

CHAPTER III

THE CRIMEAN WINTER

BLACKHALL CASTLE, on the banks of the river Dee, in Aberdeenshire, was the first of our many moorland homes of which I retain a clear and distinct recollection. My father took a three years' lease of it in 1852, when I was just seven years old.

"Castle" is a somewhat grandiloquent term for a white-washed tower with two wings—just as "Park" is hardly that for the piece of grass land with wooded islets by which Blackhall was surrounded ; but it was certainly a good, comfortable house, beautifully secluded, and approached by an avenue of considerable length, whose gates were close to the bridge of Banchory Ternan, then little more than a village—now, I understand, a town.

The avenue ran along the banks of the river, of which my father had the fishing for some miles, and many a fond and longing glance he must have cast at it, as he steadily marched to church on a Sunday morning when it was "in trim" ; but of this I am certain, never once did he yield to the temptation of casting a fly over either the "Rosepot" or the "Sandy Havens"—the two pools which lay in our path. No, he held stoutly on his way, heading his band—a goodly band too, as I shall presently show—till we filed into our front seat of the gallery, yclept "loft" in those days, which we filled from end to end.

At that time there were nine of us, the whole family, in

short ; and all were at home the first year, though soon after my eldest brother went to Cambridge. And why to Cambridge, I cannot say, since it was always his intention to enter the army ; and at the close of his University career at Trinity College, Cambridge, he went into the 4th Dragoon Guards (our father's former regiment) in which he remained fifteen years.

To return. All the other front seats in the gallery of the parish church of Banchory belonged to neighbours, and it was an exciting time for us youngsters when these began to fill. Exactly opposite were the Davidsons of Inchmarlo, who were also our exactly opposite neighbours on the other side of the Dee. There was a very little boy—he is now a grey-haired laird, and I wonder if he will read this?—whose pranks were a continued source of delight to us, his contemporaries. One of these remains in my memory by reason of its tragic ending. For our entertainment our friend stuck in his eye the penny provided for putting in the collecting-plate ; and being caught, and hastily endeavouring to conceal what was going on, his fingers somehow missed fire, and out flew the penny, struck the edge of the seat in front, and bounced to the pavement below. Not even then did it stop : it rolled and rolled away down the aisle, till a foot protruded from a side seat, and stamped it down—by which time every pair of eyes that had seen the beginning of that penny's career were straining delightedly from above to note its end. I don't think Master Duncan Davidson ever attempted that little feat again.

When we came out of Banchory church, a fine row of carriages would be in waiting outside, notable among them my mother's, by reason of her fancy to have a postillion instead of a coachman. This was not uncommon in those days ; still no one else in the neighbourhood did it, and I fancy my parents adopted the plan chiefly because they

liked to occupy the box seat themselves, as they always did when travelling and often at other times, in fine summer weather.

Our horses were denominated by my somewhat imaginative mother, Sheik and Bedouin, from some strain, real or supposed, of Arab blood in their veins—and I doubt if she ever knew that they were only Tom and Dandy, (Scotch for Andrew) in the stables. Robert Macdougall, our dapper little postillion, rode on Bedouin *né* Dandy, and such of us as were too small to walk both ways—it was two miles each way—were bundled into the large landau, though we much preferred as we grew older to walk. Shall I say why? There were small green lizards basking in the sun on a certain paling just inside our own gates, and we were not allowed to catch them on our walk to church; but coming home—well, my father looked the other way.

There were adders also—poisonous, ill-conditioned adders—in the woods round Blackhall, and these even invaded the immediate precincts of the house. On one occasion we rushed in from the garden to report that a great snake was lying coiled up upon the bank on which we were about to play, outside the kitchen-garden. Eagerly we guided my father to the spot. He had a big stick in his hand, and with a single tap on the head, he stunned the creature, and next moment dexterously caught it up by the tail.

An adder thus stunned soon recovers consciousness, but what is it to do? It can only twist and writhe; it cannot extend its head high enough to bite the hand of its captor. How the one in question was got into the high, wide-mouthed, glass bottle filled with whisky, in which I saw it thereafter—and where it is still—I do not know. My father had ere long a row of these bottles filled with specimens; and we looked at one with special interest, as a

protruding stomach betokened, we were told, a mouse inside.

