

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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MY FRIENDS: You must write your memoirs.

I: Every one writes his or her memoirs nowadays. Rather a plethora, don't you think? An exceedingly difficult thing to do without too much of the Ego.

MY FRIENDS: Oh! but yours has been such an interesting life, so varied, and you can bring in much outside yourself. Besides, you have kept a diary, you say, ever since you were twelve, and you have such an unusually long memory. A pity to waste all that. You simply *must!*

I: Very well, but remember that I am writing while the world is still knocked off its balance by the Great War, and few minds will care to attune themselves to the Victorian and Edwardian stability of my time.

MY FRIENDS: There will come a reaction.

CHAPTER I

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I was born at the pretty "Villa Claremont," just outside Lausanne and overlooking Lake Leman. I made a good start with the parents Providence gave me. My father, cultured, good, patient, after he left Cambridge set out on the "Grand Tour," and after his unsuccessful attempt to enter Parliament devoted his leisure to my and my younger sister's education. Yes, he began with our first strokes, our "pot-hooks and hangers," our two-and-two make four; nor did his tuition really cease till, entering on matrimony, we left the paternal roof. He adopted, in giving us our lessons, the principle of "a little and

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often," so that we had two hours in the morning and no lessons in the afternoon, only bits of history, poetry, the collect for the Sunday and dialogues in divers languages to learn overnight by heart to be repeated to him next morning. We had no regular holidays: a day off occasionally, especially when travelling; and we travelled much. He believed that intelligent travel was a great educator. He brought us up tremendous English patriots, but our deepest contentment lay in our Italian life, because we loved the sun—all of us.

So we oscillated between our Ligurian Riviera and the home counties of Kent and Surrey, but were never long at a time in any resting place. Our father's daughter by his first wife had married, at seventeen, an Italian officer whose family we met at Nervi, and she settled in Italy, becoming one of our attractions to the beloved Land. That officer later on joined Garibaldi, and was killed at the Battle of the Volturno. She never left the country of her adoption, and that bright lure for us remained.

Although we were very strictly ruled during lessons, we ran rather wild after, and, looking back, I only wonder that no illness or accident ever befell us. Our dear Swiss nurse was often scandalised at our escapades, but our mother, bright and beautiful, loving music and landscape painting, and practising both with an amateur's enthusiasm, allowed us what she considered very salutary freedom after study. Still, I don't think she would have liked some of our wild doings and our consortings with Genoese peasant children and Surrey ploughboys, had she known of them. But, careful as she was of our physical and spiritual health, she trusted us and thought us unique.

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My memory goes back to the time when I was just able to walk and we dwelt in a typically English village near Cheltenham. I see myself pretending to mind two big cart-horses during hay-making, while the fun of the rake and the pitchfork was engaging others not so interested in horses as I already was myself. Then I see the *Albergo*, with vine-covered porch, at Ruta, on the “saddle” of Porto Fino, that promontory which has been called the “Queen of the Mediterranean,” where we began our lessons, and, I may say, our worship of Italy.

Then comes Villa de’ Franchi for two exquisite years, a little nearer Genoa, at Sori, a *palazzo* of rose-coloured plaster and white stucco, with flights of stone steps through the vineyards right down to the sea. That sea was a joy to me in all its moods. We had our lessons in the balcony in the summer, and our mother’s piano sent bright melody out of the open windows of the drawing-room when she wasn’t painting the mountains, the sea, the flowers. She had the “semi-grand” piano brought out into the balcony one full-moon night and played Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” under those silver beams, while the sea, her audience, in its reflected glory, murmured its applause.

Often, after the babes were in bed, I cried my heart out when, through the open windows, I could hear my mother’s light soprano drowned by the strong tenor of some Italian friend in a duett, during those musical evenings so dear to the music-loving children of the South. It seemed typical of her extinction, and I felt a rage against that tenor. Our dear nurse, Amélie, would come to me with lemonade, and mamma, when apprised of the state of things, would also come to the

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rescue, her face, still bright from the singing, becoming sad and puckered.

A stay at Edenbridge, in Kent, found me very happy riding in big waggons during hay-making and hanging about the farm stables belonging to the house, making friends with those splendid cart-horses which contrasted with the mules of Genoa in so interesting a way. How the cuckoos sang that summer; a note never heard in Italy. I began writing verse about that time. Thus :

The gates of Heaven open to the lovely season,
And all the meadows sweet they lie in peace.

We children loved the Kentish beauty of our dear England. Poetry filtered into our two little hearts wherever we abode, to blossom forth in my little large-eyed, thoughtful sister in the process of time. To Nervi we went again, taking Switzerland on the way this time, into Italy by the Simplon and the Lago Maggiore.

