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1

Friendships Gallery

FORTY YEARS ago (our sincerity does her credit) a child was born in a Somersetshire Manor house. Whether she was born laughing or crying, or both at once, or whether she merely accepted the situation and made the best of it, a sincere historian, anxious to use only those words that cannot be avoided, has no means of telling.

But there never was such a child for growing.

“Nurse, bring the weighing machine,” said the doctor.

“It’s the foot rule you want Sir,” said Nurse, “if I may make so bold.”

But here the child burst out crying, so lustily that all who had charge of her agreed that she was the cleverest child, the noisiest child, and the child with the finest lungs in the Parish, and that the sooner she was christened the better.

But what can you call a child, a woman child?

Now the history of Christian names is so interesting that if I had the freedom of my mother tongue, as I have it not, for a reason to be told in the appendix, I would here expound it; I will only say that forty years ago a Christian name was a Christian name, and that if you wished your daughter to answer with credit in this world and the next you branded her with the

virtues of the faith from the very beginning. So when the long baby was held over the font god-mothers and god-fathers muttered, as people do on those occasions, “Mary” and when the clergyman said “Is that all?” and smiled, as though he could tolerate a little vanity now, they added “Violet” in the bolder tones of people who are come out of church though the hush is still on them. But as the child grew and became capable of inspecting her two names, of comparing them with others, she decided that though it was good to wear Mary next your skin, it was better to show Violet outside. “Miss Violet Dickinson” then, and if it hurts you to think that Lycidas was once a matter of conjecture it hurts me still more to consider how nearly Violet was Mary, how easily Dickinson might have been Jones. Here again I would digress. But this is one of Violet’s earliest sayings.

Her mother. “I wish you would learn to write Violet.”

Violet. “I won’t write; I’d rather talk.”

Miss Violet Dickinson grew to be as tall as the tallest hollyhock in the garden before she was eight, but after all our concern is with her spiritual progress. True, her size alarmed her family; her position in the ball room, they thought, might be seriously prejudiced, and before she drove to her first dance, in the Bath Corn Exchange, she had to submit to a solemn exhortation from her Aunt, who was also her godmother.

“Mary Dickinson,” began the Aunt, using as Aunts do, the least palatable expression, “remember that you are neither beautiful nor wealthy, nor, for anything I can see, in any way attractive; God in his infinite goodness has caused you to grow at least six inches higher than you should grow, and if you are not to be a Maypole of Derision you must see to it that you shine forth as a Beacon of Godliness.”

The Dickinsons we must add, are a Quaker family, related to William Penn, for they were transported to America in the 18th Century for stealing silver spoons.

“Love, charity, humility, Mary, are virtues above rubies, and if you possess these you may make a good match and be a happy woman. Now my dear, here is my little gift to you,” and she whipped a box from her underskirt, “and when you wear it think of IT and think of ME.”

Then she hung a heavy golden cross, in truth the bars were hollow, round her niece’s neck, kissed her on the forehead, and wished her a happy evening.

Mary or Violet, was by this time weeping solemn tears, like those that a dog might shed who has been beaten and does not question the justice of the whip. But the carriage was waiting and the ball was beginning, and Violet must go, if she went in the spirit of a Martyr to the Stake. Now it is recorded that her first partner was a clergyman, and her second was a Squire, and her third was a Peer (we shall move in good society, I promise you) and the Peer it was who said,

“May I ask, Violet, why you come to your first dance in a Cross?”

“Because I am so ugly John, and I must be a Beacon of Godliness if I am not a Maypole of Derision, and virtue is far above Rubies.”

The tail end of one eye did certainly droop over the last syllable of rubies, but that was no reason why a Christian nobleman should begin to laugh, continue to laugh, and end by laughing with such vigour that Violet lifted up her voice and laughed too, and the result was that the cross was “hauled down” (the peer said it) its value fixed, its weight judged, its purity gauged, and it was agreed that few ornaments are really more amusing than Crosses especially when been given you by maiden Aunts and worn at your first ball. The rest of the ball was what Violet called “Rattlin’ good fun” but we are writing no novel but the essence of truth. She could not tolerate for example, the final “g” of the present participle and though when

made to pick it up she could hold it in her teeth for a second, directly you looked away she had dropped it in some dark corner. In the garden of the Corn Exchange, to continue the story, the nobleman proposed the Cross should be buried; but here Violet expressed some very decided opinions how Aunts were Aunts and Crosses were Crosses, and though you might drop your “G’s” in talking of them you could not bury them; and if my instinct is true the cross is still in its box, and the box is in its drawer; just as the Aunt is in her cottage, and twice a year Violet visits her.

“Violet, I wish you weren’t so plain - but poor Child - -”

Lately it has been “Do you know Violet, I think you are growing shorter? and better tempered?”

The day after the ball is always used by sentimental novelists endowed with words, for an effective contrast; not only does it change the scene and relieve the strain of prolonged attention—I give away these secrets the best in my possession—but it reveals quite naturally a different side of the hero’s character. And so it was with my heroine, if a living woman can be called by such a title; and the critics dispute it.