None of us were ever bitten, and this is rather wonderful, as within our own precincts we were allowed to rove at will during holiday hours; but a little son of one of the gardeners fell a victim one day, and was cured by a remedy thought highly of by natives of the place. The child had flown screaming to his mother; she instantly caught and killed a chicken, severing it in two, and applied the reeking sides to the wound, with the effect that the poison was, as it were, sucked out. At any rate the patient recovered, and everyone lauded the deceased chicken, save and except Nurse Aiky, who sniffed—perhaps because she had no hand in the affair. More than once, however, she detected an adder; once, lying along a grass path in the flower-garden under the box-edging, and she had the honour of seeing her quarry in a bottle afterwards. It proved to be the largest of the set.

.

Our Sundays in those days *were* very strict—the Presbyterian Sunday of the Early Victorian era is well known, but I will affirm it had its alleviations in our home. Arrived back from church at Blackhall, we all, down to the youngest, accompanied by our tutors and governesses, dined in the dining-room—a thing we never did on any other day of the week. As there were usually guests besides, we were often a very large party, and the Sunday dinner, albeit in the middle of the day, was a merry meal. A fine salmon, or lusty grilse, would be uncovered, smoking hot, and needing no sauce but the water in which it had been boiled. It would have been caught the afternoon before. My father, as he tore the rough skin off its back, disclosing the bright pink flesh beneath, would be sure to have something to tell about the catch—whether it were in the rush of the “Grey

Mare's Tail," or the depths of shadowy "Cairnton," or the bubbling bends of "Ferroch." "Ferroch" was our favourite pool, because of its smooth shore of glittering pebbles on which the brambles sprawled, whose fruit, large and sweet and warm from the sun, shone like jet. The rest of the dinner might be unexciting—of the usual kind ; but we all took an interest in the salmon.

And the meal over, we were free to do as we chose throughout the long afternoon—than which children can have no greater boon. We were indeed expected to read "good" books, but the supply was varied, and how much or how little we perused was not inquired into ; we were not looked after ; we were not herded ; we walked or sat at our own sweet will, and I can truly say that unless the day were wet, necessitating our being kept indoors, we were never bored.

Even on rainy Sunday afternoons we had a resource ; for, being handed over to our brother's tutor, (a reliable and safe person), to be kept out of harm's way, we prevailed on him to tell us ghost stories.

Mr M'Ewan was an adept in the art. His stories were glorious, cumulative, shuddery—so much so that when he was careful, as he always was, most conscientiously careful, to "explain" the ghost, I was thankful in the depths of my heart, however bolder spirits among the audience might protest.

I have said that afternoon-tea was not born or thought of in the days whereof I write—but what about a certain sunny little room in the back regions, where Nurse Aiky sat with a tray before her, and a brown teapot with a broken nose ? Aiky's tea was sure to be going on about four o'clock, and towards that time there was a strange desire for Aiky's company in more breasts than one.

She never said us nay. She had little ornamental

cups and mugs at disposal, to say nothing of saucers—and her tea! Years afterwards she met an eulogium on tea fresh from China or India or Ceylon with “I ken naethin’ about your furrin teas. *Gie me Melrose,*”—and to the end of her life would drink none but what that fine old Edinburgh firm supplied, though it probably did not occur to her that even tea at four shillings a pound might have come from “furrin” parts.

The chief event of the Sunday took place at six o’clock. At that hour we all assembled in the dining-room for an evening service, and rows of chairs and benches had been placed at the far end. Then streamed in, with much etiquette and nicety of precedence, a congregation often amounting to over forty people, which is the limit set by the “Conventicle Act” for a religious meeting in Scotland held by a layman. The Act has, of course, fallen into abeyance; but it was frequently a mild jest on the lips of those who knew, that my father might be “had up” for breaking it! How and when he had begun thus to assemble outdoor retainers and their families for Sunday evening prayers, I do not know, but it was in full swing when we went to Blackhall. Many not merely among our gardeners and keepers were glad to come; for there was no evening service at Banchory, and, without being uncharitable, one may suspect they did not very well know what to do with themselves. The men had talked and smoked and slept long enough; the women had the sense of doing their duty, and the sight of all the ladies at the castle in full evening dress at the same time.

