

The Joy of Remembering.

Reminiscences of a Cambridge Artist.

by

Mary Greene.

*Dedicated to Eva Greene  
and Edward Lewis.*

It is to live twice to remember with joy our past life.

Martial.

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I dedicate this book to its Godfather,

Edward Lewis.

## P R E F A C E .

These reminiscences begin with a record of a past with very different social conditions to those of the present day.

The conditions for the upper and middle classes of England during the last half of the nineteenth century were perhaps safer and more comfortable than those of any other age.

They had their drawbacks but on the whole my memory chiefly recalls their elaborate, leisurely and confident stability.

From the first few years of this century unrest and uncertainty began to be felt more and more, culminating in the complete lack of security we experience now. I have lived a happy life through a strange transitional time.

Harston, 1941.

Myself.

" I summon up remembrance of things past."

Shakespeare.

### Early Days in Grantchester.

My first clear memories are connected with Grantchester, the village near Cambridge beloved by Rupert Brooke. My parents moved there when I was five years old. I was born in Essex near Dumow of the Flich of Bacon fame. Although we lived in Grantchester only six years yet those early six years have coloured my life. Its houses and cottages with their gay gardens, the river, the water meadows and the distant views of the towers of Cambridge all combined to make me love beauty and cheerfulness. I was strongly influenced by the people who lived in the Old Vicarage. The owner of it was Mr. Widnall. He ruled the village with gentle and unquestioned power. All the more so perhaps because he had no wish to rule. Nothing however could be done without him owing to his personality and to the quality of his talents. Mrs Widnall was a mild and dignified queen of Grantchester and her sister, Miss Smith, ( always called Aunt Lalley) was its fairy godmother.

The Old Vicarage stands at one end of the village at the corner of the road leading to Trumpington. The old Mill which stood near it was unfortunately burnt down a few years ago but the water is still "gentle and brown above the pool" and flows with a laugh below it.

The Old Vicarage looks much the same now as it did when I was a child. It is a red brick structure half hidden by creepers. We lived in Riversdale, the next house to it. Riversdale then was a square, simple early nineteenth century house - now it has been much altered and enlarged. The garden is large and formed a splendid playground for us children. I was the fourth of a family of nine. Our Father, owing to delicate health, had no settled occupation. He was a great reader of books and a brilliant talker. Our mother was the best mother in the world but with five children younger than myself she was, in those Grantchester days, a very busy woman.

My eldest brother, Graham, went to school in Cambridge. He rode there on the back of a donkey which generally threw him at a certain ditch, until my brother became its master. Graham was - and is - very grave and extremely determined. Though he must have been a feather weight on that wild, strong donkey in the end he would be certain to win in the struggle. He wore black velvet jackets and always looked trim.

Florence, Alice and I went to the Old Vicarage to be taught by Aunt Lalley. Florence was very pretty and seemed a grown up young lady to me. Alice was fair and rosy with a laugh like a silver bell. She was interested in everything about out-door life and was quick and clever. We learnt much from Mr. and Mrs. Widnall as well as from Aunt Lalley. We seemed to have two homes, Riversdale and the Old Vicarage.



Mr. Widnall was rather short and stout. He had a bald head with a fringe of hair at the back, a fine Roman nose and a benign boyish expression. He had broad blunt fingers but with those fingers he fashioned the tiny details of the wonderful models that he made. In the entrance to Grantchester church stands - or did stand a short time ago - a model of the church as it was in my childhood's days. Pay a penny and the roof can be lifted off and you can see the pews and pulpit and all the details of the interior. The delicate tracery of the windows he cast and carved in plaster of Paris. He made other models - the finest he made was a doll's house. The front door had a bell, a lock and a real little key. In the drawing room was a piano with a lady sitting at it. The piano could play two tunes - "Home sweet home" and "Auld Langsyne". The dining room and kitchen had everything that a dining room and kitchen should have. A real fire could be lit in the kitchen range and out of the spout of the pump could be pumped real water.

Mrs. Widnall was tall. She had grey hair, walked with dignity and her expression was sweet and grave. She wore simple dresses with skirts that hung straight down. So simple were her dresses that, in those days of amplitude and furbelows, they were remarkable. She made wonderful jams and preserves, often from uncommon fruits such as *Pyrus Japonica*, hips, mountain ash berries, mulberries, the nice sour fruit of the barbary and from huckleberries. She gardened a good deal and carried round with her as she walked in the garden a long wand to keep

off the peacocks who were either too tame or too fierce.

Aunt Lalley, her sister, was very small. She wore lace caps with pretty ribands in them. Three white curls of hair came from under the cap on each side and framed her face. She wore beautiful flowered silk shawls and often her hands were mittened. She was fond of her white fantailed doves which she fed. They sometimes followed her into the house. All the pets in their house were white. They had three white cats, many white doves, and the ducks, which walked back from the river to their shed every afternoon at the same time, were snow white.

