

- ART. II.—1. *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs. M. O. W. Oliphant.* Arranged and edited by Mrs. HARRY COGHILL. Edinburgh: 1899.
2. *Passages in the Life of Mrs. Margaret Maitland.* By Mrs. OLIPHANT. London: 1849.
3. *Salem Chapel and The Doctor's Family.* By the same Author. Edinburgh: 1863. (Reprinted together.)
4. *Miss Marjoribanks.* By the same Author. Edinburgh: 1866.
5. *Phæbe Junior: a Last Chronicle of Carlिंगford.* By the same Author. London: 1876.
6. *A Beleaguered City.* By the same Author. London: 1880.
7. *A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen.* By the same Author. London: 1882.
8. *The Wizard's Son.* By the same Author. London: 1884.
9. *Two Stories of the Seen and Unseen.* By the same Author. Edinburgh: 1885.
10. *The Land of Darkness, along with some Further Chapters in the Experience of the Little Pilgrims.* London: 1888.
11. *Fancies of a Believer.* 'Blackwood's Magazine,' February 1895.
12. *The Land of Suspense.* 'Blackwood's Magazine,' January 1897.

MRS. OLIPHANT died a few days after the Queen's second jubilee. Her first novel, 'Margaret Maitland,' was published in 1849. Her life's work covered a period of fifty years, and in that space of time she gave to the world upwards of two hundred and fifty volumes. Her miscellaneous contributions to 'Blackwood's Magazine' and other periodicals not reprinted might probably fill another fifty. From the time she was twenty to her death in her seventieth year she wrote on an average at least six volumes a year—one every two months. A journalist in full work turns out printed matter at about the same rate, but few maintain the flow of it over so long a period, and Mrs. Oliphant's work never fell below the level of the very best journalism. It is no figure of speech to say that she wrote her fingers to the bone. 'I have worked a hole in my right forefinger,'

she wrote to Mr. Blackwood in October 1896, 'with the pen, I suppose! and can't get it to heal—also from excessive use of that little implement.' That seems to have been the first thing that interfered with her amazing flow of production; the frame wore out before the mind, though that too had lost something of its freshness. Yet those who read the great book that she was engaged on when she wrote this word of half-humorous complaint, the *Annals* of the publishing house of Blackwood which she had so long and so loyally served, found little sign of decay in her masterly handling of all that complicated material. Few writers have had at their disposal a more serviceable brain; none ever used it more unsparingly. Yet the end of all this work and of all this ability was failure. Failure is written large on the fragmentary *Autobiography* now published, which, broken though it is, is a most interesting and significant document.

The saddest part of her failure is that it was only relative and partial. She accomplished a great deal, she achieved a large measure of success, she knew much happiness, but she had always the feeling that she might have done more, that her success was not equal to her merit and her labour, and that her happiness was never durable. Everything seemed to come easy to her by nature, and circumstances made everything hard; no one was ever more happy by nature, by fate more unhappy. She wrote easily and sweetly, and her first published novel succeeded far beyond her hopes; yet the absolute success that puts a seal on a career always just eluded her, and she was never free to make the effort that might—or so she thought—have won it. So far as fame was concerned, she lived a life of Tantalus, till all care for that reward had died out of her; and the desire never was masterful. When at last, as we hold, she did the best that was in her to do, she was past caring, if indeed she knew that she had done it. For the other success which can be counted in money, that too came freely to her at the outset, and she was prosperous; yet others with half her talent and less than half her labour earned twice as much, for work not so good as hers. Still she earned what was sufficient for her and for those whom she loved and supported, but that, too, came to bitterness. Her husband was a failure in life; she was able to maintain the household, but he died on her hands. Left a widow, she reared her children with every comfort and advantage, taking all the hardship of the home upon herself. A second family was thrown on her hands