When she woke in the morning the first thing that caught her eye was that emblem of her Aunt and IT which had somehow proved so versatile the night before; but now the ugly thing was one and indivisible; and Violet felt constrained to recognise it. She took it with her to her bath, and set it in the soap dish while she sponged herself. She meditated whether she should kiss it, and laughed aloud; the breakfast bell rang and she forgot all symbols in the horrible substance—she would be late for breakfast, she had not practised, and it was the morning when Fraulein Müller came to “finish” her with a German polish. So the contrast verged almost on the melodramatic, for when Violet was depressed her face stretched, and she looked up from large drooping eyes which would spill tears if you wished it.

And this morning it was the History of England, the History of the Elizabethan age in particular, that wished it. Fraulein Müller talked of the Renaissance, the Italian influence which was somehow German, the origin of the drama. Violet could only remember that Elizabeth was a “very naughty old thing”, had worn pearls on her petticoat, and someone had put down his cloak for her to step on.

“But, my dear Miss Violet, that is not history!” exclaimed Fraulein Müller. “Have you not read the course I made out for you? Have you not traced the development of the Miracle-Morality-Mystery Play into the Chronicle-History, and that into the Comedy-Tragedy, and that into the History-Comedy Tragedy-Romantico-Psychology of Shakespeare? You will never do yourself credit, Mademoiselle, in the society of Bath.”

It was at this point that the whole of life became intolerable.

“Nobody will ever care for me!” cried Violet.

“Nobody will ever wish to talk to you about the Elizabethan drama,” said Fraulein Müller, with an accuracy that did her credit.

“But” — Human nature is weak, or strong, which ever you choose to call it, and when the lunch bell rang Fraulein Müller was wiping her eyes and saying,

“Ah, my dear Miss Violet, I have never told any one what I have told you.”

Such in short was the way in which Violet acquired her knowledge of history, literature, arithmetic, modern languages, music and humanity; and that is why each governess when she left felt that she had imparted a great deal, and that it would be necessary to go on instructing her at intervals all through her life. A time comes however, parents and guardians can tell the precise second, when book learning has yielded exactly the number of drops which, taken internally, benefit the system of a maiden; a teaspoonful in excess has been known to ruin the

constitution for life; some maintain that a little external polish is no bad thing.

Violet at any rate felt considerable affection for her books when she locked them in their cases before going to London for her first season; Shakespeares pages were stamped with the affairs of the heart of Mademoiselle Bourget; Keats sang of German life in a flat on the third story; Wordsworth taught her how a plain Somersetshire girl, the daughter of an Attorney can earn her living, hem her underclothing, and keep her father's drunkenness from the knowledge of the neighbours. If you ask her to quote the Ode to Duty, at this day, which she thinks the finest modern poem, and she keeps it by her bedside, she will at once tell you the story of Miss Janet Sitwell. So her regret was quite genuine when she stood on the threshold of the schoolroom, one April day, and thought of the sunny mornings, the birds and bees among the flowers, while literature sent straight avenues branching out from all sides of the lawn till it swam as a little island on an immense ocean and she could scarcely sit on her chair for a desire to voyage there.

"How I love reading!" she exclaimed, and shut the door and jumped into the carriage which stood waiting.

Now there should be here some more tremendous division than a blank space of white paper, and I suspect that my artistic skill would have been more consummate had I thrown these first pages into the waste paper basket or enclosed them within the arms of a parenthesis. For when you are writing the life of a woman you should surely begin with her first season and leave such details as birth, parentage, education, and the first seventeen years of her life to be taken for granted. For it is the merit of the first season that, like some curiously furled flower, it folds many events and qualities and experiences into one mature blossom. Clearly no one could have a season who had not been born and who had not spent seventeen years in practising for it, but as these acquirements are completely exhibited in the ball room it is mere waste of time to say how she came by them or in what proportions they are mixed. But then this Biography is no novel but a sober chronicle; and if life will begin seventeen years before it is needed it is our task to say so valiantly and make the best of it.

Violet's first season has, no doubt, some less picturesque name in the catalogue of the century; it was the year when trade was worse or better than it has ever been, when there was a blight among the mayfly; when sashes were worn, and Mr. Gladstone's ministry came in or went out or stayed where it was; but for us and for her and for many now beginning to grizzle on the top, it was Violet's first season.

"Who is that very tall young woman with the pleasant expression?" asked Lady

(I forgot to say that names can seldom be used in this narrative, for many are yet alive, in high places, and so on—I must beg my reader to believe that a blank means rather more than a full name, for it is capable of feeling if you guess it aright.)

Her ladyship waved her fan as an elephant its trunk, and indeed her position in a drawing room was so gigantic that she was allowed the liberties that monkeys, sheep and asses grant to the King of Beasts.

"That? Oh, Miss Violet Dickinson."

"Dickinson - with a 'y' No? Well there have been Dickinsons with an 'i' - Yes, present her."

"And so Miss Dickinson, you have an 'i,'" went on the august lady.

"Two eyes I think Ma'am," said Violet fixing them both on the lady's face. Such was the comicality and at the same time the wistfulness of their expression that her Ladyship's sense of humour was tickled, and she was grateful to any one who made her laugh; "I like sneezing and I like laughing," she used to say, "but it must be natural."