Mr. Widnall called himself a farmer. I know that he planted the Orchard which is now a favourite resort of those people of Cambridge who like to take their tea under the shadow of apple trees. I know that he had calves for one day when I was playing in his paddock with a little friend I saw them but was undisturbed by any fear of them and we began to dance round an old pollard elm. My friend had on a white dress tied round the waist with a broad emerald green satin sash. One of the calves watched the sash fluttering from her as she danced and made for it. She ran away but the calf caught her up and got hold of the end of what it thought was a luscious morsel and little by little it disappeared down its throat. If it were not for my knowledge of the apple tree planting and my memory of Mr. Widnall's anxiety over the health of the calf I should

not have known that he owned and farmed land for he always had time for the village and for us children. I am able to say that the calf recovered with the aid of a Vet.

Mr. Widnall had a printing press, - a wonder and a joy to us. He printed and published books of his own writing, amongst them an interesting gossiping guide to Cambridge for he knew much of its history. He printed notices of every entertainment held in the village as well as programmes for the plays that were acted there all of which he got up. He painted the scenery for them, made the properties, and he coached and held together the amateur actors. Most of the plays were acted in the big room of his "Castle Ruins".

The garden of the Old Vicarage is large and goes down to the river. Along the river is a line of huge chestnut trees, in his day at their best. They sent their branches far over the river which was there a swift stream flowing from the near by mill. Under the trees was a picturesque bathing shed.

"And there the chestnuts summer through

Along the river make for you

A tunnel of green shade."

When lessons were over we would run down the lawn, through the woodland and soon we were in the river drowning the sound of the mill wheels with our shouts and splashings. Then we would run back avoiding the peacocks but with a keen eye for any dropped feathers. There was much to look at that tempted delay but hunger usually prevented us from getting home too

late for our dinner. However I would sometimes pause to see, on sunny days the rainbow in the fountain spray. The lovely fountain was designed and made by Mr. Widnall and the water then spouted up high. The sundial, like an open book, was also his work. Mr. Widnall built a Swiss Cottage of wood and plaster work in a glade reached by a bridge over a tiny stream. In it lived rabbits and hares and guineapigs. We children found them delightful creatures to call on. Above all he architected and built with his own hands his great work, the "Castle Ruins".

His Castle was in a corner of the garden backed by a grove. Winding stairs led to a long, well proportioned room hung with old tapestry. The mantel piece was of ancient carved oak. Chippendale chairs stood round the walls. Mr. Widnall had bought the tapestry, chairs and mantelpiece for a pound or two. They were regarded as old fashioned rubbish. When, years afterwards, the furniture of the Old Vicarage was sold, these brought in as much as all the rest put together.

At the end of the long room was a smaller one almost forming part of it. It was easy to turn it into a stage and acting often took place in the "Castle Ruins". My first really clear memory is of being taken to a performance (or perhaps it was a dress rehearsal) of a play in these castle rooms. In one scene the stage seemed covered with sand and Mr. Palmer of St. John's College, afterwards Professor Palmer of Arabian

fame, was acting as an Arab. He was then courting the beautiful Laura, the Widnall's niece whom he married later. No doubt she was acting too but I have no remembrance of her. Mr. Palmer striding about the stage, wearing a dress that would be sure to strike a child, I can still see.

Mr. Widnall once lent his garden for a bazaar for the church. To be sold at a stall was a little pamphlet which he printed. He got his friends to write amusing little articles for it. Professor Clifford of Trinity, a mathematician, a great lover of Grantchester, was one of his friends who wrote for it. Mr. Widnall made me learn by heart a specimen of his pieces of nonsense. I remember it still.

"Among the things not generally known is this - the report of a pistol, seen at the distance of five ounces, smells like the taste of half an hour, only it is not white".

Professor Clifford was fond of children and always ready to joke with them. One day Aunt Lalley, my two elder sisters and I had walked into Cambridge. He saw me in King's Parade when I was separated from the others and had my nose glued to a pictureshop window gazing at the one picture displayed in it. It had a card placed near it and on the card was the word "Turner". The word "Turner" meant nothing to me. Professor Clifford came behind me and said:- "I will tell you how that picture was painted. The artist squeezed a lot of his paints on to a canvas and sat on it". I remember turning round and

looking silently at him with the scornful tolerance of the very young for those much older. I again became absorbed in the picture. It mattered nothing to me how it was done. It was done. I gazed at it until Aunt Lalley fetched me away.

Aunt Lalley - how can I describe the charm of the little fairy Godmother of Grantchester? We were lucky children to be taught by her. She made learning of geography a travel-joy, history an exciting story, the Bible a living and beautiful book. Even grammar was not dull with her. She guided us through "Little Mary's Grammar". She taught me all I have ever been able to learn of arithmetic and that I fear is not much. One afternoon in every week was spent in reading poetry. I was considerably younger than my clever sister Alice who was next above me in age yet, with Aunt Lalley's help, Shakespeare, Milton, even Spencer, down to the modern poets were all studied by my small brain with great joy but I daresay with little understanding.