when her brother, having failed in business, came to live, a mere wreck of a man, under her roof. She stinted nothing, but worked double tides that these children also might lack nothing in life, putting aside her personal ambition to be ambitious for others. Her own sons failed to profit by the start she had given them; then when a hope of seeing them enter resolutely upon life dawned in her mind, they too died, as her nephew, who was like a son to her, had died before them. One by one the young lives about her went out. She herself had health that nothing could shake, the health that is in itself the joy of living, a sweetness of breath and blood; but it was given to her that she might be all through her life a pillar and prop to sickness. Death struck all about her, in her very arms, but it never touched her, till she was left absolutely alone. She had in herself that well-spring of happiness, the power to make happy faces about her, and to rejoice in the sight of them; but with it went the poignant agony of apprehension which nothing can feel but the keenest love, and the longer she lived the more passionately she loved, and the more cause she had for that agony. She lived the life of Damocles, and the sword fell not once nor twice, and even the last blow, though it was mortal, did not kill mercifully. She lived nearly three years after the death of her last surviving child. Her life was the tragedy of happiness, and she has written it herself.

These pages of her Autobiography—even such of them as are merely reminiscences—show the woman as she was: a creature in whom extraordinary intensity of feeling was matched with a keen incisive intellect, curiously prone to analysis, stripping off all illusions and going to the very heart of things, finding bitterness enough, but never losing hope; strong to act, strong to think, strong to endure, and strong to believe; womanly in everything, keen with a woman's keenness, and strong with a woman's strength. Such a temper and faculties in one endowed with a rare gift of expression cannot but have left something that will last, and the best service that can be done to her memory is to disencumber the essential and vital parts in her achievement from that which has no permanent claim upon our interest. Probably no one living has read all or even nearly all that she wrote; certainly we have no pretension to have done so. But public opinion is in some measure a guide, and a far better index is to be found in this record of her life. Work that means little to its author can never mean much to the world, and it is easy to see from the Auto-

biography, and from stray passages in the letters, when Mrs. Oliphant wrote because there was a thing in her that demanded to be uttered. One may dismiss at once all the history, biography, and the rest, as hackwork undertaken merely because there was money to be made. Work of this class may of course be literature of the highest kind, but not done as Mrs. Oliphant did it—not without a fuller knowledge and a deeper meditation than she ever took time for. Yet we would not for a moment allow that by doing this work she in anyway disqualified herself for doing better. All Goldsmith's drudgery—and he wrote, as he said himself pathetically, a volume a month—never harmed 'The Vicar of Wakefield;' rather, it went to give that ease of the much practised hand which is half the charm of his masterpiece. And knowledge is never amiss, and the variety of Mrs. Oliphant's enforced reading gave a richness to her mind. She did not know as much of the subjects she wrote on as it befits a specialist to know, but the width of her culture was hard to parallel, and papers like those called 'The Looker-On,' which she wrote for 'Blackwood's Magazine' in her last years, are delightful in their maturity, not only of judgement and experience, but of knowledge. As for her style, it certainly does not conform to the prevailing standards. It does not keep one on the stretch with continual expectation of the unexpected word: it is never contorted or tormented, never emphatic, never affected. The words flow simply and smoothly, like the utterance of a perfectly well-bred woman, talking sometimes eagerly, sometimes with a grave earnestness, but more often with a delicate under-current of laughter in the tone; and the style answers by a sort of instinct to each inflection of the voice. She is thinking more about what she has to say than about the way in which she is to say it; and since the day when people listened to Mr. Pater and misunderstood Stevenson that has been to a certain school of critics the unpardonable sin. Style comes to some by the grace of nature, and Mrs. Oliphant was one of the fortunate who had none of the vehemences and eccentricities of temperament which make it difficult for the writer to arrive at a harmonious manner of expression; nor was she obliged to hide mediocrity under a solemn and elaborate vesture of language. What she had to say was interesting, and she arrived spontaneously at a manner of saying it perfectly fitted to her purpose. As she developed, both the matter and the form mended, but there was only the change that comes between youth

and maturity. Nothing can be more absurd than to say that Mrs. Oliphant was indifferent to style because she did not inquire diligently what manner of style she should adopt. She knew instinctively the mode of expression suited to her talent, and she delighted to make the most of it. She had the artist's pleasure 'in 'small technical successes' that Stevenson writes of, and was, by her own avowal, 'ever more really satisfied by 'some little conscious felicity of words than by anything 'else.'