It is possible that this last was not lost upon the other sex also. At any rate, Nurse Aiky did not altogether like it, especially as her own bairns grew into young ladies; but my mother was adamant on the point. She could not see that we should be worse dressed on Sunday evenings than

on other nights of the week, when we were always attired in white or pale-tinted muslin, with low necks and short sleeves ; and her indignation was roused by a hint that the young keepers and gardeners were not accustomed to sights of the kind. They had come, she fully believed, actuated by very different motives—and we will hope that at any rate in some cases she was right ; but certainly we did present a somewhat dazzling tableau, especially when the family party was reinforced by guests equally elegantly turned out—and certainly our Sunday evening services were appreciated at Blackhall, and elsewhere. Throughout his life my father never failed to hold them wherever he might be.

If a clergyman were present, he would indeed be called upon to take the place of the master of the house, and conduct an extempore service, including an extempore sermon. This we young ones did not altogether approve of. We preferred my father's well-known voice, and a discourse by Blunt, or Melvill, or Jay, long though it might be, to the never-knowing-when-it-would-end feeling evoked by a preacher left to his own devices. He might indeed politely inquire as to the usual order of ceremonial, and make believe to adhere to it ; but though it was simple enough—a sermon, a hymn, and a prayer—he always, or so it seemed to us, contrived to spin out all three.

Prayers over, a short interval would elapse during which we flew out-of-doors if possible, at any rate out of sight ; but the sound of the gong soon summoned all together again for a gigantic repast—the precursor of the “ Sunday evening supper ” of to-day. By this time youthful spirits were, it must be confessed, getting sadly out of hand ; and I think there must have been some sneaking sympathy with them even among our elders, who, after all, were young themselves, though I thought them old then. I recall being

apologised for to a godly divine who had just delivered a homily on strictest Calvinistic lines, and the gentle indulgence of his response and the benevolence of his smile won my affection ever after. His heart was soft and loving, whatever were his tenets.

If we relaxed a little at supper; however, there was no chance of doing so throughout the evening which followed. It was of the nature of a Sunday School, and none were exempt from attending and contributing to it. We had to repeat hymns or sing them—but with no piano, nor musical instrument of any kind; we had divers Biblical exercises, such as repeating texts in turn, all beginning with the same letter of the alphabet, or turning on the same Scriptural subject; and, with the whole party under her eye, my poor mother exerted herself to the very best of her ability to keep us “good and happy,” according to her ideas; but when it is added that even after we broke up at night, she re-assembled all her children, sons as well as daughters, yet again for further exhortation and prayer within her own chamber, I think it will hardly be wondered at if she found us, as she would tearfully lament, wild and unmanageable.

We had been “kept at it” the whole day long—for I have not mentioned that before descending to breakfast, we were expected to sing several hymns outside her bedroom door, and that in the interval between breakfast and preparing for church she read to us from some missionary or other religious work)—so that the few afternoon hours were our sole relaxation,—and though I speak of this prolonged effort on the part of the best of parents with reverence and gratitude, I cannot but think such Sundays were an almost unbearable strain for all concerned.

Moreover, the above was Sunday at its best in the old Scottish home. It was Sunday amid beautiful surroundings, and under summer skies. When we went into Edinburgh,

as soon after we began to do, for the winter and spring months, the same domestic routine was observed, but with additions and subtractions. We were taken twice to church—the one service following hard upon the other—and we had no afternoon outlet. The days, short and dark, did not admit of our going out after dinner, whose hour was altered to four o'clock ; also we had no guests beneath our own roof, neither did we ever see a single fresh face from without. The door-bell never rang. No one would have been admitted, if it had.

Those were terrible Sundays indeed ; yes, I fear I must say it, they were. I do not believe any one of us young ones ever went to bed at night without a sense of relief that the day was over. Yet let me not be misunderstood. We were so far from being uninfluenced by our parents' example, or incapable of being advantaged by their teaching, that the impress of both was indelible ; but it was the mistaken idea of "winding ourselves too high" on one day of the week which bore so hardly on our tender years, and I rejoice to think no Presbyterian child of to-day is likely ever to suffer from it.

