – I really do not think the skies would fall. My belief is that the men would get used to it in a week and reconciled in a month. Not that I would be that woman for anything you could give me. The main thing is that politically we are good friends and not sore-hearted antagonists. As fairly as our men have dealt by us shall we deal by them. Dear, dear! To think what a buttress Ireland might have been to England now if she had been let out of leading-strings three generations ago!

I returned to London at intervals between this sweet June day, when the rhododendrons in the Park were still abloom and the "Season" at its culmination, and the early winter evening of my last departure; but without those passages which must be "blacked out" the tale is but a tale of prosaic shoppings and the sort of country-cousin sightseeings at which the superior person lifts the nose of scorn. Even in the latter regard, I did not see half the things I had meant to see. The Royal Academy Exhibition was postponed and postponed until too late. The British Museum, the National Gallery, Westminster Abbey – even these I missed. The Tower, which I had never seen at all, that I can remember, I now saw only from the outside – except on the stage at Drury Lane, in the *Marriages of Mayfair*. The friend and hostess who took me to this play, as the wife of a Colonel of Grenadiers and intimately acquainted with the life of the place, answered for the accuracy of detail in the dramatic representation of it; furthermore, she arranged that I was to explore the great fortress in her company, and took my promise to accept no other guide. I was then within a fortnight of leaving England, and, to my keen regret, the press of last engagements crowded that one out.

Mention of the Tower reminds me of a circumstance that occurred the night before we made the futile compact, than which circumstance nothing happening to me in London impressed me more.

An afternoon at His Majesty's to see Beerbohm Tree in *Faust*– the new Faust, redeemed, not destroyed, through his human errors; the new Mephistopheles, with the dignity of a god – had provided excitement enough for one day, and we decided to spend the evening quietly at home. Tea, a rest with a book, three only at dinner, were the peaceful preliminaries; then we sank into deep sofa-corners by the drawing-room fire.

"This," said B., "is the opportunity I have been looking for to show you something. They have only just come back from the British Museum."

Two large, thick volumes were produced. And when I opened one of them – the other was a typed rendering of the precious text – I perceived that I was privileged for the moment above the rest of my countrymen. For I was the first of the general public to read some most interesting pages of English history, lost long before the story as we know it was put together for the use of schools.

For three hundred years or more they had probably been in hiding where they had recently been found – in the library of one of the seats of the family to which B. belonged. Consequent upon the death of the owner, her brother-in-law, there had been rummaging about the house, and a quantity of valuable documents had been discovered behind oaken wainscots and elsewhere. A cupboardful, found at a moment when it was not convenient to remove them, mysteriously disappeared, unread, before they could be retrieved; the bundle of letters on my knee had been spared to the family,

of which a Lord C., of Charles the Second's reign, had been friend and kin to the writers. B. and the British Museum had been attending to their preservation. They had been carefully arranged and bound, and their condition was so perfect, and the penmanship was so exquisite, that I was able to read the original, in the old lettering of the time, as fast as B. could follow me with the modernised typed copy. We took turn and turn about with this reading and checking, and I suppose it took us hours – we were too absorbed to think of time – to get through the whole, if we did get through it.

They were the letters of that Lord William Russell who was beheaded, and of his wife, the famous Rachel, written during his trial and imprisonment, to and of each other, to Charles the Second, and the King's replies; portions of her journals; a long and minutely detailed account of the whole tragedy, from day to day, almost from hour to hour, by Bishop Burnet, who attended the prisoner – all in their own handwritings; and a more touching and elevating tale and a more distinguished piece of literature I do not remember to have come across. B. showed me a letter from the lady who had typewritten the copy. She said in effect that her sense of the privilege conferred on her with the work was beyond words. By this time, possibly, Lady C. has allowed the documents, family archives though they be, to be published for the benefit of the nation. Unless, indeed, the nation has had them this long time, and I have not known it.

Beheadings, again, remind me of Madame Tussaud's. As a child I had thought it hard lines never to see the famous waxworks, and I never did – until this belated return to where they were. I might not then have done so but for the accident of a Baker Street engagement, which being discharged with unexpected promptitude left us, G. and I, with an hour or two on our hands. The great building, new since he had visited it, stood almost over us, conspicuously proclaiming itself, and with one accord we turned into it. Another lifelong ambition gratified at last!

"You won't go into the Chamber of Horrors, I suppose?" said G., when I had viewed Mrs Pankhurst and the rest of the notabilities.

"Oh yes," said I, for I was out to see things. And down I went. It was not particularly thrilling to one whose childhood was so far behind, but it was very nasty. A cup of tea in the fresh air of the restaurant was grateful after it. And I felt a particular craving for a bath.

One thing, however, has contrived to haunt me – the mask of Marie Antoinette as at the moment after execution, with the blood-oozing nostrils and the swooning, drowning eyes. For it seemed to me as if that might be very much how she would have looked.

But it strikes me I am not developing the proposition set at the beginning of this chapter to be the text of my discourse.

CHAPTER III
IN BEAUTIFUL ENGLAND

The second evening ashore saw us speeding out of London towards Cambridge and Ely, and beyond to the not-to-be-mentioned spot in the fens which represented the bosom of the family – G.'s family, that is to say, for England held no more trace of mine.

I saw prettier English landscapes afterwards, from the windows of railway carriages, but this first picture of the green country was overwhelmingly beautiful to my eyes. I had forgotten what the country grass was like, and the country trees. Our "English trees" of boulevard and garden had not struck me as inferior to their ancestors in any way, but here, in these glorious free-flung masses, how different they were. Throughout my stay and various ramblings in the land, the trees and the grass were my constant joy. The lawns of English gardens – not bits and scraps that must not be trodden on, but acres of velvet-soft emerald carpet always under one's feet, making the loveliest setting for flowers and tea-parties. It happened in this lucky year that the summer was the finest the land had known for years, and I think I must have had my tea on grass more times in that short English season than in all the years of my sojourn in the brighter country of the South; if I except Bush picnics – and I need not except them, because the aim of Bush campers is to keep as clear of grass as possible. I am not ashamed to say that I could have wept for joy of those English trees and meadows when I first saw them after the long, long exile. Nothing but the publicity of my position prevented it. I could only look and look at them till throat and eyes ached. I could not talk.