'I have always had my sing-song,' she says, 'guided by no sort of law but my ear, which was in its way fastidious to the cadence and measure that pleased me, but it is bewildering to me in my perfectly artless art, if I may use the word at all, to hear of the elaborate ways of forming and enhancing style and all the studies for that end.'

Goldsmith would probably have said the same, and though Mrs. Oliphant is not Goldsmith, she is far nearer to the best English than nine-tenths of the living writers whom it is the fashion to praise for excellence in style. She wrote sometimes worse, sometimes better, always with a certain looseness of texture in the sentence; but from her earliest beginnings to the latest of her work there was never a period in which one could not pick out from her writings passages of rare beauty and charm. 'Miss 'Marjoribanks,' perhaps the best written of all her novels, is a model of refined irony—the most difficult of all qualities to achieve—and the conscious pleasure of workmanship is apparent in the neatly turned sentences which round off each chapter cleanly, as if with the crack of a whip, while the laugh hides itself behind a studied decorum of phrase. Take an instance—Lucilla had conducted to a triumphant issue her great project for the social regeneration of Carlingford by means of 'Thursday evenings;' but her public success had been attended with private disappointments, and for a second time the homage of an eligible suitor had been transferred to one of the weaker sisters whom she had launched in life.

'Nothing could be more exciting than the position in which she found herself; but the difficulties were only such as stimulated her genius; and then it was not any selfish advantage, but the good of her neighbour in its most sublime manifestation—the good of her neighbour who had injured her and been insensible to her attractions, which according to the world in general is the one thing unpardonable to a woman—which Lucilla sought. And it was not even the Scriptural coals of fire she was thinking of, as she pondered her great

undertaking in her mind. The enterprise might not be free from a touch of human vanity, but it was vanity of a loftier description; the pleasure of exercising a great faculty and the natural confidence of genius in its own powers.'

The passage is thoroughly characteristic; somewhat faulty in structure—the long sentence indeed is unusually ill built—yet what could be more admirable than the tone? But for the best of Mrs. Oliphant's writing we should go to the evening of her life—to the period when according to the prevailing cant of criticism her whole faculty must have been blunted and worn down by her lifelong disregard of the minuter delicacies of language. We should quote by choice from the preface to almost the last volume published before her death, 'The Ways of Life,' in which she wrote concerning the melancholy ebb of human faculties, and the slow sad conviction borne in upon many that they have survived their highest point of reputation; or from any one of the stories dealing with the unseen world in which, as it will be our endeavour to show, her genius found its full and characteristic expression. The writings of this later period abound in passages of the truest pathos—sometimes wonderfully soft and moving, sometimes tragic in their restraint—always womanly and never effeminate; and in these there is a noble melody of language. The melody is simple and not greatly varied, yet there are few pieces of English writing more musical than the 'Little Pilgrim in 'the Unseen.'

It could not, however, by any means be asserted that Mrs. Oliphant will continue to hold a place in literature for the sake of her style. The versatility of her mind, the variety and extent of her work may secure her a place in the dictionaries, but will not keep her memory alive. If she survives at all it must be in some sort or other as a writer of fiction—as a maker of stories. And the stories which have a chance to live must be those in which she herself was most interested—into which, consciously or unconsciously, she put most of herself. Without the Autobiography one could guess readily enough: with it we ought to be able to know. It is a little difficult, however, because Mrs. Oliphant, as she says, never took herself or her work very seriously.

'I always avoid considering formally what my own mind is worth. I have never had any theory on the subject. I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children.'