One word more. I have said nothing about the church services, because it is well known how thoroughly these have been reformed since the period I write of ; but let me give one glimpse of what the musical portion must have been like at St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, where it is now so beautiful, when it could draw forth the following comment from my outspoken father. Our pew was close beneath the precentor's desk, and the raucous nasal twang which burst out over our heads as the latter led each psalm or paraphrase invariably brought a frown to his brow ; but we had never heard his feelings put into words till one day, when, as he issued from the porch, out it came : "Well, I suppose that horrid din that horrid creature, Gibson, makes,

is the correct thing for church? I suppose you like it," (to my mother), "and other people like it; but for my part I'd sooner hear a dog howl or a donkey bray."

Governesses were naturally important personages with us in the Blackhall days. We were five sisters, and my parents were great educationists: accordingly one preceptress was not considered sufficient, and we had two—both Germans, and related to each other.

The German craze in the educational world was at its height, taking its cue no doubt from the Royal schoolroom, then in full swing; furthermore, I believe that my mother, when debating the question of having a Parisian for our No. 2, was daunted by the fear of internecine warfare, or at any rate of jealousy between Fräulein and Mademoiselle. Accordingly there they were. Fräulein Lindemann, fair, soft, pretty, with heavenly blue eyes, and a pure soprano voice; and Fräulein Müller, ugly, dark, eager, strenuous, with spectacles, and a fierce contralto.

Both were singers, and musical evenings soon became *de rigueur* in the house. The two voices not only blended charmingly, but had been trained to sing together. An invitation having been sent in due time to the schoolroom, the pair would enter arm-in-arm, carefully and becomingly dressed, with rolls of music in their hands. By-and-by, when the sweet songs of the Vaterland thrilled a delighted audience, some of the latter would be proud to join in; the group round the piano would swell, and my mother—an excellent musician—would readily act as accompanist, adding her own sweet low tones from time to time, timidly, but with keen enjoyment.

It needed but a very little pressure on the part of us younger ones to gain her permission to sit up an extra half-

hour on these occasions ; hence I remember them now. Let it be remembered how early were the hours we kept.

At other times the Fräuleins spent their evenings together in the schoolroom, happily enough, no doubt, reading, working, and writing letters. It would have been a tax on them to have had to dress and go into company every night, and it was not as though one poor exiled girl had been left to solitude and her own devices. They were both clever, efficient, and thoroughly trained, with diplomas from various colleges. They taught us well ; and we acquired from them many things besides the knowledge they were engaged to impart.

Our schoolroom was a kingdom in itself, and there we might do as we chose, and as the Fräuleins chose. If, under their auspices, we elected to cook nice little puddings and pastries such as were compounded in their native land, no one had anything to say. We sent to the kitchen for what we wanted ; we brought in fruit from the garden, berries from the hillsides ; and the kind creatures, especially if we had been diligent at our lessons, would hasten to bring out the little stewpans. Then what a delicious odour arose, and how ravishing tasted the small, steaming mess cooked by our own hands ! I doubt if any English preceptress, either of that date or any other date, would have so condescended with her pupils.

We strove to emulate their needlework ; the blonde was an exquisite embroidress—her patterns grew by magic ; the other, I think, rather despised the art—or would in any hands but those of “Emma.” She adored Emma. Her pride in Emma’s beauty was intensified by having none of her own, and it was a joy to her to gather up the long, thick, flaxen tresses, and coil the plait round Emma’s head. When Emma, fully dressed, with a pale pink, gauze scarf floating from her plump, milk-white shoulders,

would come to be looked over before an evening of music and company, Helene's unalloyed admiration of her younger, fairer colleague had in it not a tinge of envy.

We children used to mimic, but not ill-naturedly, the two contrasting voices,—Emma's soft piping treble, and her "Ach so, Helene," then Helene's deep-toned response, her "So, Emma," which resembled the bass note of a drum.

Helene was, I think, the more intellectual; and she had also a talent for drawing, which, if not very profound, gave much pleasure to the household, for she took likenesses of everybody from my father downwards, and I know that the sitters were pleased. Of course, *we* thought them works of genius. And again, each lady excelled in an accomplishment which if not particularly useful, was quaint and uncommon: they could weave the most wonderful little bouquets of hair, arranging the different colours so as to form the light and shade of flowers. In a large party of children, some very small, there were plenty of golden heads to cull from, and I possess one of these little relics of the past to this day.

