

MAMIE DICKENS

MY FATHER
AS I RECALL
HIM

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My Father as I Recall Him

CHAPTER I

Seeing “Gad’s Hill” as a child. – His domestic side and home-love. – His love of children. – His neatness and punctuality. – At the table, and as host. – The original of “Little Nell.”

If, in these pages, written in remembrance of my father, I should tell you my dear friends, nothing new of him, I can, at least, promise you that what I shall tell will be told faithfully, if simply, and perhaps there may be some things not familiar to you.

A great many writers have taken it upon themselves to write lives of my father, to tell anecdotes of him, and to print all manner of things about him. Of all these published books I have read but one, the only genuine “Life” thus far written of him, the one sanctioned by my father himself, namely: “The Life of Charles Dickens,” by John Forster.

But in what I write about my father I shall depend chiefly upon my own memory of him, for I wish no other or dearer remembrance. My love for my father has never been touched or approached by any other love. I hold him in my heart of hearts as a man apart from all other men, as one apart from all other beings.

Of my father’s childhood it is but natural that I should know very little more than the knowledge possessed by the great public. But I never remember hearing him allude at any time, or under any circumstances, to those unhappy days in his life except in the one instance of his childish love and admiration for “Gad’s Hill,” which was destined to become so closely associated with his name and works.

He had a very strong and faithful attachment for places: Chatham, I think, being his first love in this respect. For it was here, when a child, and a very sickly child, poor little fellow, that he found in an old spare room a store of books, among which were “Roderick Random,” “Peregrine Pickle,” “Humphrey Clinker,” “Tom Jones,” “The Vicar of Wakefield,” “Don Quixote,” “Gil Blas,” “Robinson Crusoe,” “The Arabian Nights,” and other volumes. “They were,” as Mr. Forster wrote, “a host of friends when he had no single friend.” And it was while living at Chatham that he first saw “Gad’s Hill.”

As a “very queer small boy” he used to walk up to the house – it stood on the summit of a high hill – on holidays, or when his heart ached for a “great treat.” He would stand and look at it, for as a little fellow he had a wonderful liking and admiration for the house, and it was, to him, like no other house he had ever seen. He would walk up and down before it with his father, gazing at it with delight, and the latter would tell him that perhaps if he worked hard, was industrious, and grew up to be a good man, he might some day come to live in that very house. His love for this place went through his whole life, and was with him until his death. He takes “Mr. Pickwick” and his friends from Rochester to Cobham by the beautiful back road, and I remember one day when we were driving that way he showed me the exact spot where “Mr. Pickwick” called out: “Whoa, I have dropped my whip!” After his marriage he took his wife for the honeymoon to a village called Chalk, between Gravesend and Rochester.

Many years after, when he was living with his family in a villa near Lausanne, he wrote to a friend: “The green woods and green shades about here are more like Cobham, in Kent, than anything we dream of at the foot of the Alpine passes.” And again, in still later years, one of his favorite walks from “Gad’s Hill” was to a village called Shorne, where there was a quaint old church and graveyard.

He often said that he would like to be buried there, the peace and quiet of the homely little place having a tender fascination for him. So we see that his heart was always in Kent.

But let this single reference to his earlier years suffice, so that I may write of him during those years when I remember him among us and around us in our home.

From his earliest childhood, throughout his earliest married life to the day of his death, his nature was home-loving. He was a “home man” in every respect. When he became celebrated at a very early age, as we know, all his joys and sorrows were taken home; and he found there sympathy and the companionship of his “own familiar friends.” In his letters to these latter, in his letters to my mother, to my aunt, and, later on, to us his children, he never forgot anything that he knew would be of interest about his work, his successes, his hopes or fears. And there was a sweet simplicity in his belief that such news would most certainly be acceptable to all, that is wonderfully touching and child-like coming from a man of genius.

His care and thoughtfulness about home matters, nothing being deemed too small or trivial to claim his attention and consideration, were really marvellous when we remember his active, eager, restless, working brain. No man was so inclined naturally to derive his happiness from home affairs. He was full of the kind of interest in a house which is commonly confined to women, and his care of and for us as wee children did most certainly “pass the love of women!” His was a tender and most affectionate nature.

