

LEAVES FROM A LIFE

CHAPTER I

I AM BORN

I WAS born in the year 1848, and I only wish I could recollect the events of that stirring epoch. Naturally I cannot, but I have always had an idea that the storm and stress of the period, the unrest and upheaval of most things which occurred then, influenced me in some mysterious manner, and made me a rebel against most of the forms and ceremonies that in a great measure deform and cripple a most delightful world.

The part of London that saw my birth was a small crescent called Park Village West, and is at the present moment much as it was now nearly sixty years ago. It stood back from the main road of Albany Street, Regent's Park, and was as long as we lived there a continual source of joy and delight to us. In the first place, we were quiet and retired, and yet in half a minute we could see the omnibuses go up and down the street, and we could visit our mother's little dressmaker, who was called Miss Jones, and to reach whose abode we had to

LEAVES FROM A LIFE

climb three steps, push open a half-door, and enter a tiny parlour, in the window of which were laid out open fashion-books, as a hint of the glories to be found within. I can at the moment smell the mingled odour of warm irons, linings, and “materials” that dominated the chamber, and see little Miss Jones, in a very flounced dress, with a bodice having a very long point before and behind, and loose swaying sleeves, which I have lived to see reproduced as the “latest thing” more than once; while her six little curls, three on each side of her face, bobbed up and down, as she held forth to our mother on the different modes in which she could have her winter or summer dress made to the best advantage. Next to Miss Jones was quite a dreadful shop, where they made coffins, and to which we were sent now and again with rolls of flannel and silk to be “pinked” for home dressmaking. I wonder if anything is ever “pinked” now? In those days flannel underskirts were all pinked, and silk flounces were finished with the same hideous decoration, and the vast joy of my first silk frock was damped by the fact that we had to take the flounces thereof to be “pinked” at the undertaker’s aforesaid. I can never forget the horror of that, for though we did not see any coffins, we heard the tap, tap, tap at the back of the place, which the undertaker’s wife obligingly told our nurse was old Mr. “Some one’s” coffin in the making; describing it in detail, and showing with pride the satin cushion on which his head was to rest, despite the fact that we knew old

I AM BORN

Mr. "Some one" in life, and were indebted to him for many and many a treat.

Lower down on the opposite side was a public-house, and here I made my one and only appearance at the public bar. I must have been very, very small, not more than three or four, but I recollect it precisely, the smell of the mingled beer and sawdust, the loud raucous voices, and presently the angry manner in which we were snatched out of the place, the long-clothes infant grabbed out of the nurse's arms, and our flight up Albany Street, pursued by the nurse, who was kept at bay by a policeman, and our indignant mother waving her back whenever she dared to approach the sacred infant.

I do not believe either I or my sister had ever been taken to that house before, but a kindly neighbour had warned my mother of the nurse's proclivities who, acting on the warning, had caught the nurse in the act; and oh! how thankful we were to see her go. I have an idea she was Irish. I know her name was Mary, and I recollect how she used to curdle our blood with the most awful and hideous nightmare tales, which made us most fearsome cowards in the dark, and caused us agonies which took us years and years to outgrow.

Nowadays the modern nurse does not believe in fairies, which are pronounced by her to be absurd, and not to be credited for one moment. I think of the two specimens I prefer Mary, banshees, night hags, public-house and all. There was a fearful joy

LEAVES FROM A LIFE

in listening to her, there can be none at all in hearkening to the modern nurse, who, attired in hospital garb, minces along, immersed in a half-penny novelette, pushing her charge in an elegant vehicle over any one she comes near, and taking no notice of anything until she reaches the park or wherever may be her destination, where she finishes her novelette or else confides to all the rest of the nurses her love affairs, and also the affairs, or what she thinks are the affairs, of those whose money she takes with one hand, while she deprives them at the same time of every shred of character they might possess.