What the governesses thought of our Scottish Sunday as represented at Blackhall, can only be surmised, for they were at once too cautious and too loyal ever to let it out.

They were completely happy with us—that I know. Their warmly affectionate natures made them soon look on our house as a home, and they learned to climb the hills and rove over the surrounding country as to the manner born. Only once do I remember Emma's courage and endurance giving way, after hours and hours of steady tramp, during which we had insisted on following unknown "short cuts" home, patiently attended by our faithful pair, (who, directly school-hours were over, became the most mild and docile of guardians); she offered not a syllable of remonstrance, but when desired to mount a high, stone dyke, and

leap a deep ditch on the far side, Emma could no longer restrain herself, and wept aloud. She really was at her last gasp, poor thing ; and we were all so contrite we would cheerfully have carried her home. Luckily a farmer's cart came by, and she was popped in and borne to safety.

The governesses were never tired of one sight—namely, that of the rafts on the river. It is probable that those rafts are no longer to be seen swinging down from the wooded heights of the Upper Dee to the dockyards at Aberdeen ; but they were the only means of conveying there timber to be used for shipbuilding and railway sleepers, fifty or sixty years ago.

The rafts were built of pine trees, roped together roughly but very strongly—for the river was rapid and beset by rocks, seen and unseen, and guiding this rude craft among them was dangerous in the extreme. The two men—always two—who stood at either end, steering, had need of all their watchfulness and all their strength as they wended their perilous way ; and how they ever had a footing at all on the slippery pine stems stripped of bark, was a marvel.

They often shouted and laughed as they went by. We little ones, paddling in the shallows, thought they did it from sheer lightness of heart—but I have wondered since. Could such joviality have proceeded from the same sort of feeling as that which prompts the Italian or French boy to sing, and shout, and caper when conscription time comes round ? The other day I witnessed a scene of the kind in Italy. You would have sworn the olive-skinned lads were all mad with joy, such hilariousness—such tomfoolery—the air resounded with their merriment and laughter. “Ah, no ; they are all very sad *really*,” quoth a gentle matron, gazing at the revellers out of dark, pitiful eyes. “But this is it, they *have* to sing to make their spirits, you see ?” Did

the bold raftsmen of the Dee use the same device to "make their spirits" as they plunged forward into the swirling and foaming waters?

One day we were setting forth on our daily walk when our attention was called to people running across the park from different points, and as one of them passed us, he shouted, "There's a man droonin' ; The Kelpie's i' the river."

The Kelpie (water-sprite), so nicknamed from that element being presumably his own, as he was the most reckless and fearless of raftsmen, was known to us all, and not very favourably so, being an arrant poacher when not otherwise employed. He had his good points, however ; and my father had a sneaking fondness for him as a dead shot, and something of a naturalist besides.

Horrified at his danger, but wild to see what there was to be seen, we broke from the poor little Emma, who chanced to be alone in charge, and raced to the spot.

As usual, rumour had outstripped reality. The Kelpie was not yet drowned, but he and his fellow-raftsmen were in momentary danger of being so. The river was in flood, and their raft had been hurled upon a rock and broken up. All that remained were a few cross logs, on which the apparently doomed men balanced themselves with difficulty, and which swayed to and fro, as though at any moment fated to be overpowered by the raging torrent.

It seemed hours before a rescue came, in the shape of a rope, which was flung by the strong arm of a wader venturing in as far as he dared, with the rope round his waist, whose other end was held fast by those behind.

The Kelpie caught the rope. We all drew a breath, and our eyes started from our heads. Could he, dared he, leave his pole, with which he alone battled for his life—could he trust to the single strength of his mate at that awful crisis? He did, and a low groan burst from the

spectators ; but it was a groan of admiration and sympathy, for the brave fellow calmly tied the rope first round his friend, and then himself, when both were drawn to shore. The same instant the wreck, released, tilted forward, crashed into the boiling current, and was instantly out of sight.

And what did The Kelpie say ? Did he emit any sentiment of satisfaction or gratitude or piety ? He did not. He stood and dripped for a moment, then shook himself, and walked away.