The unspeakable memories that thronged the platform at Cambridge! The last moment of one of the most tragical happenings of my life passed me, probably, on the very spot where our train halted. At a later day the ghosts of all the hours belonging to that last moment forgathered with me in the old quadrangles, and I could not believe they had been there for forty years. The first glimpse of the towers of Ely was still more thrilling. That ever I should have lived to see them again! Here, when soon afterwards we prowled about the place – the first I saw of an English provincial town after my return – I found my eye hopelessly out of focus. I ought to have known it better than any spot in the country. I had lived there and married there, and it had been my last English home; yet, but for the cathedral, I should not have recognised it. "*This* Ely!" I exclaimed. "These little, little, quaint, cramped streets and houses!" I seemed to have seen them in a picture; they were incredible as the whole substance of our city of old. Gradually I got the perspective, but it took two or three visits to do it. The familiar past enmeshed me with its thousand tentacles. "You don't know me, ma'am?" a weather-beaten matron emotionally accosted me on the steps of the post-office – her married daughter drove the cart she hastily descended from on seeing me. "You don't remember me? I was housemaid at W – when you were there on your honeymoon." One of the young maids, with white satin ribbon in their caps, who stood with their smiling welcomes on the doorstep of the rectory at W – when our bridal brougham drove up in 1870! The tears jumped to my own eyes as I wrung her toil-worn hands. I nearly kissed her in the open street – and market day too! Old servants, old friends, stretched arms to draw me into the groove they had never left – never been thrown out of, as I was – until the gulf of years sank out of sight, and we fraternised again as if partings had never been. Yet I could not get the "atmosphere," so to speak. I am such a fresh-air person! The first time I attended service at the cathedral where I was such a devout worshipper in my youth, although it was a Pan-Anglican function, with a stirring American preacher to it, and my personal interest in the occasion, apart from that, was intense, I was so overcome with drowsiness that I had to struggle the whole time not to disgrace myself before the bishops, under whose eyes I sat. I could easily attribute it to the fatiguing excitements of the first days in England, but that was no reason why at each subsequent service at the same place the same phenomenon should occur. As surely as I went to church at the

cathedral, I got deadly sleepy straight away, and had to fight to keep eyes snapping and head from rolling off. Suddenly I suspected what the trouble was. I looked up at the roofs, into the lantern, around the windows – there was not a crack for ventilation above the doorways, never had been in the hundreds of years that pious breathings had daily been going up. When I mentioned the matter to my old friends, who had been going to the cathedral all the time I had been away, they were rather inclined to be annoyed. *They* found nothing wrong with the air of the cathedral. Of course not. Nor did I in the old days. It was typical of the sea-change my whole being had undergone.

Well, after that sight of Ely – and a glorious pile it is, from just that point of view that the London train gives you as it draws near to the station – after Ely, fen of the fens, that was drowned morass not so very long ago, now richly cropped, the farms and hamlets standing clear like things set on a table; then the station in the fields, the little governess-cart at the gate, the unknown niece at the pony's head; the short cut across country, and the old farmhouse, a long grey streak on a wide green sea, with one bright and beautiful splash of colour lighting up the sober landscape – the flaming orange of an Austrian briar bush in full bloom on the front lawn. Finally, the bosom of the family, over which the veil of reticence must fall.

On the following evening – no, the evening after that – I had the long-dreamed-of bliss of a ramble through English lanes. Although it was fen country, there were lanes about the farm – green old trees interlacing overhead, green grass thick as a silk rug underfoot, all the precious things that used to be in tangled hedge and ditch. I gathered them, and sniffed them, and cherished them; no words can describe the ecstasy of the meeting with them again – pink herb-robert in its brown calyx, the darling little blue speedwell – "birdseye," as we called it; white cow-parsnip, wild roses (following the may, which had just passed), buttercups and oxeye daisies and yellow birdsfoot trefoil, and all the rest of them; their scents, even more than their sweet forms, overpowering in suggestion of the days that were no more. The nightingale, to my disappointment, was gone, but the lark and the cuckoo were rarely silent. A dear brown-velvet "bumble" – bee showed me his golden stripe again. Nesting partridges whirred up from the hedgerows in their sudden way and went flickering over the fields – dewy English fields, exhaling the breath of clover and beanflower, the incomparable perfume of English earth…

But Norfolk is my county. And not thirty-eight years, but nearly half-a-century, had passed since I was within its borders, when I crossed them again about a month after our return. A still longer interval had elapsed between my departure from the first home that I remember and my seeing it again – and recognising it in the selfsame moment.

A Cambridgeshire sister-in-law had been led by various accidental happenings to rent a house right in the middle of my territory, unaware that I was not as great a stranger to Norfolk as herself. The haunts of my childhood lay around her in all directions and close up to her doors, and never, never had I expected to revisit *them*, except in dreams. G. can hardly be dragged by an ox chain where he does not want to go, and he did not want to go to D – , which had no associations for him, even to see his sister. "Why couldn't she have settled in some decent place?" he wanted to know, when her affectionate calls to him to come and be entertained evoked the spectre of boredom which never in any circumstances appeared to me. The pretty town of her adoption was, from his point of view, a "hole," with "nothing in it." But my luck was in when she drifted thither. It was the first court of the sanctuary, so to speak; the way by which I entered the hallowed places of the past. Every inch of the old streets, every brick and chimney-pot over fifty years old, was sacred to me. The bulk of life lay between that past and now, and the intervening years dropped away as if they had never been.