For many consecutive summers we used to be taken to Broadstairs. This little place became a great favorite with my father. He was always very happy there, and delighted in wandering about the garden of his house, generally accompanied by one or other of his children. In later years, at Boulogne, he would often have his youngest boy, “The Noble Plorn,” trotting by his side. These two were constant companions in those days, and after these walks my father would always have some funny anecdote to tell us. And when years later the time came for the boy of his heart to go out into the world, my father, after seeing him off, wrote: “Poor Plorn has gone to Australia. It was a hard parting at the last. He seemed to become once more my youngest and favorite little child as the day drew near, and I did not think I could have been so shaken. These are hard, hard things, but they might have to be done without means or influence, and then they would be far harder. God bless him!”

When my father was arranging and rehearsing his readings from “Dombey,” the death of “little Paul” caused him such real anguish, the reading being so difficult to him, that he told us he could only master his intense emotion by keeping the picture of Plorn, well, strong and hearty, steadily before his eyes. We can see by the different child characters in his books what a wonderful knowledge he had of children, and what a wonderful and truly womanly sympathy he had with them in all their childish joys and griefs. I can remember with us, his own children, how kind, considerate and patient he always was. But we were never afraid to go to him in any trouble, and never had a snub from him or a cross word under any circumstances. He was always glad to give us “treats,” as he called them, and used to conceive all manner of those “treats” for us, and if any favor had to be asked we were always sure of a favorable answer. On these occasions my sister “Katie” was generally our messenger, we others waiting outside the study door to hear the verdict. She and I used to have delightful treats in those summer evenings, driving up to Hampstead in the open carriage with him, our mother, and “Auntie,”¹ and getting out for a long walk through the lovely country lanes, picking wild roses and other flowers, or walking hand in hand with him listening to some story.

There never existed, I think, in all the world, a more thoroughly tidy or methodical creature than was my father. He was tidy in every way – in his mind, in his handsome and graceful person, in his work, in keeping his writing table drawers, in his large correspondence, in fact in his whole life.

¹ When I write about my aunt, or “Auntie,” as no doubt I may often have occasion to do, it is of the aunt *par excellence*, Georgina Hogarth. She has been to me ever since I can remember anything, and to all of us, the truest, best and dearest friend, companion and counsellor. To quote my father’s own words: “The best and truest friend man ever had.”

I remember that my sister and I occupied a little garret room in Devonshire Terrace, at the very top of the house. He had taken the greatest pains and care to make the room as pretty and comfortable for his two little daughters as it could be made. He was often dragged up the steep staircase to this room to see some new print or some new ornament which we children had put up, and he always gave us words of praise and approval. He encouraged us in every possible way to make ourselves useful, and to adorn and beautify our rooms with our own hands, and to be ever tidy and neat. I remember that the adornment of this garret was decidedly primitive, the unframed prints being fastened to the wall by ordinary black or white pins, whichever we could get. But, never mind, if they were put up neatly and tidily they were always “excellent,” or “quite slap-up” as he used to say. Even in those early days, he made a point of visiting every room in the house once each morning, and if a chair was out of its place, or a blind not quite straight, or a crumb left on the floor, woe betide the offender.

And then his punctuality! It was almost frightful to an unpunctual mind! This again was another phase of his extreme tidiness; it was also the outcome of his excessive thoughtfulness and consideration for others. His sympathy, also, with all pain and suffering made him quite invaluable in a sick room. Quick, active, sensible, bright and cheery, and sympathetic to a degree, he would seize the “case” at once, know exactly what to do and do it. In all our childish ailments his visits were eagerly looked forward to; and our little hearts would beat a shade faster, and our aches and pains become more bearable, when the sound of his quick footstep was heard, and the encouraging accents of his voice greeted the invalid. I can remember now, as if it were yesterday, how the touch of his hand – he had a most sympathetic touch – was almost too much sometimes, the help and hope in it making my heart full to overflowing. He believed firmly in the power of mesmerism, as a remedy in some forms of illness, and was himself a mesmerist of no mean order; I know of many cases, my own among the number, in which he used his power in this way with perfect success.

And however busy he might be, and even in his hours of relaxation, he was still, if you can understand me, always busy; he would give up any amount of time and spare himself no fatigue if he could in any way alleviate sickness and pain.

In very many of my father’s books there are frequent references to delicious meals, wonderful dinners and more marvellous dishes, steaming bowls of punch, etc, which have led many to believe that he was a man very fond of the table. And yet I think no more abstemious man ever lived.