That passage illustrates at once the strength and the weakness of her gift. The vocation was perfectly natural; she wrote, not out of ambition, but simply from a pleasure in the occupation, to pass away long hours by her mother's bedside. Her family were sympathetic, and made an audience to whom she read out her early attempts; they were delighted at her success, but they never talked to her of genius, or encouraged her to spell art with a capital A. If she ever had leanings that way herself, she satirised them keenly but kindly in her sketch of Rose Lake, the pretty little drawing-master's daughter, who believes in the social position conferred by Art, and thinks that her design for the border of an embroidery is the most important thing in the world. Margaret Oliphant grew up a bookish and secluded child in a very shrewd family circle. Her mother, she says, was like Mrs. Carlyle, and Mrs. Carlyle would not have fostered illusions. Her gift was encouraged and applauded, 'but always with a hidden sense that it was an admirable 'joke.' She did her writing at a corner of the family table, joining in whatever talk was going just as if she 'had 'been making a shirt instead of writing a book.' Miss Austen, as Mrs. Oliphant herself observes, worked under the same conditions. Still, the very best work is not produced except by those in whom it takes up an enormously large space of life. Miss Austen may have written in a room full of people, but she must have spent innumerable hours in the company of her characters. Scott also was very tolerant of interruptions, but, as he said himself, if there was never five minutes in the day when he was thinking of nothing but his story, so there was also never five minutes when his story was out of his head. Mrs. Oliphant never lived in the life of her characters, as the greater novelists have done—as Trollope, for instance, describes himself to have done, and that is why Trollope, in many respects so inferior to her, is, nevertheless, a greater novelist. Mrs. Proudie and the rest were just as real to him as Becky Sharp and Amelia were to Thackeray. Mrs. Oliphant's characters were to her—it is her own illustration—no more than people in a book; no better known than Jeanie Deans, and, perhaps, not so well known. And the reason is not far to seek—certainly not obscure enough to escape so fine a critic as she was. There were always other things far more engrossing and far more important to occupy her mind. Womanlike, she lived her life chiefly in the interests of those about her, and those concerns were always of a nature to leave her no

breathing space 'to labour with an artist's fervour and 'concentration to produce a masterpiece.' Their home in Liverpool, where Mr. Wilson, her father, had some office in the Customs—with characteristic vagueness, she does not know precisely what office—was never a happy one. Before she was old enough to understand, her elder brother Willy 'had come by some defeat in life' and was at home idle. Then came reform, a new start, and he went up to London to study in the English Presbyterian College for a ministry in the Church to which the Oliphants belonged. His sister went with him, a small, fierce guardian. It was in those days that 'Margaret Maitland' was accepted by Colburn. The reformation continued, and the brother went to take a charge in some small village of Northumberland. There he relapsed and was brought home a mere wreck, incapable of anything but drifting through life, a log in the domestic circle at home. That was when the novelist first learnt her tenderness for ne'er-do-wells and wastrels. Shortly after this came her marriage with her first cousin, Frank Oliphant. Marriage brought with it happiness and cares. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson followed their daughter to London, and Mr. Oliphant did not get on with his mother-in-law. The first child born was a girl, and shortly after the birth of the second—only a year later—Mrs. Wilson sank into a fatal illness. Her daughter nursed her with a passionate devotion.

'At the very end I remember the struggle against overwhelming sleep, after nights and days in incessant anxiety, which made me so bitterly ashamed of the limits of wretched nature. To want to sleep while she was dying seemed so unnatural and so horrible. And, oh me! when all was over, mingled with my grief there was—how can I say it?—something like a dreadful relief.'

That, too, is very characteristic. To a woman with that bitter habit of analysis was denied even the comfort of illusions. But it gave her a force of insight not common among novelists; there is a strange reflection of this train of thought at the beginning of 'Miss Marjoribanks' which tells of the doctor's bereavement, and how he is almost glad to find himself truly sorry for the loss of the wife who had been so little to him. All that grief can teach, Mrs. Oliphant's indomitable spirit was fated to learn. A few months after her mother's death she lost her second child, a baby of eight months old, and mingled with her sorrow was a shame to know how much deeper this pang struck than the loss of her mother, 'who had been everything to



'her all her life.' A third child was born, and died a day old.

'My spirit sank completely under it. I used to go about saying to myself "A little while and ye shall not see me," with a longing to get to the end and have all safe—for my one remaining, my eldest, my Maggie, seemed as if she too must be taken out of my arms. People will say it was an animal instinct, perhaps. Neither of these little ones could speak to me or exchange an idea or show love, and yet their withdrawal was like the sun going out from the sky—life remained, the daylight continued, but all was different. It seems strange to me now at this long distance—but so it was.'

