

About my Writing.

Spending time in writing is a late development of mine and Heaven only knows why I do it ! I did not make any attempt at writing stories or plays during the years when youth usually makes its ventures into literature. From a child I had scribbled verses. I did it during my school days on my exercise books and, up to the present day, in my diaries and on any odd scrap of paper. It had never troubled me if they happened to get lost. As to prose writing, to judge from the few school essays preserved, it was trenchant and unemotional to a degree, just stating facts and showing no reaction to any event or person.

I did not feel capable of writing in prose until years after we had settled at Harston. One New Year's day a gardening magazine came out which offered two prizes for the best essay on any gardening subject that its readers liked to choose. On Christmas Day I had decorated our table with five vases of roses. It was an unusually warm Christmas. I felt that I should like to tell the story of those roses so, with enormous effort and care, I wrote about them. I conveyed the information - I am sure extremely tersely - of which kind of rose trees would be likely to give very late blooms. I did not get the guinea prize but I got the 10/- one and was proud of it and

felt encouraged.

143.

When Helen and I came back from Brazil we were asked by some literary agent to write accounts of our visits to the coffee fields. Some articles had appeared in papers so inaccurate that they had been complained of by the merchants in the coffee trade. We both wrote accounts, Helen with ease, I with labour. Helen's appeared in a magazine as she wrote it, mine, I discovered afterwards, was regarded merely as useful information and was cut up into four and rewritten. Who ever arranged that it should be so treated was quite right, I am sure.

My pupils knew little about our great artists. They knew their names and perhaps had seen a few of their pictures. If I told them a few personal details of their lives then he or she would at once make tracks to see all that was possible of their works so I decided to give a lecture on an artist every month. I wrote my lectures with great care and read them to my listeners as I had not enough confidence to speak them. I did not see in the lives any episode of dramatic interest. That was beyond me in those days.

I was looking through some old books one day and picked up a commentary on the Book of Kings by my old friend, long since dead, Dr. Lumby of Grantchester. Of course I opened the dry looking book and began to read the beginning of it. I became lost in interest of the story of Adonijah and, as the commentary gave an inkling of the political situation of his

time, I was still more interested. To write about him did not even enter my head but I at once saw his story as a series of pictures in the way Hogarth would have seen it - that is - as a play. I had by me six panels of an awkward proportion for landscape but they would just do for Adonijah. I finished painting the set and made pencil drawings for a series on the dramatic story of Abigail, the lady of Carmel, but did not carry those out as pictures.

Time passes. The first war was over. Its effects were beginning to lessen. Villages woke up and wanted Village Halls. Money must be raised. Plays must be acted and above all acted economically. Therefore they must be written by the villagers themselves as fees could not be afforded. Helen wrote many short plays, amusing and suiting the times, and produced them well often taking part in them herself. I helped in writing and songs she wished to put in. I painted scenery and dressed actors. Open air plays and pageants were wanted and there I came in. I had by now grown interested in dramatic writing and I wrote a fairy play to suit our garden and the next year a much more ambitious one to suit the Manor House garden. I called it "The Haunted Pool" and I put into it all the fancies that that garden had for years called up in me.

Then Helen and I devoted ourselves to pageants on traditional, (or at least possible) village history. I chose the scenes and wrote the words. Six months before the first pageant

we held a gathering every week in our Gate House for turning old sheets, old dresses, by means of dying, stencilling and remaking them. We dressed all the people in the village, old and young, because we knew that our onlookers would come from villages round. For our second pageant we had, with additions, a fair acting wardrobe and for the third, with yet more gifts of old clothes, we did really well in the way of costumes. The remnants of our acting wardrobe helped us later to black out 54 Harston House windows. Our best pageant was on the possible origin of the name of our village. We gained by plays and pageants quite a respectable sum towards the funds for the building of the Village Hall. It was erected and opened in 1923. It was a great day for the village for all had worked for it. Helen and I felt tired for some time afterwards for I think we had worked harder than anyone. Through my efforts in writing for our entertainments I had now a rough and ready apprenticeship in drama.