In the “Gad’s Hill” days, when the house was full of visitors, he had a peculiar notion of always having the menu for the day’s dinner placed on the sideboard at luncheon time. And then he would discuss every item in his fanciful, humorous way with his guests, much to this effect: “Cock-a-leekie? Good, decidedly good; fried soles with shrimp sauce? Good again; croquettes of chicken? Weak, very weak; decided want of imagination here,” and so on, and he would apparently be so taken up with the merits or demerits of a menu that one might imagine he lived for nothing but the coming dinner. He had a small but healthy appetite, but was remarkably abstemious both in eating and drinking.

He was delightful as a host, caring individually for each guest, and bringing the special qualities of each into full notice and prominence, putting the very shyest at his or her ease, making the best of the most humdrum, and never thrusting himself forward.

But when he was most delightful, was alone with us at home and sitting over dessert, and when my sister was with us especially – I am talking now of our grownup days – for she had great power in “drawing him out.” At such times although he might sit down to dinner in a grave or abstracted mood, he would, invariably, soon throw aside his silence and end by delighting us all with his genial talk and his quaint fancies about people and things. He was always, as I have said, much interested in mesmerism, and the curious influence exercised by one personality over another. One illustration I remember his using was, that meeting someone in the busy London streets, he was on the point of turning back to accost the supposed friend, when finding out his mistake in time he walked on again until he actually met the real friend, whose shadow, as it were, but a moment ago had come across his path.

And then the forgetting of a word or a name. “Now into what pigeon-hole of my brain did that go, and why do I suddenly remember it now?” And as these thoughts passed through his mind and were spoken dreamily, so they also appeared in his face. Another instant, perhaps, and his eyes would be full of fun and laughter.

At the beginning of his literary career he suffered a great sorrow in the death – a very sudden death – of my mother’s sister, Mary Hogarth. She was of a most charming and lovable disposition, as well as being personally very beautiful. Soon after my parents married, Aunt Mary was constantly with them. As her nature developed she became my father’s ideal of what a young girl should be. And his own words show how this great affection and the influence of the girl’s loved memory were with him to the end of his life. The shock of her sudden death so affected and prostrated him that the publication of “Pickwick” was interrupted for two months.

“I look back,” he wrote, “and with unmingled pleasure, to every link which each ensuing week has added to the chain of our attachment. It shall go hard I hope ere anything but death impairs the toughness of a bond now so firmly riveted. That beautiful passage you were so kind and considerate as to send to me has given me the only feeling akin to pleasure, sorrowful pleasure it is, that I have yet had connected with the loss of my dear young friend and companion, for whom my love and attachment will never diminish, and by whose side, if it please God to leave me in possession of sense to signify my wishes, my bones whenever or wherever I die, will one day be laid.”

She was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, and her grave bears the following inscription, written by my father:

“Young, beautiful, and good, God in His mercy numbered her among His angels at the early age of seventeen.”

A year after her death, in writing to my mother from Yorkshire, he says: “Is it not extraordinary that the same dreams which have constantly visited me since poor Mary died follow me everywhere? After all the change of scene and fatigue I have dreamt of her ever since I left home, and no doubt shall until I return. I would fain believe, sometimes, that her spirit may have some influence over them, but their perpetual repetition is extraordinary.”

In the course of years there came changes in our home, inevitable changes. But no changes could ever alter my father’s home-loving nature. As he wrote to Mr. Forster, as a young man, so it was with him to the time of his death: “We shall soon meet, please God, and be happier than ever we were in all our lives. Oh! home – home – home!!!”

CHAPTER II

Buying Christmas presents. – In the dance. – The merriest of them all. – As a conjurer. – Christmas at “Gad’s Hill.” – Our Christmas dinners. – A New Year’s Eve frolic. – New Year on the Green. – Twelfth Night festivities.

Christmas was always a time which in our home was looked forward to with eagerness and delight, and to my father it was a time dearer than any other part of the year, I think. He loved Christmas for its deep significance as well as for its joys, and this he demonstrates in every allusion in his writings to the great festival, a day which he considered should be fragrant with the love that we should bear one to another, and with the love and reverence of his Saviour and Master. Even in his most merry conceits of Christmas, there are always subtle and tender touches which will bring tears to the eyes, and make even the thoughtless have some special veneration for this most blessed anniversary.

In our childish days my father used to take us, every twenty-fourth day of December, to a toy shop in Holborn, where we were allowed to select our Christmas presents, and also any that we wished to give to our little companions. Although I believe we were often an hour or more in the shop before our several tastes were satisfied, he never showed the least impatience, was always interested, and as desirous as we, that we should choose exactly what we liked best. As we grew older, present giving was confined to our several birthdays, and this annual visit to the Holborn toy shop ceased.