Over the road from my bedroom window in her house stood a fine old dwelling, with a sundial on a prominent gable, and a high-walled garden of which I caught beautiful glimpses through the tall iron gates and between the ancient trees – quite unchanged. There, when I was a child, Miss M. kept her Preparatory School for Young Gentlemen, still mentioned with pride in the local handbooks, although long extinct. "Many of her old pupils have attained high positions in the world," say they; and

I wonder if these were any of the little men with whom we little women of eight or nine or thereabouts exchanged furtive glances over the pew-tops in the old parish church on Sundays. I can see some of their faces now, and hers, so serene and lofty, as she stood amongst them, her ringlets showering down out of her bonnet like two bunches of laburnum, a narrow silken scarf about her well-boned bust. Young Nelsons of the great admiral's family were amongst Miss M.'s "young gentlemen"; the hero himself was at school in D – , although his schoolhouse is no more; and the cocked hat, with two bullet holes through it, in which he fought the Battle of the Nile, has belonged to the neighbourhood since before Trafalgar. "Well, Beechey, I'm off after the French again. What shall I leave my godson?" The hat was asked for, and, says Nelson, "He shall have it," and the granddaughter of the honoured infant has it still. It takes a Norfolk person to appreciate the importance of these historic associations to a little Norfolk town.

On the Denes at Yarmouth there is a tall column, something like one hundred and fifty feet high, with Britannia ruling the waves from the apex, that in my time stood majestically alone between river and sea, and part of its dedicatory inscription, which is in Latin, runs thus:

HORATIO LORD NELSON

Whom, as her first and proudest champion in naval fight, Britain honoured, while living, with her favour, and, when lost, with her tears; Of whom, signalised by his triumphs in all lands, the whole earth stood in awe on account of the tempered firmness of his counsels, and the undaunted ardour of his courage; This great man NORFOLK boasts her own, not only as born there of a respectable family, and as there having received his early education, but her own also in talents manners and mind.

This will show how little D – , which assisted at his early education, deserves to be called a "hole, with nothing in it."

Miss M. died or retired in time to leave another set of memories for me around that old house. I laughed to myself as I looked at the gate through which a most dashing, black-whiskered gentleman of the D'Orsay type used to issue of a Sunday morning, gloved in primrose kid, crowned with glossiest beaver, the glass of fashion to his sex and the admiration of ours, and thought of his little secret which I daresay he never knew had been surprised.

His pew in the old church (all open benches now) was close to ours, and we little girls used to watch him as he entered and stood, turned to the wall, with his hat before his face, to say his preliminary prayer. Something aroused our suspicions, and a burning desire to see the lining of that hat. Patience and perseverance rewarded us with a peep, and there was a little round mirror fixed to the inside of the crown.

And then I sighed, remembering his sister – I think it was his sister – a rather swarthy, dark-browed, Juno-like creature, as I recall her; knowing that I had just been within a touch of meeting her again; an old old woman…

Once, in the far past, at the first known home, some miles from D – , we gave a dance. You remember those dances of the fifties, dear reader who went to them? They were simple affairs; no caterer from outside the house, no outlay for flowers or band or champagne, or the hire of public rooms (except for county or hunt balls, and then the claim was light on the individual pocket). But if they were not as delightful to go to as the more expensive corresponding functions of these days, I have no memory worth trusting. I am sure you will say the same.

The guests were dancing by eight o'clock to the strains of the domestic piano, the polka and the schottische and the varsoviana alternating with quadrilles and lancers, the waltz a stately gyration round and round. They were not staled and blasé, those simple people, but as fresh as children for the game in hand. They had time to play it then. Whole love stories were enacted in a night, and there was one in which I played a part which I was too young to appreciate at the time, and of which that handsome girl of the house opposite was the heroine. In my ringlets and sandalled shoes, my full-skirted book-muslin frock and blue sash and shoulder-knots – a little spoiled child allowed to see the fun for an hour or two when she ought to have been in bed – I was passed from knee to knee, petted

to my heart's content by the adult guests, the gentlemen especially; and the festive scene is as clear before me now as it was then. The drawing-room was festooned with wreaths of evergreen and paper flowers, out of which branched candles in hidden sconces made of tin; the nursery guard was before the fire; the mirror with the gilt eagle on the top reflected moving figures that had space to swim in the mazy dance without jostling each other.

"Do you see that lady in the white dress?" a whiskered nurse of mine whispered in my ear.

I did – I see her now – her dark eyes flashing, dark cheek glowing, deep breast visibly swelling with the triumph of the hour – the undoubted belle of the ball. Her dress was of white tulle, flounced to the waist and trimmed with a long spray, running obliquely from neck to hem, of white artificial roses sprinkled with glass dewdrops. A cluster of the same was set in her abundant dusky hair.

"I want you to take something to her," said he, fumbling. "Don't show it to anybody, and don't give it to anybody but her."

He closed my little fist over a wad of folded paper, and I dodged through the crowd and delivered it, and returned to report.

"Did she read it?"

"Yes."

"Did she say anything?"

"No."

"Didn't she take any notice at all?"

"She only laughed."

He fell into sombre reverie, and I left him for more cheerful companionship.

Later in the evening I was in the vicinity of the belle of the ball, and she beckoned me, stooped, and whispered. "Take this to Mr G. Don't let anyone see it. Give it to him when nobody is looking."

I brought him the note, and straightway he forgot me and my services. The next I saw of him he was sitting in her pocket under the stairs.

And she did not marry him, after all! And now she is an old, old woman!

There was another member of the family (a cousin of these two), whose portrait in my mental picture gallery has been classed always as a gem of romantic art.