I fell ill, perhaps owing to fatigue, and had to remain in bed a month or two in the care of a nurse. I was at first horribly bored. Then I begged her to give me pencil and paper for, as I lay idle, my mind began to play round an idea. I thought over the lives of our English Painters and in quite a different way than for lectures. I saw an episode in each artist's life that would show his character as a play would show it. The pencil and paper were put to much use and at last

I had written down in a dramatic form a first draft of eight plays. I have written and rewritten those plays on artists but I have never changed the choice of the episodes that I had thought out under the coverlets. During that illness I had not only lives of artists on my bed but light volumes of Shakespeare and I read every play one after the other from the beginning to the end. How I had the courage to make my first serious venture into play writing at the same time as reading all that Shakespeare wrote, I cannot think, but I did it. Among my attempts was not included the first draft of a play on William Blake. I dared not touch him. Only later on did I venture to write on that great and strange man.

When I was well I took to carrying note books about with me wherever I went. In trains, waiting in stations and omnibus shelters - indeed during any unoccupied moment - I wrote, bit by bit, long plays that I knew quite well could not be acted in our village and more likely never be acted at all. I had painted scenes from Adonijah's dramatic life and I now wrote a play on his adventures. I had drawn scenes from Abigail's life and I wrote a play on her story.

Some one told me that I should not be able to read to the end Browning's poem of Sordello. I began it at once and felt like the contemporary of Browning who exclaimed when starting it "Am I mad or is Browning mad? I don't understand a word of it". I did read it to the end and began it again and, as I neared the end of it the second time, I decided that Browning

had spoiled a good story - as a story - and that I would make a play of it. If the poet chose to begin in the middle of the ~~take~~ I would not. I had to read the poem many times before I really got the hang of it for the poetry dazzled and confused me so much that I could not easily pick out the simple plot. In spite of its difficult form and language the poem entranced me. I was exhausted by the time my play was finished and I had to paint pictures and do much gardening to recover. Then I wrote other plays.

Helen had made friends with a Mr. Jenkins, the Squire of a small, very rural village in Kent. He had devoted himself every year to the production of a Shakespeare play acted by his villagers. Mr. Jenkins asked me, as well as Helen, to stay a couple of nights with them and see Romeo and Juliet acted in one of his barns. We went and we thoroughly enjoyed it. The play was very well acted. All the parts were taken by women of the village. Mr. Jenkins was a most sympathetic producer. Helen told him that I had tried my hand at writing plays and he asked me to send him one. I sent him Sordello. The gist of his answer was - "Get instruction". After hunting round I heard of the Drama League Correspondence Course. I joined the League and took a twelve lesson course. I thought at first that the fee was very high. I thought at last that it had been very low. I learnt during the course only the principles of play writing. After it was over I rewrote some

of my old plays for the critic and wrote new ones. They poured from my pen. A beginner is nothing if not ambitious. History became alive to me. The struggle between the Emperor Henry IV. and the Pope, the story of King Louis II of Anjou and Queen Giovanna of Naples, the varied life of Palissy, the potter, the entwined fortunes of the Duke of Bridgewater and James Brindley, those Canal builders whose lives might have been arranged by fate in order to make a good film. Many other historical as well as imaginary people became my subjects for drama and film stories. I spent most of my time however in thinking over my half hour studies from the lives of artists.

Why I should have taken to writing so late in life, when most people feel that their work is finished, - I do not know nor why I must needs choose drama - the most difficult of all writing forms. But so it was. I did not worry my mind as to whether it might be wise or foolish to spend so much time in such a way. I wanted to do it - it made me happy and after all it is a social duty to be happy.

No waiting time bored me. I had my pencil and note book always with me. My sketching trips to London were writing trips too. The men in the cloakroom at King's Cross knew well my little brown box holding my books and notes that I left with them every Thursday morning. They had no need to ask me for the ticket before it was brought out in the evening. I went up to London last Spring with Eva. I had not been there for months owing to cold, darkness and air raids. Eva took

my box to the cloakroom. She had kind enquiries from the men in charge about the health and wellbeing of the lady with the knitting box. My journeys were far more enjoyable than if I had spent them in dulling my brain with knitting.

After much reading and certainly with a little trepidation I started to write a half hour play on Blake. I felt that I could not leave him out of my series of artists.

I knew very well how such an attempt would test me. But was it for nothing, I thought, that, in the far off days when I was a raw Academy student I had deserted my companions and had sat in the R.A. library reading Gilchrist's Life of Blake until I knew it almost off by heart? No, it was not for nothing. The mind food that had been given me in the Schools had been very dry and I was fed by Blake in some spiritual way. I had played with him when I had been young, and when few cared for him, and he did not desert me when I called on him. I wrote the little play and sent it to my critic to be condemned or approved. It was approved.