All the same Mary's departure was a vast relief to us then, and she was succeeded by the daintiest, kindest of women, the young widow of a Dorsetshire sailor. She lived with us fifteen years, when to the children's rage and despair she married again, an omnibus conductor, who bought a little bakehouse in Hertfordshire, where she lived until she died at a vast age. She was "old nurse" when she came to us fifty years ago, and she has only been dead about three or four years now. We used to hear from her long stories about the sailor husband, but soon, very soon, the rapidly filling nursery was no place for us elder ones; mites of three and four and five, we were relegated to the "tower room," where we used to have lessons with the governess, a subdued, sad, wearisome creature, whom I frankly hated at the mature age of three, and wondered about even then. I should have wondered still

I AM BORN

more had I known that her brother was then in Bedlam, confined as a criminal lunatic there, for murdering his own father in a fit of ungovernable frenzy.

I believe there are still members of that gifted and unfortunate family still living, indeed I know of one whom I remember, a charming and beautiful young married woman, the wife of a celebrated academician, who is still alive in an asylum, and so I cannot mention names; but I shall never forget the dread we all had of Miss D——, and her mournful voice, and her attempts at making us learn something or other. One thing I do know, and that is, she never taught me to read: I picked up my letters myself, and could read easily at the mature age of two, and when I recollect how little we had to read, and how often we read it, I think I almost envy the child of to-day with its endless books and toys, and its more than endless amusements and instruction. Yet I do not think I really do envy it; thank heaven, we were allowed to grow, we were let alone, we were neither trained nor developed nor interfered with; and though sometimes I have craved for more light and more conventionality, more training, I have worried along comfortably through life, made out a path of my own, and have never been dependent for amusement on any one, content with books and newspapers, and always able to be sufficient company for myself. I fancy Miss D—— gave me my first dread of other people. By some means we had

LEAVES FROM A LIFE

heard before she left us about her brother, and we heard that once our father had gone to see him to arrange a journey abroad in their student days; and when he did not reply to papa's knock or open the painting-room door, papa noticed a curious scraping sound, and looking down saw a razor moving about under the door as if to cut into his boots. Papa called out "Don't be a fool, D——: open the door," and that ended the episode, which would have been forgotten had not the young artist, Mr. Egg, and my father been driving along in a diligence in France, when, half asleep, papa saw D—— glance round, draw his razor from his pocket and make for Mr. Egg, who was asleep in the corner of the lumbering carriage. Papa called out, D—— laughed, but Mr. Egg was awakened, he and papa had a whispered consultation, and when the diligence arrived at its destination, meant to part company with their eccentric friend. But he saved them the trouble; he disappeared, and the next thing they heard of was the murder, and that the brilliant genius was incarcerated in Bedlam, where, to the day of his death, which took place quite recently, he painted pictures which were really beautiful, and were I believe sold, and helped to pay for him in the asylum. What would have happened had not papa been awake we can only conjecture, but I do not think either he or Mr. Egg would have left the diligence alive.

In thinking over my earliest days of all, events appear to me as a series of pictures, hung on a

I AM BORN

gallery wall, and apparently they had no connecting link. The next picture I see, after our rapid exit from the public-house, is a very different one. I was sitting on the floor of the dining-room, my mother, a sweet and graceful figure in grey cashmere, her full skirt and sweeping sleeves after the fashion of Miss Jones, and with her dark hair in the same arrangement of curls, was pouring out tea, while my father and his idolised brother Charles were skirmishing by the fire for the first sight of the *Times*. Personally I was in very great fear lest they should hurt each other, but a gentle "Now, William," ended it, and Uncle Charles departed to his home next door shouting defiance as he went, and waving one-half of the paper which he was bearing off in triumph. Uncle Charles died when I was three or four, and that was the last sight I recollect of his gay and gracious presence. He was, I think, short and slight; I know he had laughing blue eyes and a long lock of hair on his forehead, which he had to toss out of his eyes every now and then, and I have often heard my father declare he would have been Lord Chancellor had he lived to an age when he could have earned that distinction.