I only saw her once, and that was after another ball given at the same old country house where the lady of the tulle dress and dew-sprinkled roses disported herself with Mr G. I do not think I could have attended this ball myself, for I have no recollection of seeing the girl I refer to, who was there, until the following day. Her chaperon, whoever it was, had left her over in my mother's care, probably to get thoroughly rested before taking the journey home. In the morning we only heard of her. She was in bed, being assiduously coddled. Before she came forth mother gathered her little ones together and thus admonished them:

"Yes, you will see her at dinner, and if you are very good you may take her for a walk with you this afternoon. But, mind, you must be very gentle with her. You must take the greatest care of her, because she is in a decline and very soon she is going to die." We were further commanded on no account to disclose our knowledge of her sad fate to the invalid.

She come down to the midday farmhouse dinner, and it was then I took my indelible picture of her. She was probably eighteen, a willowy slip of a girl, and with the pathos of her doom about her, the loveliest creature my eyes (with such an idealising quality in them) had ever seen. That was the impression, made permanent. Very fair of skin, with golden hair arranged Madonna-wise in smooth bands; and dressed all in white, looking the part my mother had given her to perfection – an angel at large, granted to gross mortals for a little while to be jealously recalled to her proper place. Her white muslin bodice was long-waisted and stiffly-boned, and cut to a deep point in front over the bunchy skirt; but it was lovely. And the gold watch at her side, and the long gold chain round her neck to which it was attached, gave just the touch of radiance to the unearthly purity of her appearance, as effective as a Fra Angelico halo.

We took her for a walk through our fields and lanes, and with awe and reverence laid ourselves out to take care of her. I remember that we gathered mushrooms and that she ate some raw, which was unwise of her in her delicate condition. I also remember (only it spoils the picture to include such a squalid detail) that some of the little party ate more than she did, and that one was deadly sick and had to be carried home. At that point she fades from the scene – went away to die, as I supposed. This one tragic vision of her made such an impression upon my imagination that I have thought of her when anything reminded me, for over half-a-century; but I have never thought of her as being other than half angel in heaven and half dust of the earth all the time. I thought of her when I looked out of my window in my sister-in-law's house at the old house opposite, when first I returned to D – , still with an ache of pity for a young life defrauded of the common heritage, which we others, not more deserving, had come into.

But almost immediately afterwards my hostess asked me to go with her to call upon one of her new acquaintances, a lady who had known me as a child, had heard of my coming, and wished to see me. She bore the name of the family which had followed Miss M. at the house with the sundial on the wall, but as she was a widow that was the name of her husband's family, and so I had no clue to her.

We found her in the pretty garden of her handsome house close by, and she welcomed me warmly.

"You remember me?" she queried, when I had taken a basket chair beside her. "I once stayed at your house at T – . I went to a party your mother gave, and remained overnight. Don't you remember?"

I said I did, because I knew as soon as I looked at her that I had seen her before. The forehead and the set of the eyes came back to me from the past, unmistakably familiar. But the whole time I was there, although she kept talking of the old times and the old people, I was cudgelling my brains to place her and I could not. She told me she had married her cousin and had not changed her name, so that I knew where she belonged; and yet I could not think of any member of the family answering to her personal reminiscences. She took me round her garden, she showed me the rooms she lived in, spoke of her life with her husband, recently dead, but with her long enough for them to celebrate their golden wedding together; and yet I could not get myself on to the right track. I went home with my sister-in-law quite worried and bothered about it, and lay awake at night to continue my search in the holes and corners of Memory when the public, so to speak, had left the building.

Suddenly I discovered her. The face of the deaf old lady of over seventy, and the angular body that had to lean on an arm or a stick when it walked abroad, were suddenly transfigured like Faust in the play, and there hung before my eyes in the dark the beautiful vision of that golden-haired girl in white whom we had been told to take care of and be good to because she was to die soon. There was no doubt about it. That forehead and those eyes, that I had instantly recognised, although I could not identify them, were hers. She had not been dust of the earth for half-a-century, but alive all the time – yes, and well and happy; and now she was in the most comfortable circumstances and apparently far from her journey's ending still. It was a delightful discovery. Quite an appreciable sorrow seemed to have been lifted from my heart.

Unfortunately I had no opportunity to see her again, to talk with her of the old times now that I should know what I was talking about. When you have but six months in England in which to make up the arrears of about three-quarters of a lifetime, every visit is a flying visit, every taste of the old friendships but a tantalising sip.

Down the road from the walled garden of the house I have been speaking of, another high wall with a door at one end and a carriage gate at the other, the spreading crown of a great chestnut-tree overtopping the middle, bounded the street side of another garden, and sheltered from public view another house which cried to me with a thousand tongues of memory every time I passed it on my way to and from the railway station. It was one of my own old homes – the third, not counting my birthplace (which I left as a baby, and therefore have no knowledge of). The tenant of this house in D – was now my sister-in-law's landlord, and I could have gone through it if there had been time

for a polite process of siege; but because an Englishman's house is his castle, and you cannot march into it without notice as if it was yours, I was able to see only the outside of any of my old homes. Perhaps it was as well.

When no one was looking I lingered by the carriage gate, through which all the front of the house was visible – the pillared porch and flight of steps within it, the windows of the rooms where we lived when we were a family of seven or eight, and not of two as we are now; and behind them I could see with the eyes of imagination all I wanted to know.

The garden had been rearranged. There were greenhouses in it that used not to be, and the stone lions were gone. In my time two large heraldic lions, that came from the piers of a park entrance to an estate that had been brought to the hammer, sat on square pedestals in front of the house, ornaments of a semicircular lawn that now spread over ground once cut off for strawberry beds and espalier apple-trees. Under the belly of one of those lions, whose forepaws served for doorway and his haunches for shelter from wind and rain, I had my summer reading place. There I wept over the death of the Heir of Redclyffe, and shivered at the ghastly imaginings of Edgar Allan Poe. There also I made the little secret scribblings that were to lead eventually to the writing of this book. I could not see round to the arbour under the big chestnut-tree – or where the arbour was – with its processioning groups of ghosts; nor the thickets of syringa bushes, the scent of which has never come to my nose without the suggestion of this place to my mind, and never will. The nose is as sensitive to poetic impressions as the eye with its rose-coloured spectacles, if not more so. There is a poem of W.W. Story's which begins:

"O faint, delicious, spring-time violet!
Thine odour, like a key,
Turns noiselessly in memory's wards to let
A thought of sorrow free.