When we were only babies my father determined that we should be taught to dance, so as early as the Genoa days we were given our first lessons. “Our oldest boy and his sisters are to be waited upon next week by a professor of the noble art of dancing,” he wrote to a friend at this time. And again, in writing to my mother, he says: “I hope the dancing lessons will be a success. Don’t fail to let me know.”

Our progress in the graceful art delighted him, and his admiration of our success was evident when we exhibited to him, as we were perfected in them, all the steps, exercises and dances which formed our lessons. He always encouraged us in our dancing, and praised our grace and aptness, although criticized quite severely in some places for allowing his children to expend so much time and energy upon the training of their feet.

When “the boys” came home for the holidays there were constant rehearsals for the Christmas and New Year’s parties; and more especially for the dance on Twelfth Night, the anniversary of my brother Charlie’s birthday. Just before one of these celebrations my father insisted that my sister Katie and I should teach the polka step to Mr. Leech and himself. My father was as much in earnest about learning to take that wonderful step correctly, as though there were nothing of greater importance in the world. Often he would practice gravely in a corner, without either partner or music, and I remember one cold winter’s night his awakening with the fear that he had forgotten the step so strong upon him that, jumping out of bed, by the scant illumination of the old-fashioned rushlight, and to his own whistling, he diligently rehearsed its “one, two, three, one, two, three” until he was once more secure in his knowledge.

No one can imagine our excitement and nervousness when the evening came on which we were to dance with our pupils. Katie, who was a very little girl was to have Mr. Leech, who was over six feet tall, for her partner, while my father was to be mine. My heart beat so fast that I could scarcely breathe, I was so fearful for the success of our exhibition. But my fears were groundless, and we were greeted at the finish of our dance with hearty applause, which was more than compensation for the work which had been expended upon its learning.

My father was certainly not what in the ordinary acceptance of the term would be called “a good dancer.” I doubt whether he had ever received any instruction in “the noble art” other than that

which my sister and I gave him. In later years I remember trying to teach him the Schottische, a dance which he particularly admired and desired to learn. But although he was so fond of dancing, except at family gatherings in his own or his most intimate friends' homes, I never remember seeing him join in it himself, and I doubt if, even as a young man, he ever went to balls. Graceful in motion, his dancing, such as it was, was natural to him. Dance music was delightful to his cheery, genial spirit; the time and steps of a dance suited his tidy nature, if I may so speak. The action and the exercise seemed to be a part of his abundant vitality.

While I am writing of my father's fondness for dancing, a characteristic anecdote of him occurs to me. While he was courting my mother, he went one summer evening to call upon her. The Hogarths were living a little way out of London, in a residence which had a drawing-room opening with French windows on to a lawn. In this room my mother and her family were seated quietly after dinner on this particular evening, when suddenly a young sailor jumped through one of the open windows into the apartment, whistled and danced a hornpipe, and before they could recover from their amazement jumped out again. A few minutes later my father walked in at the door as sedately as though quite innocent of the prank, and shook hands with everyone; but the sight of their amazed faces proving too much for his attempted sobriety, his hearty laugh was the signal for the rest of the party to join in his merriment. But judging from his slight ability in later years, I fancy that he must have taken many lessons to secure his perfection in that hornpipe.

His dancing was at its best, I think, in the "Sir Roger de Coverly" – and in what are known as country dances. In the former, while the end couples are dancing, and the side couples are supposed to be still, my father would insist upon the sides keeping up a kind of jig step, and clapping his hands to add to the fun, and dancing at the backs of those whose enthusiasm he thought needed rousing, was himself never still for a moment until the dance was over. He was very fond of a country dance which he learned at the house of some dear friends at Rockingham Castle, which began with quite a stately minuet to the tune of "God save the Queen," and then dashed suddenly into "Down the Middle and up Again." His enthusiasm in this dance, I remember, was so great that, one evening after some of our Tavistock House theatricals, when I was thoroughly worn out with fatigue, being selected by him as his partner, I caught the infection of his merriment, and my weariness vanished. As he himself says, in describing dear old "Fezziwig's" Christmas party, we were "people who would dance and had no notion of walking." His enjoyment of all our frolics was equally keen, and he writes to an American friend, *à propos* of one of our Christmas merry-makings: "Forster is out again; and if he don't go in again after the manner in which we have been keeping Christmas, he must be very strong indeed. Such dinings, such conjurings, such blindman's buffings, such theatre goings, such kissings out of old years and kissings in of new ones never took place in these parts before. To keep the Chuzzlewit going, and to do this little book the Carol, in the odd times between two parts of it, was, as you may suppose, pretty tight work. But when it was done I broke out like a madman, and if you could have seen me at a children's party at Macready's the other night going down a country dance with Mrs. M. you would have thought I was a country gentleman of independent property residing on a tip-top farm, with the wind blowing straight in my face every day."