Certainly he was brilliantly clever, very joyous, very charming, and full of life, as indeed it seemed to me all artists and their relations and friends used to be, but he died of what was thought to be a neglected cold, but which was really typhoid fever, to cure which his doctor sent him to Dover, where

LEAVES FROM A LIFE

he died at once. Died because no one knew how to treat typhoid, and in consequence Uncle Charles ate what he liked, and went a long journey when he ought to have been in bed on milk diet, with a couple of trained nurses to wait on him night and day.

How well I recollect my father's mad and uncontrollable grief, and how he tore out of the house—I think to go to his brother; and how we watched with horrid complacency the great black coffin carried up the steps into his house, while our two cousins, rather younger than ourselves, gave themselves vast airs in their new black, and seemed to think an orphan the most delightful and conspicuous thing in the whole world.

We rather shone too among our acquaintances, I fancy, on the strength of that funeral, and though we certainly loved our uncle and missed his merry ways and papa's jokes and fun for many a long day, we were not deterred from playing at funerals with great gusto, the long horsehair bolster from the sofa being the coffin, and the cellarette under the sideboard serving as the grave. I think cellarettes are absolutely extinct nowadays, so I may not be doing wrong if I give a short description of the one we had. It stood on four castors and was rather a heavy fluted piece of mahogany, with a locked cover; inside it was lined with lead and divided into different compartments for the heavy cut-glass decanters, which were the pride of my mother's heart, and which she polished herself with an old

I AM BORN

Bandana handkerchief belonging to her grandfather, and which she kept in the middle drawer of the sideboard itself, in company with a chamois leather and a duster which she used herself, the first, should the table silver show a speck of dirt, and the second, did any dust appear on any articles of furniture in the room.

I do not think to the day of her death, through all the years that led from comfortable obscurity to a life among the most delightful and brilliant people of the times, that I ever saw my mother idle for five minutes of the day. She was always doing something. In the earliest days she was invariably sewing, sometimes for us, very often for my father, whose costumes she made and arranged, and who owed her many a hint for his pictures and the colours and draperies used therein, that were never known of until she died. Then the taste and fancy she had lavished on him were wanting, and soon began to fade out of his work after her death, and the one great and fatal error of his life became public property.

Later on in years she made her house and her entertainments brilliant and unique, and having a perfect genius for organisation, left nothing to other people. Long before flowers were indispensable in a room—in the days when one had to go to Covent Garden or to Soloman's in Piccadilly for anything one required in the way of plants and blossoms—we were never without them, and I well recollect the disgust expressed by my grandmother at a charming arrange-

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LEAVES FROM A LIFE

ment of ox-eye daisies and grass which my mother had gathered during a day in the country I fancy Kew or Hampton Court which would nowadays be admired for its appropriate lightness and delicacy of touch.

“Nothing but weeds,” said Grandmama; we never called her Granny, no one would ever have thought of such a word; “you ought not to bring such rubbish into the house;” but Mama said nothing—she never did appear, now I think back, to say much; but the daisies remained, and even Grandmama lived to see great bunches sold in Westbourne Grove out of the flower-girls’ baskets, although I do not believe that she herself would ever have spent a farthing on such “rubbishy stuff.”

When I think of the gay young golden-headed, frizzled, waved, and curled grandmothers of to-day, I can hardly believe my grandmother existed, but I know she did, I can remember her so very, very well. She could not have been fifty years old when I first began to see her in my picture-gallery, but she must have looked an elderly hundred and ten. In the first place, the unbecoming fashions of the early fifties were adapted to her venerable age, and she wore unflinching black, more especially because I think she and my grandfather had been very rich and were then very poor, than because she was in mourning for any one. I think her gown was of rep, it was very horrid to touch, and she wore, as did all ladies in those days, a big apron, alpaca or cashmere