The breath of distant fields upon my brow
Blows through that open door …"

And just so it is, and was, with me. Every exhalation of English earth was a magic potion to conjure visions and dreams. It did not need to be a perfume for the handkerchief, syringa or violet, jasmine or lily-of-the-valley; the smell of the little herb-robert, whose other name is something with "stink" in it, was to me – who had not smelt it for forty years – the most exquisite of all.

But the shrubbery walk around the fruit garden where the syringas grew was all open border now, not shady and secluded as when I used to pace it in dusk and dark with the earliest of those fairy emissaries that come to a girl when she is passing into her teens… For the peculiar charm of this garden is that it was the scene of the great transition.

Here I received my first proposal. Heavens! what a shock it gave me. In fact I was horrified and terrified out of my wits. It came in a letter surreptitiously conveyed to me through servants. "I love you with my whole heart. Dare I hope that I am loved in return?" – the startling words were but the commencement of a long outpouring, but I was so frightened by them that I dared not read another. In frantic haste I destroyed the letter, and thereafter went in fear and dread of the writer – quite a grown man to me, perhaps eighteen – as of an ogre waiting to devour me. I may point out, by the way, that it is a mistake not to read letters through – one that I did not make again. This unread letter contained a request that I would, if I favoured my lover's suit, indicate the same to him by a certain sign that he alone would understand, and in my ignorance I made that sign, placing myself where he could find me, when all my aim was to get as far away from him as possible. How I hated him for his attentions no words can tell. On the other hand I rather "cottoned" to a brother of his, who did not write me love-letters. For little girls do cotton to little boys, and vice versa, and why not? "I confess I

get consolation … in seeing the artless little girls walking after the boys to whom they incline … this is as it should be," said Thackeray, writing of children's parties. But the boy to whom I was secretly inclined was never aware of the compliment paid him, and, almost before I was aware of it myself, he was sadly removed from my path by an accidental gun-shot. And the boy who inclined, much more than inclined, to me I took every precaution that was in my power never to speak to again. I cannot remember that I ever did so.

But the reader who knows anything at all of human nature does not need to be told that when I found myself in D – again, after an interval of nearly half-a-century, my inclination was rather to see him than to avoid him. It would be a piquant moment, I felt, that of meeting now, if his memory of early happenings was as good in old age as mine; even although no reference to them should be permitted. I quite looked forward to it.

But it was not to be. Although I had nothing to be ashamed of in connection with him – very much to the contrary – I did not mention his name to anybody, also I need not say that I kept to myself the little affair that had been between us; I merely held an ear cocked for casual information. And it ended with my leaving D – without having any news of him, not knowing even whether he was alive or dead.

But later I dropped across one of his sisters, a widow, who had become connected by marriage with my husband's family. One day we went in a little party to the town where she lived and she entertained us to tea. I sat beside her at table, and inevitably we gossiped of our young days throughout the meal. She told me what had become of her several brothers and sisters, and so as last I heard of the one in whom I was interested.

"I have just had a letter from him," said she, no trace in her face or voice of any knowledge of the ancient secret. "I told him that you were in England, and he wishes me to give you his kindest remembrances and to say he is very sorry not to be able to see you." I forget where she said he lived, but it was in some far-away county; married, of course, with grown-up children – no doubt grandchildren – as I have.

CHAPTER IV
THE HOME OF CHILDHOOD

There was another old home – an earlier one – that on my first walk in D – I went to look at. Its associations were even more keenly dear, and archæologically it was immensely the most interesting.

I was astonished to see how very, very old it was, and for the first time was curious about its evidently extensive history. There was a monastic suggestion in its thick walls and crow-stepped gables, and the oaken door exactly like a church door, and the peculiar irregularity of the grouping of its parts. Nothing was changed, except that a horrid little office had been built into a corner that was once a sunless well between masonry, containing only evergreen shrubs and a dense mat of lilies-of-the-valley; but the office was an excrescence so glaringly alone by itself that one could treat it as if it were a tradesman's cart awaiting orders. Nothing else seemed to have been altered; even the bay-tree, from which we gathered leaves to flavour cookings, stood in the little front court as of yore, and the old ivy was, I am sure, the old ivy of fifty, possibly a hundred, if not a thousand, years ago. I viewed the place now with instructed eyes, which told me that half-a-century was a mere fraction of its age.

The guide-book says nothing about it. Old dwelling-houses are too thick on the ground in England to have any distinction unconnected with famous persons and events; this was no more to the town of D – in 1908 than it was to us when we left it for the modern four-square house with the pillared portico and stone lions on the lawn, down there near the station. At neither time was there a doubt of the latter's incomparable superiority.

But I had come from the land of the raw and new, the domain of the social vagrant and the speculative builder, and I could appreciate the charm of this relic of antiquity, for the first time. I stood at the gate, and tried to think how it had come there. The clue was in the name of the lane beside it – Priory Road – and in the guide-book statement that the fine old rectory, in the gardens of which we used to lose arrows and balls over the wall dividing it from ours, stood "on the site of a Benedictine Priory."

Then I tried to reconstruct the plan of the interior, and remembered that the floor under the cocoanut matting of the dining-room was of cold stone slabs; the passages the same, and I think there was a press of black wood, that became store cupboards, built into an end of that room. Entering the arched front door, of such pronounced ecclesiastical design, mother's store-room was the first thing you came to, a room that opened out of the front hall on your right hand. Passing through that hall and opening the door that faced you, you were dropped straight into the drawing-room down a short flight of steps. One window of that apartment looked out towards the road (I fancy the excrescent office blocked it); another, and a door, opened directly upon the garden, gravelled nearly all over, with, at one side, a group of large and very old yew-trees, roofing a circular wooden bench. In the right-hand drawing-room wall a third door opened, at the top of another flight of steps, into what we called the music-room – really a cosier sitting-room, incidentally enclosing the piano, and without so many draughts in it; and a fourth door in a fourth wall led you into the stone-flagged passage connecting with our refectory and the domestic offices, and to the foot of the staircase. Surely that plan was never drawn with a view to the convenience of a lay family!