.

Another day we had an excitement of a different nature. Some neighbours had brought word of a forthcoming event which to them and to others whose tastes were musical, was of much importance ; Grisi, the famous soprano, and Mario, the equally famous tenor, were to sing at a concert for one night only at Aberdeen ; and though Aberdeen was eighteen miles off and no Deeside railway was then in existence, my mother and elder sisters were on fire to go, and my father was submissive. The carriage stood at the door ; the parents mounted the box, the daughters, the dicky behind ; the maids were inside with the small luggage, and a huge "Imperial," containing the gala dresses, was strapped on behind. How gay and grand it all looked ! We children hopped about, and wondered what it would be like to be grown up—or nearly so—and be going to a concert, and sleep the night at an hotel ? But when, on the following day, the party returned, we did not hear so much of Grisi and Mario as of something else which eclipsed their glories utterly—with us at any rate. *The Queen* was coming to Balmoral, and would pass our gates on her way thither !

I believe, though I am not absolutely sure, that this was Her Majesty's first visit to her Highland home. I think it must have been so : the excitement was so great,

and the loyal enthusiasm so widespread. Far and wide the lairds left their houses and the cotters their huts, to line the roadside and bid their sovereign welcome.

The gates of Blackhall abutted on to the main road, and were high and imposing. A flag was affixed to the topmast point, and a daring Highlander, spurred on by his fellows, stood on the narrow ledge by its side, prepared to yell a notification when the cortège came within his view.

Below, the family and household were assembled in the circle of ground just without the gates; and my younger brother and I were on our little Shetland ponies in front. We had, I think, to wait some time, for my little animal, a hot-tempered chestnut, grew restive, and I was terribly afraid I should be ordered off him; but after a while he quieted down, and that happily before a cry broke out from above: "She's comin'!—she's comin'!—she's comin'! Ay, it's *Her!*" shrieked Sandy Macgregor, and almost instantly outriders appeared round the corner of the road.

What a moment that was when the *real* moment came! Prince Albert—he was always called "Prince Albert" then—ever courteous and kindly, and on the lookout to acknowledge loyal greetings, laid his hand on the Queen's arm—for we could see him do it—to draw her attention to our little assemblage; but at the moment Her Majesty was taken up with tying the Princess Royal's bonnet-strings, which she was tugging at in the fashion peculiar to arbitrary mothers. The little princess was holding back, pouting: and as the carriage slowed down (no doubt by previous orders) to enable a considerable crowd which had collected round us, the nucleus, to give vent to their feelings, and have also a good look into the open barouche, we had the satisfaction of seeing our gracious Sovereign Lady obliged to postpone her maternal inclinations, and bestow the light of her countenance elsewhere.

Her face, we then saw, was radiant with sweetness and happiness. She wore a dark blue "Ugly"—a concoction of silk and wire, supposed to be a protection from the sun, when attached to the small bonnet then in vogue,—and it did not misbecome her. She also wore a tartan cloak, and the little princess opposite wore the same, and also the hideous thing rightly named an "Ugly." That is all I remember. Whether Prince Albert, and his son, our late King, were in the kilt or not, I cannot tell.

We heard afterwards that the Royal party did not know at the time that they were passing the author of *The Moor and The Loch*, or would have called a halt, as that book did much to lead their steps northward. Her Majesty's Librarian, Mr, now Sir Richard, Holmes, showed it me, thumbed and worn, years and years afterwards, in a selected group of the Prince's favourite works at Windsor Castle.

.

At the end of our third summer at Blackhall, my parents decided to stay on there for the winter—the Portobello house being let to Lord Worcester,—(and it was on this occasion that the "poothered heids" of his footmen scared poor old Henny Rose from the door). Blackhall was a good, comfortable house, and its situation was ideal, but—the winter proved to be the historic Crimean winter! For weeks we should have been snowed up but for the snow-plough which plied incessantly up and down the long avenue, and by-and-by the river, the rushing Dee itself, was frozen over.