At our holiday frolics he used sometimes to conjure for us, the equally "noble art" of the prestidigitateur being among his accomplishments. He writes of this, which he included in the list of our Twelfth Night amusements, to another American friend: "The actuary of the national debt couldn't calculate the number of children who are coming here on Twelfth Night, in honor of Charlie's birthday, for which occasion I have provided a magic lantern and divers other tremendous engines of that nature. But the best of it is that Forster and I have purchased between us the entire stock-in-trade of a conjuror, the practice and display whereof is entrusted to me. And if you could see me conjuring the company's watches into impossible tea-caddies and causing pieces of money to fly, and burning pocket handkerchiefs without burning 'em, and practising in my own room without anybody to admire, you would never forget it as long as you live."

One of these conjuring tricks comprised the disappearance and reappearance of a tiny doll, which would announce most unexpected pieces of news and messages to the different children in the audience; this doll was a particular favorite, and its arrival eagerly awaited and welcomed.

That he loved to emphasize Christmas in every possible way, the following extract from a note which he sent me in December, 1868, will evidence. After speaking of a reading which he was to give on Christmas Eve, he says: "It occurs to me that my table at St. James' Hall might be appropriately ornamented with a little holly next Tuesday. If the two front legs were entwined with it, for instance, and a border of it ran round the top of the fringe in front, with a little sprig by way of bouquet at each corner, it would present a seasonable appearance. If you think of this and will have the materials ready in a little basket, I will call for you at the office and take you up to the hall where the table will be ready for you."

But I think that our Christmas and New Year's tides at "Gad's Hill" were the happiest of all. Our house was always filled with guests, while a cottage in the village was reserved for the use of the bachelor members of our holiday party. My father himself, always deserted work for the week, and that was almost our greatest treat. He was the fun and life of those gatherings, the true Christmas spirit of sweetness and hospitality filling his large and generous heart. Long walks with him were daily treats to be remembered. Games passed our evenings merrily. "Proverbs," a game of memory, was very popular, and it was one in which either my aunt or myself was apt to prove winner. Father's annoyance at our failure sometimes was very amusing, but quite genuine. "Dumb Crambo" was another favorite, and one in which my father's great imitative ability showed finely. I remember one evening his dumb showing of the word "frog" was so extremely laughable that the memory of it convulsed Marcus Stone, the clever artist, when he tried some time later to imitate it.

One very severe Christmas, when the snow was so deep as to make outdoor amusement or entertainment for our guests impossible, my father suggested that he and the inhabitants of the "bachelors' cottage" should pass the time in unpacking the French chalet, which had been sent to him by Mr. Fetcher, and which reached Higham Station in a large number of packing cases. Unpacking these and fitting the pieces together gave them interesting employment, and some topics of conversation for our luncheon party.

Our Christmas Day dinners at "Gad's Hill" were particularly bright and cheery, some of our nearest neighbours joining our home party. The Christmas plum pudding had its own special dish of coloured "repuissé" china, ornamented with holly. The pudding was placed on this with a sprig of real holly in the centre, lighted, and in this state placed in front of my father, its arrival being always the signal for applause. A prettily decorated table was his special pleasure, and from my earliest girlhood the care of this devolved upon me. When I had everything in readiness, he would come with me to inspect the result of my labors, before dressing for dinner, and no word except of praise ever came to my ears.

He was a wonderfully neat and rapid carver, and I am happy to say taught me some of his skill in this. I used to help him in our home parties at "Gad's Hill" by carving at a side table, returning to my seat opposite him as soon as my duty was ended. On Christmas Day we all had our glasses filled, and then my father, raising his, would say: "Here's to us all. God bless us!" a toast which was rapidly and willingly drunk. His conversation, as may be imagined, was often extremely humorous, and I have seen the servants, who were waiting at table, convulsed often with laughter at his droll remarks and stories. Now, as I recall these gatherings, my sight grows blurred with the tears that rise to my eyes. But I love to remember them, and to see, if only in memory, my father at his own table, surrounded by his own family and friends – a beautiful Christmas spirit.

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