A nice couple of children we were sometimes! At this same Nervi, one day, we little girls found the village people celebrating a *festa* at Sant' Ilario, high up on the foothills of the mountains behind our house. We mixed in the crowd outside, as the church emptied, and armed ourselves with branches. Rounding up the children, who were in swarms, we gave chase. Down, down, through the zone of chestnut trees, down through the olive woods, down through the vineyards, down to the little town the throng fled, till, landing them in the street, we went home, remarking on the evident superior power of the Anglo-Saxon race over the Latin.

As time went on my drawing-books began to show

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some promise, so that my father gave me great historical subjects for treatment, but warning me, in that amused way he had, that an artist must never get spoiled by celebrity, keeping in mind the fluctuations of popularity. I took all this seriously. I think that, having no boys to bring up, he tried to put all the tuition suitable to both boys and girls into us. One result was that as a child I had the ambition to be a writer as well as a painter. We children were fanatically devoted to the worship of Charlotte Bronte, since our father had read us “Jane Eyre” (with omissions). Rather strong meat for babes! We began sending poetry and prose to divers periodicals and cut our teeth on rejected MSS.

We went back to Genoa, *viâ* Jersey (as a little *détour*!) Poor old Agostino, our inevitable cook, saw us as we drove from the station, on our arrival, through the Via Carlo Felice. Worse luck, for he had become too blind for his work. In days gone by he had done very well and we had not the heart to cast him off. He ran after our carriage, kissing our hands as he capered sideways alongside, at the peril of being run over. So we were in for him again, but it was the last time. On our next visit a friend told us, “Agostino is dead, thank goodness!” He and our dear nurse, Amélie, used to have the most desperate rows, principally over religion, he a devout Catholic and she a Protestant of the true Swiss fibre. They always ended by wrangling themselves at the highest pitch of their voices into papa’s presence for judgment. But he never gave it, only begging them to be quiet. She declared to Agostino that if he got no wages at all he would still make a fortune out of us by his perquisites; and, indeed, considering we left all purchases in his

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hands, I don't think she exaggerated. The war against Austria had been won. Magenta, Solferino, Montebello—dear me, how those names resounded! One day as we were running along the road in our pinafores near the Zerbino palace, above Genoa, along came Victor Emmanuel in an open carriage looking very red and blotchy in the heat, with big, ungloved hands, one of which he raised to his hat in saluting us little imps who were shouting “Long live the King of Italy!” in English with all our might. We were only a *little* previous (!) Then the next year came the Garibaldi enthusiasm, and we, like all the children about us, became highly exalted *Garibaldians*. I saw the Liberator the day before he sailed from Quarto for his historical landing in Sicily, at the Villa Spinola, in the grounds of which we were, on a visit at the English consul's. He was sitting in a little arbour overlooking the sea, talking to the gardener. In the following autumn, when his fame had increased a thousandfold, I made a pen and ink memory sketch of him which my father told me to keep for future times. I vividly remember, though at the time not able to understand the extraordinary meaning of the words, hearing one of Garibaldi's adoring comrades (one Colonel Vecchii) a year or two later on exclaim to my father, with hands raised to heaven, “*Garibaldi!! C'est le Christ le revolver à la main!*”

Our life at old Albaro was resumed, and I recall the pleasant English colony at Genoa in those days, headed by the very popular consul, “Monty” Brown, and the nice Church of England chaplain, the Rev. Alfred Strettell. Ah! those primitive picnics on Porto Fino, when Mr. Strettell and our father used to read aloud to the little company, including our

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precocious selves, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, under the vines and olives, between whose branches, far below the cultivated terraces which we chose for our repose, appeared the deep blue waters of the Sea of seas. My early sketch books are full of incidents in Genoese peasant life : carnival revels in the streets, so suited to the child's idea of fun ; charges of Garibaldian cavalry on discomfited Neapolitan troops (the despised *Borbonici*), and waving of tricolours by bellicose patriots. I was taken to the Carlo Felice Theatre to see Ristori in " Maria Stuarda," and became overwhelmed with adoration of that mighty creature. One night she came on the stage waving a great red, white, and green tricolour, and recited to a delirious audience a fine patriotic poem to united Italy ending in the words "*E sii Regina Ancor!*" I see her now in an immense crinoline.