The Old Vicarage was of course haunted. A bedroom on the upper story had two windows, one looking East and the other West. One of the old vicars of Grantchester must have been very wicked for one night when he was sleeping there as usual, the Devil came in at the East window and carried him out by the West. I have slept in the room but I was not disturbed by either of the couple. The back stairs, near the dark cupboard where Mr. Widnall kept his press for printing sheets,

was supposed to be favoured by the spirit of a little old woman in a red cloak but I never saw her.

Riversdale is built on a terrace and looks over meadows towards Bourne Brook, a tributary to the Granta. Graham hired a little boat and he and Alice would often go out in it but I was supposed to be too young, and most likely too foolish, to be asked to go with them. I looked on my brother with awe, he seemed so far above me. I regarded my sister with much the same admiration that I accorded to him but with less awe. I was very proud one day when they asked me to go with them collecting birds' eggs. The little boat rowed by Graham made its way between the weedy banks of the Bourne Brook until he stopped it under a row of old pollard willows. Graham and Alice got out, one end of the boat was tied up and the boat drifted sideways with the stream. I was left in it and was told to keep it steady with a little branch. The two egg collectors found that they had plenty to do and I was forgotten. I had a passion for flowers and there were some to be gathered near me so I let go my hold of the branch for a moment and began to pick them. Slowly and inevitably the boat slipped away from the bank and slowly and inevitably I was deposited into the water. I luckily did not attempt to fling myself back into the boat but grasped the flowers and plants more tightly and uttered one cry - "Oh goodness !" Alice, who had been gazing at Graham high on a willow tree, gave a frightened call to him.

I saw him come down. He glanced at me and then with extreme care counted his eggs from his pocket into Alice's hand. When I was pulled out of the water wet to my neck - but not muddy for the Bourne Brook is a very deep stream - I was told severely that I could'nt come into the boat again as I was much too wet. I must walk back with Alice through the meadows. I started with her but soon complained that my shoes - or rather boots - must be full of water for they squelched so badly and I had better take them off and pour it out. I sat down and took them off. No water came out but nothing would induce them to go on again. Little girls then did not run about with bare feet and mine were tender. My anguish I shall never forget as I made my way over the rough meadows. It was an agnominious and painful return home and, if it had not been for the help and sympathy of Alice, I should have sat down and given up.

Mr. Widnall, Aunt Lalley and two of us children would sometimes go on botanising expeditions. We were driven in a chaise drawn by an old white horse once dappled grey and still called "Dapple". We would perhaps go to the Roman Road to pick the clustered Campanula or to the Devil's Dyke to pick Dane's Blood or to the deserted railway cutting for what we called "the Blue Fleabane" which is a Canadian plant naturalised in very few places in England. This plant grew nowhere Except near the railway cutting and we were always interested in guessing why and how it suddenly should have sprung up on the banks



after the high ground had been cut through for a railway that had never been completed. Did some workman in digging drop from his pocket some seeds which he had unknowingly brought from his home in Canada? Or was it perhaps once a native plant and seeds had lain dormant in the ground for hundreds of years? Every summer we went in Mr. Widnall's big boat to the field called Florida full of uncommon wild flowers. It lies between the two rivers, the Ribb and the Rhee, which join at the end of the field and form the Granta.

One day Mr. Widnall asked me to come with him. He said that he was going to tell me a profound secret. We went to a huge field near Bourne Brook and there, by a series of clues, I was taught to find the tiny Adders Tongue fern. It was like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay but there it was. It was declared, in the ~~than~~ edition of Babingtons Flora of Cambridgeshire, to be extinct in Grantchester and Mr. Widnall and I knew that it was'nt! It was a grand moment to be told something that the great Dr. Babington did not know. When I was out with Mr. Widnall he would teach me to know the names of all the trees, by their bark, growth and twigs in winter, and by their leaves in summer. He knew a great deal about geology and I began to understand it a little. He was a splendid companion.

Later on we made great friends with the family of Dr. Lumby who lived in Merton House which stands at the other end of the village nearer to Cambridge.

When we left Grantchester for Bedford I left my heart behind, but I often, afterwards paid visits there. When School and College work were over and we came to live in Harston, four miles away, I went every week to see Aunt Lalley. She lived to be very old and yet was always cheery and ready to be pleased. When at the last her nurse took her up a few flowers she said - "How beautiful ! How very beautiful !" and with beauty on her lips she died.

No skipping blackrobed ghosts of old vicars such as Rupert Brooke imagined dance down the lawn of the Old Vicarage but his spirit might well revisit it to see his lilacs branches "stir across the moon", his pinks and his pansies and "the falling house that never falls".