Upstairs the arrangement was still more unconventional, although it may have been conventual, for aught I know. That window over the arched main entrance – it was open, and its muslin curtains fluttering in the breeze – belonged to one of three rooms so tucked into the many-cornered structure that they described a sort of triangle; one was hemmed in by two, the only way in and out being through one or other of those two, which also intercommunicated, the point of common junction being a sort of square entry place, having the three doors in its panelled sides. For some reason the inmost, which was also to the person in the road the outermost, room was reserved as a guest chamber

– the aunts used it; but once it was given to a male visitor, who wanted to be out early. His dilemma was a cruel one, seeing that his window was in a sheer wall and he had no rope ladder. He could gain freedom only through my parents' room or through that occupied by their daughters, now grown from babies to little girls. After long listening in our joint vestibule, he chose the former path, as the least of two evils; but, although he crept on stockinged feet, my mother was awake. She made some alterations after that. It seems to me they should have been made before.

Over that window above the front door another and smaller window looked down on me. I met its gaze with a shrinking eye and the cold creeps down my back – yes, even after all those years and years! You reached the little sloping walled room behind it through a suite of attics at the top of dark and lonely stairs; the first room was the servants', who, however, were not there when I went to bed; the next had only ghosts in it, and the locked door of a lumber-room out of which I nightly expected some shape of horror to spring forth on me as I breathlessly scurried past; the last – with this window in it – was where I slept with my governess.

Seven governesses in succession reigned over us, for in my circle it was considered rather shocking to send girls to boarding-school, which was quite the proper place for boys; and I can truthfully affirm that I never learned anything which would now be considered worth learning until I had done with them all and started foraging for myself. I did have a few months of boarding-school at the end – obtained by hard teasing for it – and a very good school for its day it was, but it left no lasting impression on my mind, except that of great unhappiness. The unhappiness had nothing to do with its being a boarding-school, but solely to its not being Home. Home is a place that I never do get away from without immediately wishing myself back in it.

Of the first two governesses – technically the nursery governesses – I remember little but their names and the circumstance that one of them was a nobleman's grand-daughter. Her mother had eloped with a poor tutor, and been cast out of her world in consequence – so closely does one generation resemble another in some of its practices, if not in all. The next – I think the next – was she who once turned that gable room into a torture-chamber, worthy successor of heretic-persecuting Mediæval monks, if any such preceded her. Only I was not a heretic, but an innocent, fairly well-behaved, carefully cherished child.

She came from L – , a neighbouring town of county importance, and it was darkly hinted that her father kept a boot-shop there. Anyway, she gave herself great airs. Before coming to us she had been governess at S – Hall, and her late pupil, Rosamond U – , was thrown in our faces all day long. If they were not so well known, I would like to write the omitted names in full, and express to Rosamond U – , if she be living, the sympathy I have since felt for her in that long-past experience common to us both; but at the time I loathed her beyond everybody, with the solitary exception of our joint governess. Rosamond was so beautiful, so good, such a perfect lady! – the continual foil to her successors. Miss H – sniffed behind backs at everything in our house, because it was so different from what she had been accustomed to. I slept in her room – alas! – and when she was beautifying herself for the evening and father called for her at the foot of the stairs, she used to inform me, with that ugly smile of hers, that at S – Hall Mr U – always came upstairs to her door and escorted her to the drawing-room on his arm – he was such a perfect gentleman! She must have been a liar, than which one is accustomed to believe there is nothing worse; but she was worse – a vile woman all through. I have never in my life disclosed the horrors of the nights I spent with her; her threats of revenge, if I should do so, sealed my lips at the time, and my mortal terror of her, even after she was gone, for years more; and then I was ashamed to speak. My poor parents died ignorant of what they had exposed me to in my tender childhood. I, so extravagantly beloved and cared for! Possibly Rosamond U – 's rank saved her from the like treatment. When I think of Miss H – , and I hate to think of her – even now she could taint the English landscape – when I do think of her, it is to wish I could tell all the parents in the world about her, as a warning against the promiscuous governess and against leaving any governess unwatched. Better the poorest boarding-school, where there is the

safety of publicity, a thousand times. In L – I had a married cousin, whose little bridesmaid I had been, and whose baby, that I was allowed to nurse on a footstool, lured me to stay with her once or twice; but I clung to her side all the time lest perchance I should sight Miss H – half-a-mile off, after she had left our employ and lost all power over me. One day at church – great St Margaret's, so full of people – I caught a distant glimpse of the dull, sallow face, and nearly fainted as I stood.

Happily, there were other and more wholesome memories connected with that attic room. But it was still a tragedy that came first to my mind when I thought of Miss H – 's successor, Miss W – . For it was in her reign that I very nearly committed suicide.

She was not like – nobody was like – Miss H – , but she was not above using power unfairly when she was put out. I had been nasty to her in some way, and she returned the compliment by formulating a specific complaint of me to father – actually of *me*, his queen, to *him*, my devoted slave. She was a pretty young woman, and he, poor man, just as human as could be. He used to take her walks of an evening when he thought she needed exercise, and on other evenings would sit entranced for hours while she sang "Should he Upbraid" and "Good-bye, Sweetheart" and "When the Swallows homeward fly," and scores of other nice things, to him. And that accounts now, although it did not then, for the astounding circumstance that he punished me at her behest. I was not whipped, of course, but I was sent to my room in disgrace and ordered to stay there. Never shall I forget my mingled astonishment, rage and despair under the unprecedented calamity. I would not have minded, I thought, if I had really done the thing she had accused me of. But I was an innocent victim, and it was father —*father*– who had been set against me! Simply I could not bear it. I resolved to put an end to my wretched existence there and then. "When he comes and finds me dead upon the floor, then he will be sorry," was the reflection that was to console me in my last moments. But, although I crept into mother's room and ransacked her medicine cupboard for the fatal dose, I did not find it; I lived to make friends with father again, and to suffer many more hours of anguish over troubles that were not worth it.