A charming autumn sojourn on the lakes of Orta and Maggiore filled our young minds with beauty. Early autumn is the time for the Italian lakes, while the vintage is "on" and the golden Indian corn is stored in the open loggias of the farms, hanging in rich bunches in sun and luminous shade amongst the flower pots and all the homely odds and ends of these picturesque dwellings. The following spring was clouded by our return to England and London in particularly cold and foggy weather, dark with the London smoke, and our temporary installation in a dismal abode hastily hired for us by our mother's father, where we could be close to his pretty little dwelling at Fulham. My Diary was begun there. Poor little "Mimi" (as I was called), the pages descriptive of our leaving Alvaro at that time are spotted with the mementos of her tears. The journey

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itself was a distraction, for we returned by the long Cornice Route which then was followed by the *Malle Poste* and Diligence, the railway being only in course of construction. It was very interesting to go in that fashion, especially to me, who loved the horses and watched the changing of our teams at the end of the “stages” with the intensest zest. I made little sketches whenever halts allowed, and, as usual, my irrepressible head was out of the Diligence window most of the time. The Riviera is now known to everybody, and very delightful in its way. I have not long returned from a very pleasant visit there; everything very luxurious and up-to-date, but the local sentiment is lessened. The reason is obvious, and has been laboured enough. One can still go off the beaten paths and find the true Italy. I have found one funny little sketch showing our *Malle Poste* stopping to pick up the mail bag at a village (San Remo, perhaps), which bag is being handed out of a top window, at night, by the old postmistress. The *Malle Poste* evidently went “like the wind,” for I invariably show the horses at a gallop all along the route.

My misery at the view of our approach to London through that wilderness of slums that ushers us into the Great Metropolis is all chronicled, and, what with one thing and another, the Diary sinks for a while into despondency. But not for long. I cheer up soon.

In London I took in all the amusing details of the London streets, so new to me, coming from Italy. I seem, by my entries in the Diary, to have been particularly diverted by the colour of those Dundreary whiskers that the English “swell” of the period affected. I constantly come upon “Saw no end of red whiskers.” Then I read, “Mamma and I paid

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calls, one on Dickens (*sic*)—out, thank goodness.” Charles Dickens, whom I dismiss in this offhand manner, had been a close friend of my father’s, and it was he who introduced my father to the beautiful Miss Weller (amusing coincidence in names!) at an amateur concert where she played. The result was rapid. My vivid memory can just recall Charles Dickens’s laugh. I never heard it echoed by any other man’s till I heard Lord Wolseley’s. The volunteer movement was in full swing, and I became even more enthusiastic over the citizen soldiers than I had been over the *Garibaldini*. Then there are pages and pages filled with descriptions of the pictures at the Royal Academy; of the Zoological Gardens, describing nearly every bird, beast, reptile and fish. Laments over the fogs and the cold of that dreadful London April and May, and untiring outbursts in verse of regret for my lost Italy. But I stuffed my sketch books with British volunteers in every conceivable uniform, each corps dressed after its own taste. There was a very short-lived corps called the Six-foot Guards! I sent a design for a uniform to the *Illustrated London News*, which was returned with thanks. I felt hurt. Grandpapa attached himself to the St. George’s Rifles, and went, later on, through storm and rain and sun in several sham fights. Well, *Punch* made fun of those good men and true, but I have lived to know that the “Territorials,” as they came to be called, were destined in the following century to lend their strong arm in saving the nation. We next had a breezy and refreshing experience of Hastings and the joy of rides on the downs with the riding master. London fog and smoke were blown off us by the briny breezes.

CHAPTER II

EARLY YOUTH

IN December we migrated back to London, and shortly before Christmas our dear, faithful nurse died. That was Alice's and my first sense of sorrow, and, even now, I can't bear to go over those dreadful days. Our father told us we would never forgive ourselves if we did not take our last look at her. He said we were very young for looking on death, but "go, my children," he said, "it is right." I cannot read those heartbroken words with which I fill page after page of my Diary even now without tears. She had at first intended to remain at home at Lausanne when my parents were leaving for England, shortly after my birth, but as she was going I smiled at her from my cradle. "*Ab! Mademoiselle Mimi, ce sourire!*" brought her back irresistibly, and with us she remained to the end.

As we girls grew apace we had a Parisian mistress to try and parisianise our Swiss French and an Italian master to try and tuscanise our Genoese Italian, and every Saturday a certain Mr. Standish gave me two hours' drill in oil painting. How grand I felt! He gave me his own copies of Landseer's horses' heads and dogs as models. This wasn't very much, but it was a beginning. My lessons in the elementary class at the S. Kensington School of Art are not worth mentioning. The masters gave me hateful scrolls and patterns to copy, and I relieved my feelings by