Yet gradually her elastic nature recovered itself; they began to go a little into artist society, orders came in to her husband, who was an artist, 'and, best of all, our delightful 'boy was born.' That was in November 1856, four years and a half after their marriage. Within that period she had endured four births and three deaths. Yet she had written five novels and five-and-twenty articles for *Blackwood*. *I nunc et versus tecum meditare canoros*. With those agonies knocking at her heart, how was a woman to live the life of imagination? The actual had her by the throat. Yet happiness came back, and for a year or two she lived in the heartease of constant and congenial employment.

'When I look back on my life, among the happy moments which I can recollect is one which is so curiously common and homely, with nothing in it, that it is strange even to record such a recollection, and yet it embodied more happiness to me than almost any real occasion, as might be supposed, for happiness. It was the moment after dinner when I used to run upstairs to see that all was well in the nursery, and then to turn into my room on my way down again to wash my hands, as I had a way of doing before I took up my evening work, which was generally needlework, something to make for the children. My bedroom had three windows in it, one looking out upon the gardens I have mentioned, the other two into the road. It was light enough with the lamplight outside for all I wanted. I can see it now, the glimmer of the outside lights, the room dark, the faint reflection in the glasses, and my heart full of joy and peace—for what?—for nothing—that there was no harm anywhere, the children well above stairs and their father below. I had few of the pleasures of society, no gaiety at all. I was eight-and-twenty, going downstairs as light as a feather, to the little frock I was making. My husband also gone back for an hour or two after dinner to his work, and well—and the bairnies well. I can feel now the sensation of that sweet calm and ease and peace.

'I have always said it is in these unconsidered moments that happiness is—not in things or events that may be supposed to cause it. How clear it is over these more than thirty years!'

Then came the forerunner of fresh disaster; her husband

in coughing brought up blood. Consumption ran its course rapidly. He was ordered abroad, and the pair went to Italy in January 1859, friendless and all but destitute of money, ignorant of everything that might have smoothed matters down. His life lasted some few months yet, first in Florence, then in Rome, where he died in October, leaving his wife with two helpless children in life and one unborn. When the second boy, born six weeks after his father's death, was three months old, the family struggled home, having for all its fortune, Mrs. Oliphant writes, 'about 1,000*l.* of debt, a small insurance of, I think, 200*l.* on Frank's life, our furniture laid up in warehouse, and my own faculties, such as they were, to make our living and pay off our burdens by.'

Yet even under all this weight of affliction she never lost heart. But her work suffered. In 1860 she was in Scotland, and in that winter, living in Edinburgh with her children, went through one of her worst times. The Blackwoods had been rejecting contributions of hers. There is a letter, pathetic in its courage, given in this book about a returned manuscript; and she tells in her History of the firm with what trepidation she went to offer them a serial for the Magazine which was the very apple of their eye: how the two men received her kindly, but gave her little hope; and how she kept down her tears until she was fairly out of the office, and walked home through a bitter north-east wind to the little house where the little ones ran to the door 'all gay and sweet' to meet her 'wi' flichterin' noise and glee.' For the rest of the day she was occupied with them 'in a sort of cheerful despair,' but when the house was still that night she sat down and wrote a story, the first of the 'Carlingford' series, which made her 'almost one of the popularities of literature. She 'sat up nearly all night over it in a passion of composition.' Next day it was finished and sent up to George Street, and her fortune, 'comparatively speaking, was made.' In the winter of 1861 she settled down near Ealing, then a real village near London, in a tiny house on the Uxbridge Road. Here she stayed for four years, when the need of schooling for her boys made her move to Windsor; and here her best work as a novelist was done. 'Salem Chapel' was written in 1862, on the whole, perhaps, her best novel, if due weight be given to its excellence of plot and skilful developement of interest. 'The Perpetual Curate' followed it, and there is a new note perceptible in her correspondence with Blackwood; she is keenly inte-