Another episode of Miss W – 's reign came to my mind when I could clear it of the smoke of the darker memories. The brother and sister next below me were the victims of her wrath on this occasion. I was away from home, and my sister was promoted to the attic room and my place in the governess's bed. She noticed, as I had done, Miss W – 's habit of performing half her evening toilet by candlelight and the rest in the dark; she discovered that the unseen part of the process consisted in dabbing the skin with Rowland's Kalydor for the improvement of a much-valued complexion. She told the second brother – a person of humour – who promptly turned the knowledge to account. Together they unearthed the secret bottle of Kalydor, adulterated the contents with ink, re-hid it in its supposed safe place. Night came, and an evening party. Miss W – dressed herself with special care and splendour, and duly extinguished her candles before applying the finishing touch. She had fine shoulders and arms, now well displayed, and was particularly careful to anoint them thoroughly with her favourite cosmetic. Then she swept downstairs. We had dark staircases and dim halls then, and somehow she did not realise the situation until the drawing-room lights and the eyes and laughs of the assembled company revealed it to her. I am sorry I did not see the dramatic dénouement. There were violent hysterics, I was told, and a terrible hullabaloo. Father, in a towering passion, rushed upstairs and thrashed the children all round, innocent and guilty together, lest he should miss out a possible participant in the crime.

We had two more English governesses, and one French. One of the former had taught a family of cousins and was reported to be very clever; but she had a fiery, ungovernable temper, and did not stay long enough to prove her gifts. She was a tiny woman, and pretty in a bird-like, sharp-nosed, bright-eyed way, and she became engaged to one of the men who admired her; and one day he came to see her, and from the hall where he was taking off his hat and coat overheard her "giving tongue" to our stately youngest aunt, with her customary fierceness and fluency. She was unaware of his propinquity until he marched in to inform her that he had not really known her until that moment,

and that, as a consequence of the revelation, his offer of marriage was revoked. It was characteristic of her that she turned on him with a furious repudiation of any desire whatever to be his wife. She died an elderly, if not old, maid some years later.

The other Englishwoman was a dear – and not much else. We loved her, but we did not learn much from her. As for our French companion – it was for French conversation that she was engaged – she was all the time learning English herself. Poor little Eugénie Léonie de B – ! She had a white face and big, lustrous black eyes, and pretty frocks, supplied by her mother, herself a governess in an English family of higher consequence than ours. The boys used to tease Eugénie about Waterloo and frogs, and she would burst into rages and tears because her limited vocabulary denied her the power of arguing for her country on equal terms. She was a dear little thing, and we were all fond of her, and she of us; she took the place of another sister while she lived with us, and there was mutual and bitter grief when she went away. But she did not teach us French to any extent. We taught her English instead.

In short, there was not one, I am convinced, amongst them all – with the possible exception of the lady with the temper – who could have passed a proper examination in the subjects she professed to teach. No one asked for a certificate of competency other than her own word and that of her friends. Miss W – certainly had the warrant of the principal of the best ladies' school in L – , but there was no warrant for principals of schools. They conducted their own examinations and gave judgment in their own way, which might be any way. All I learned effectually during my brief experience of boarding-school was a long poem by N. P. Willis; I was letter-perfect in it for break-up day, but, when the moment came for me to distinguish myself and the school, stage fright paralysed me and I could not utter a word. At least, that is the only scholastic achievement that I can now recall to mind.

In the final result we were able to read and write – not "cypher," in my case; and I could play the piano pretty well (by ear), and my brothers vastly better – especially the eldest – and, later on, one sister also. But that was because music was a passion born in us; it had to come out, wild or cultivated, and our teachers could take little credit for such proficiency as we attained. Instead of making me read scores and understand them, they played my new pieces over to me before setting me to them. It was not only a labour-saving system, but produced the most immediately effective results. I was a brilliant performer of "Woodlands" (descriptive of a gathering and bursting storm and the warbling of little birds after it), and of the "Duet in D," before I could puzzle out a hymn-tune that had not been sung or played to me. The elder brother, who went to school in L – (whence he used to be brought home suddenly every now and then, at death's door, for mother to nurse to life again), had lessons from a master and the advantage of knowing something of the basis of the art; yet his music was before all things the instinctive speech and poetry of a soul that was not made for this prosaic world. It was hard to get him to play to listeners – to "show off" what was really a great accomplishment from the most common point of view. But in twilight and firelight, or with only me, who was his constant chum, his extemporisation was so exquisite that I used to sit and cry as I listened to it. Once a great musician listened to it, unknown to him, and told our mother that her son was destined to set the Thames on fire some day. He died at seventeen. When he was too weak to sit on the music stool by himself, I used to stand behind him and support his weight against my chest to enable him to enjoy his communion with the divine and beautiful as long as he could.

He died in March; and in June of the same year the second brother, two and a half years younger, was laid beside him. This dear boy, so sweet-tempered, so gay, so unselfish, hid facts that should have been attended to while the other was yet alive, because all his thoughts were for him and he never had any for himself, and his own life was in danger before it was known that he was ill. But an organist friend had promised him the glory of playing the whole Sunday service in a neighbouring church (St Peter's, Great Yarmouth, where we were living at the time), and, with his complaint already past hope, he went off to this task, simply full of it, and performed it triumphantly. It was his last

act in life, and through all his delirium until he died his fingers were playing up and down the sheet, showing that his stricken brain made music for him to the last.