My father was in his element, however, enjoying a novelty in sport, namely, the chase of the roe-deer, which, driven from the heights, abounded in the woody banks of the river. We were allowed to join occasionally in the hunt, as the youngest of us could keep a pass as well as a full-

grown person ; and though we little girls only wore—will it be believed ?—short socks, and our poor little knees were sadly chapped by the cold, we would have endured anything rather than be ordered home before the day's sport was over. Woodcock and other northern birds were also plentiful that winter, and my father's enormously heavy "duck gun" was scarcely ever off his shoulder.

The governesses were also quite content amidst snow and frost, which reminded them of their beloved Vaterland, and there were no grumbles from them when every road was impassable but that kept open by the snow-plough. They were the most cheerful of inmates. They devised all sorts of indoor games ; and, best of all, told us in their own tongue such enthralling tales of the weird and mysterious Hartz Mountains, such legends of the Rhine, as made us fancy we were perpetually dwelling in fairyland.

Hans Andersen we read for ourselves ; and it was a noble idea to make the translation of *The Snow Queen* and other tales form a part of our German lesson—and then came an idea still more noble, in fact rapturous. We were to have a real German Christmas tree—not the poor imitation to be found in this country.

My mother, who was very well and strong at the time, entered into the notion with spirit, and gave the Fräuleins permission to order what materials they needed from Stewart and Chevis, the Aberdeen grocers.

Then what designing and cutting, what pasting and stitching, what cabbage-nets and streamers of silver and gold and blue and crimson paper—what gilding of walnuts and oranges, what strings of raisins and figs—above all, what quaint little figures perched everywhere upon the boughs, with a mighty Father Christmas on the topmost !

Fastening him and his attendant tapers on, was only accomplished by putting one table on the top of another, and a

step-ladder on the top of both. One of the menservants then mounted aloft, and his head appeared to touch the ceiling. Yet the room was a lofty one, and the tree stood in a tub on the floor. You may guess what a tree it was.

I think my parents themselves were proud of it. Certainly they permitted it to be seen by high and low, for it was lit up several nights in succession, and many of our own small contemporaries, as well as the children of our gardeners and foresters, gazed with envious eyes. It is borne in on my mind that one of the ladies who came on the "gentry" night, appeared with small flat side-curls on either cheek, just in front of the ear, and that they were extremely becoming to her. She also wore a single curl depending from one side of her head; and we learned that this fashion, side-curls and all, had just been introduced by the Empress Eugénie. Soon there was hardly a pretty face in England which did not follow it, and my two elder sisters were among the first to begin.

The roll of drums and roar of battle in the East sent, I fear, but dim echoes into our quiet home. No very near relation was at the front, and my parents, albeit no doubt patriotically interested, were not personally so. They were, it must be owned, always much wrapped up in their own little world; and even when we grew to be more of companions and could have appreciated discussions on the affairs of nations, we did not hear them.

This was a pity. It was more; it was a serious loss. If children are to take an intelligent interest in the history of their own times, their elders must themselves show—not preach—love of the subject and a sense of its importance.

My mother seldom, if ever, opened a newspaper. It is true that in her day newspapers were usually left to "the gentlemen"; but still it was inexplicable to me as I older grew that, with her powers of mind, she should have been

content to take such knowledge of home and foreign politics as she possessed through the medium of my father. Even these communications were not usually made in our presence, since we led, as I have shown, a separate life all the days of childhood and early youth.

The names of Alma, Balaclava, and Inkermann were therefore, I have to own, but names and nothing more, at any rate to us younger ones. We had snow soldiers indeed, and had field-days on the mimic battle-field, and we demanded a holiday when news of a victory arrived, or sang "The Red, White and Blue," emphasising "This Russian bear we must conquer now or never,"—but we were in reality infinitely more interested in seeing country carts cross the frozen bed of the Dee, and in all the other strange surroundings of our frost-bound fortress.

Then came the break-up of the ice—the awful, thunderous groaning and creaking, crashing and roaring which went on all one night, keeping everyone awake—and the sight next day as the huge blocks which still adhered to the banks, detached themselves and swung and circled down the foaming rapids.

Once begun, the thaw set in rapidly ; and ere we left Blackhall, which we did in April (never, so far as I am concerned, to see it again), we had had plenty of warm and fragrant spring days to blot out the background of grey sky above and snowy hills beneath, throughout the earlier part of that historic winter.