"I like you, Miss Whats-your-name," she said.

"Dickinson Ma'am; and a very good name too," said Violet. "And may I tuck in your Ladyship's chemise? One pin will do it, I have one myself. Thank'ee."

"Am I straight behind," asked Lady in some agitation. "Most annoying you know. One can't trust one's maid. Now who does your hair?"

"A little creature I picked up off the streets, gave her a bath, it's astonishin' what the water was like afterwards - and converted her. We go to church, hand in hand, and she tells me I shall be damned, but she prays for me."

"Miss Dickinson," pronounced the great lady as she rose, "you must lunch with me to-morrow."

"Very sorry, but I can't" said Violet.

"Then Tuesday? - Wednesday? to meet the Prime Minister?"

"I think I could come Thursday if that suits. Thank'ee."

Any one who knows the manners of the inner circle of English society will agree that this slight but faithful conversation (there was more of it than I have quoted) is as remarkable in one way as *The Ode to a Nightingale* in another. In both you see the same amazing precocity, the same instant penetration to the secret heart, the same perception that truth is beauty, the same mastery over material. But Violet must be allowed the credit due to one who makes fact out of barren paradox; who proves that Duchesses are as true as nightingales.

When six months later, Lady (the blanks yawn like awful caverns, as though the shield once withdrawn you might see all splendours and glittering lights within) had to confess that somewhere behind her name and her tremendous front door she kept a mortal body, Violet was the first to see her after the operation. She did not like to confess to others that she was so solid a fact. Then (this should come in a footnote) Violet was present at the birth of the first grandchild, now Lord she went to Italy with Lady and by feeding her with steamed breadcrumbs for twelve hours incessantly saved her from death from the puncture of a pin, which her Ladyship had swallowed by mistake; she was in the house when the cook fell through the floor, thereby revealing the presence of an unsuspected cesspool. "Enough to give you all enteric two whiffs," said Dr. Walker, had not Violet instantly soaked the woman in salad oil and soapsuds—"the one thing that could have saved her life"—while she directed the household to fill the chasm with vinegar and burning feather beds till the doctor came. The butcher's horse falling down the area on the same afternoon, made it necessary for her to take the man to the London hospital. He recovered, and called his first child *Violus* (it was a boy) after her; while Lady put up a window in the parish church, in which the good

Samaritan helps a Leper on to his Ass, while the beast crops Violets. The horse, unfortunately, died.

From this bald and hasty paragraph a person of discrimination will construct whole chapters which I have no time to write out. But when you think what a casual bow in a drawing room did in this instance, and there are many others, you will figure to yourself a head charged with thunders and lightnings, bent beneath the winds of heaven, so piercing in the shafts of its eyes that fires will kindle and flames long blunt among ashes shoot up beneath its compulsion. Further, you will imagine a mouth, which like flame again for my figure declares its need of ashes, curls and flickers and bursts here and there into a true rose of heat, deep with quivering shades of red and opal colour as the petals overlap each other and melt swiftly to the heart of the naked fire within. Ashes, even, glow like the clouds of dusk when it flushes them. "I too have a fire within me." "I too sing a delightful song." And "My God, I can write!" such were the sparks that spurted from Duchess and kitchen maid when Violet struck them.

Among Violet's friends there was a Costermonger and a woman who sold apples; a number of people whose names would produce no kind of effect were I to write them down, and at least half a dozen who were so profoundly investigated that the surface shell was of no more importance than that "thin jacket which grasshoppers shed in spring."

Now here again it would be possible to enter into one of those intricate labyrinths of analysis which, as modern novelists expound them, turn human hearts and brains into so many honey-combs of coral. How did Violet love her friends, how did she know them? Tell me, for example, how she thought? Why did she drop her "g's" and put in her "h's"? Was she a Christian? Describe the flight of her mind, rising like a cloud of bees, when a question was dropped into it. Did she reason or

only instincticise? Where does care for others become care for oneself, and at what precise point in her relationship with did she cross the boundary of unselfishness and become the most selfish of living creatures?

All these questions are legitimate, and I can only answer—she had an Irish grandmother, and the Irish grandmother was one day triumphing in the mist above Loch Ness, and clasping to her breast cloud-shapes of spiritual bridegrooms, when she fell into a pit, “a pit of rocks and sulphur and the howlin’ of the damned” as she described it afterwards. “And there was a man like Elijah in his burnin’ mantle” who gave her “fire to drink and the flesh of wild goats and spake to me with the voice of the wind and the rain. And it was like the voice of none other, for he did the things he spake of, and lifted me in his arms and drave me behind wild beasts, like a God, to the little house in the valley and there he married me. Och Och Ochone!”

Mr. Dickinson, a North country cotton spinner who had made a fortune by inventing a new form of spinning frame, called the Throstle, would have told the story in sober prose, and there would have been bans and wedding rings and marriage settlements above all, but no prose, as I begin to discover, can tell you how Irish mists break over Lancashire rods of steel in the brain of their descendant.

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