The sister was like them both in that one and only respect. She was a delightful extemporiser on the piano, expressing thus all her wayward moods as they alternated so quickly in her passionate little soul. Continually she surprised herself as well as us with some beautiful improvisation, and then burst into tears because she could not repeat it. And all that budding genius to be swept out of the world, without a chance to flower and bear fruit! It is a sad reflection – the waste of valuable things in life, the persistent superfluity of the valueless.

However, such gifts as the then numerous family could lay claim to were hidden as it were in the "plain egg of the nightingale" while our development was in the hands of the governesses. They were intellectually limited, spiritually common, all unlearned, and the majority of them underbred. The fact being that, taking the average of the seven, they fairly represented their class – the governess class of my young days. Naturally, in this case, we more or less fairly represented the class of those who were supposed to be well educated.

But I must except the youngest aunt from this category. She was a governess – but not the average governess – and it was never *her* opinion that we were well educated. She frequently deplored my own lack of opportunities to improve, and made generous, if vain, efforts to provide them. Before she entered upon her career as instructress of foreign young high-mightinesses, she spent years on her own studies abroad, and she offered to keep me at school in Germany if my parents would send me to her there. I know we were all fools, father, mother and self, but I clung to them and they clung to me, and "No, no, a thousand times no!" was our unanimous reply. "You are standing in the child's light," wrote the youngest aunt from Heidelberg, but that was not fair, for they would have sent me and broken their hearts over it if I had wanted to go. But if the youngest aunt had invited me to join her in heaven, the joylessness of the prospect would have been the same. So she instituted a system of correspondence, as the best she could do in the circumstances. I was to write long and regular letters to her, to which she was to reply, correcting their grammar and composition and otherwise enlightening my neglected mind. I performed my part of this contract not wholly without pleasure in it, and I have no doubt that I owe to her my first taste for literature and the bent towards authorship which afterwards became a fixed line. I remember that it was to her I submitted an early MS., while as yet it was a secret that I wrote stories. This one was all about moated granges and Mediæval castles and the splendours of what I imagined to be high life. How just her criticism was! And how – naturally, on that account – it hurt my feelings then, when I was professionally so young and innocent. "A boudoir," smiled she, "is not a room that a lady keeps all to herself, as she does her bedroom. And she does not have 'tapers' on the dressing-table, but candles. And why don't you write what you understand?" That advice, which is of the best to-day, was astonishingly good for those days.

In later years her letters were like novels themselves. Her reticence about things one burned to know concerning the private lives of her royal employers was impenetrable, but outside of that what food for the romantic imagination! There was the death of her pupil, a young princess of S – , and later the semi-dissolution of her father's kingdom – two events that the youngest aunt took bitterly to heart and discoursed of eloquently. There was that mandate of the Czar to her and another pupil, wintering in Dresden, to return instantly to St Petersburg, and the journey of the party in bullet-proof railway carriages through Poland in revolt. The train crawled along so slowly, on account of the fighting on the line, that they were nearly starved, and when it reached a station where food might be obtained no one but the youngest aunt had the pluck to leave its shelter. The English tutor of her pupil's brother (the children were fatherless wards of the Russian Emperor) cowered in his corner paralysed with fright; the youngest aunt could not find words to express her contempt for him. She gathered up her skirts – it was necessary to hold them high, she said, because the ground was running with blood – and sallied forth to forage alone, returning with a little black bread and some dirty water, procured with great difficulty and by a heavy bribe. I remember that the youngest aunt was all

indignation against "ungrateful Poland," which shows how the finest judgment can be affected by the personal point of view. At the end of the perilous journey there was a solemn service of thanksgiving for the deliverance of the Lord's Anointed out of the hands of bloodthirsty rebels. Her sketches of these and other stirring scenes taught me something of the world outside my village or country town; they supplied plots for many early romances that never saw the light.

On the whole, school work was a deadly uninteresting, and therefore unprofitable, business in my time, no matter what the qualifications of teachers. The notion of making it a pleasure as well as a discipline, of breathing into its dry bones any breath of knowledgeable life, seemed not to occur to anybody. The idea that it was anything but a penalty for being young certainly never occurred to *us*. It is not surprising when one considers other aspects of the social system prevailing at the period. But it does seem strange that a theory of education so essentially stupid on the face of it should still persist to the extent we see in these more enlightened days. And yet – not so strange. Nothing is really strange when you think it out. The schools, most humanly and naturally, keep their old alliance with the Church, clinging to the old dogmas which have been the roots of their being and the symbols of their power for so long; inevitably resisting, while they can, on behalf of all sorts of vested interests, the Spirit of Progress which they must know to be ultimately irresistible. When I see growing children who have spent morning and afternoon at school fagging wearily at "prep" through the evening when they ought to be recruiting with a game or in their beds, I marvel at the hidebound conservatism which can thus ignore the laws of health and the rights of the individual, freely recognised as paramount in other directions. But again – what is there to marvel at? There are scores of good, common-sense business men to whom Compulsory Greek is a sacred thing, and there are thousands and thousands of truly saintly women who would not have a hand laid on the Athanasian Creed for anything. Not to speak of the innumerable brave fellows, souls of honour, flowers of chivalry, who believe as devoutly as they believe in God that the world would go to pieces utterly without its armies and navies.

How often we hear elderly people gushing over their school days! "Ah, those were the happy days!" When I hear them I know exactly what they mean – not the school part of school days, but the free parts in between. I am not of those who sentimentally deceive themselves in this matter – the school parts to me were never happy. I have always known it. And when I came back to the scenes of my schooldays, when I stood in that quiet road at D – and looked up at the window of the room under the crow-stepped gable, I realised with a shudder how unutterably wretched they had been sometimes.

But it is time I dragged my spirit eyes from that sad little nook in the house of dreams. I will not look at it again. I will take Memory through the ghost-haunted attics behind it and down the twisty stairs, to the lower floors and the garden and the company of my dear family, where she can play about much more cheerfully.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.