In the summer of 1939 Eva and I visited the Midsummer Fair in Cambridge. I went there on the faint chance of getting a conversation with a gypsy for I was introducing a gypsy woman into a play. As we were looking over the stalls a brilliantly dressed old gypsy woman passed by us. At once we left our examination of the stalls and followed her. She went to her caravan on the outskirts of the fair and we found her



name - Nancy Lee - was written on it and she told fortunes for half a crown. Others told them for a shilling but Nancy Lee was a sort of Queen among the gypsies and could not tell fortunes for so small a fee. We decided to pay. After my fortune was told we sat outside her car - a van - and talked. Conversation was what I wanted and listening to her made me forget nearly all that she had said would befall me in the way of fortune except that the next year, 1940, would be the great year of my life. I thought that was an odd thing for her to say. Nancy, I think, enjoyed her talk with us and we said good-bye to her with regret. I can see her still, as in a picture, backed by the great scarlet wheel of her caravan. Her head was tied round with a richly coloured kerchief, from under this fell a few wisps of white hair. Ancient gold earrings dangles from her ears and a heavy gold brooch fastened her little shawl. She had on a green apron on which her hands rested. She made a fine picture for my memory. I wonder why old people so seldom wear good colours. Before we left her she affirmed again that 1940 would be a great year in my life.

I sent my play "An Afternoon with Blake" and two others of my artist plays to my nephew, Graham Greene, the novelist. He approved of Blake and also of the play "Turner at Chelsea" but not so much of "Morland in the Sponging House". He said of himself that he was far too much of a toper to like a "temperance" play. I had not thought of my play in that light

but I saw that it would be hardly possible to prevent any study of the life of poor Morland from being Temperance propaganda. I told Graham that Hogarth's print of Gin Lane had so affected me from childhood that I had even now a horror of the spirit. Hogarth had evidently hated gin and that spirit had been George Morland's undoing.

Graham wrote to me and told me that when I next came up to London I must let him take me to a restaurant. We met and he took me somewhere. An order was given to the waiter that I didn't hear and a glass was put in front of me, as well as of him, of a gin cocktail! I looked at Graham amusedly. I suppose he wanted to see/ either put it away from me "gently but firmly" or to see me pour it dramatically on to the floor. I took the cocktail and sipped it gravely as if I were an expert in cocktails and told him that it was not bad.

Graham advised me to send my play of Blake to Broadcasting House. I sent it and it was accepted but met with so many delays that I lost some of my hope that it might be produced. At last, it was fixed to be broadcast on January 18th. 1940. Nancy was right. The year 1940 began well for me. To hear a broadcast of one's own work is an event rare enough to make a whole year memorable. We had no wireless set just then in the house and so we went over to listen to one that an old artist friend had. She had come to live in Harston and was renting a flat made out of an old clunch barn. In her big

room we sat and listened to my play. I call it "An Afternoon with Blake" and the B.B.C. called it "The Great Man Speaks". It was well produced and well acted. The episode that I had chosen was where Blake tells his friends of his vision of the Ghost of the Flea.

When the play was over my friend asked me if I knew if Blake had made a painting of the Ghost or if a drawing was all that existed. I was able to tell her that I had a few days before been invited to look at the picture by Blake belonging to Mr. W. Graham Robertson, the writer, and I had seen the little oil painting of the horrible, green-black Ghost of a Flea stalking through a starlit corridor.

The year 1940 was indeed one of the great years of my life. It was made so by that happy afternoon in the clunch barn room and then by the publication one after the other, of five of the nine half hour plays that I had written on the English Artists of the eighteenth century. ~~xxxx~~ The remaining four must wait till the paper shortage is over. It has been made memorable for me too, in not so pleasant a way, by having to give up my weekly sketching in London and for a month or two not wishing to paint pictures, write plays or even to make verses. The war seemed to dry up at first all creative springs in my mind. However that time passed and very soon I could paint again but found that to write plays had become impossible to me. I was encouraged by my dramatic

critic to make an effort to learn to write ordinary prose.  
I knew quite well how dry my style of prose-writing had been  
and I started these memories in the hope of growing better,