rested in the future, determined to make, as she says, laughingly, 'an 'it,' and keenly gratified by the increasing success. The scar that was left by her husband's death had closed up; and she never pretends that her affection for him was the passion of her life. Passion of that kind there was none in her history; she owns in a curiously frank passage of her Autobiography to a sense of 'whimsical 'injury' because she had never in her life 'impressed any- 'body,' as George Eliot and George Sand did. It is an odd confession of that sort of envy which the virtuous so often appear to feel for famous sinners. But there was a passion in Mrs. Oliphant's life of which 'these two bigger women,' as she calls them, knew nothing. George Eliot was childless, and George Sand was a mother indeed, but one to whom her child was an interest scarcely competing with her art or her various loves. To Mrs. Oliphant her children were the universe; she lived in them and for them, and in their lives she built up a new happiness to which her own success was only contributory. Just in these years between 1861 and 1868 she had her chance to achieve greatness as a novelist if it lay in her. She was in the maturity of her powers—in 1867 she reached her fortieth birthday—she had no pressing call for money, her children were old enough to be a keen pleasure, not old enough to be an anxiety; her heart was light, and her strength unlimited. She wrote under the keen stimulus of a half-achieved popularity, and she had hit upon the manner best suited to her. People wondered at the knowledge displayed in 'Salem Chapel'—where old Tozer is a real creation. If the book be taken along with its sequel, 'Phoebe Junior,' it may be said that Mrs. Oliphant knew all about Tozer. Yet, masterly as 'Salem Chapel' is, it cannot be placed higher than in the second rank of fiction; not higher than Trollope's best work. Yet Mrs. Oliphant had gifts denied to Trollope; she had eloquence, charm of style, grace and ease where he is heavy and clumsy; above all, she had the power to construct a story full of high-strung situations, yet in no way sinning against common sense; and her insight into feminine character and skill to depict it at least rival his mastery over men. Why with all these advantages does she get no further? What is it that sets the dividing line between her and George Eliot, or Charlotte Brontë? What is the quality in which Trollope outdoes her so far as to counterbalance all his deficiencies? It is, we hold, what may be called force or sincerity: the result of the artist's passionate absorption in his work. Mrs.

Oliphant complains in her Autobiography that she spoiled her fortunes by making light to others of her own work. In reality she made light of it to herself. It did not mean much to her. Scott had something of the same turn in him, and the consequence is that Scott's work is not so great as it might have been. Read the passages in his journal written under the heaviest stroke of trouble, when he speaks as Shakspeare might have spoken, and you will realise how much greater is Scott than any of his novels. Read this Autobiography of Mrs. Oliphant's and you will feel the same. Yet there is all the difference in the world between the two temperaments. Scott was a man, and though he worked lightly and almost carelessly, yet his work was the central preoccupation of his life. A man cannot alter his nature, and the power of concentrating his whole energy for a long stretch was not in him; his work came as if by some unconscious process of nature. But the life of imagination was the strongest in him; that was his secret joy, the thing lying deepest in his heart. Mrs. Oliphant was a woman and a mother, and the innermost preoccupation of her mind—the point to which her fluctuating thoughts would always swing back—was her children. It may be an accident—but more likely it is not—that the women who have been great artists have been childless women. George Sand is the one exception, and she would leave her child while she strayed over Italy with de Musset. The others are Miss Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot; one may add Mrs. Browning, all of whose best work was done before she became a mother. There are interests in life too strong for art to compete with, especially the art of the novelist, which needs that the artist should live in imaginary characters. The art of the poet is different, for it may incorporate with itself any emotion; and the genius of Mrs. Oliphant revealed itself as genius in work that is essentially poetry. But happiness seldom needs to find a voice—not until it is remembered happiness; and in the days when the first 'Carlingford' tales were being written Mrs. Oliphant was thoroughly happy. It was not for long. In the autumn of 1863 she, with her three children and her dear friends Principal Tulloch and his wife and children, went to Rome. They were a party full of gaiety and brightness. And then came back the pain that was 'the over-word of her life.' Her daughter, a child of eleven years, was taken ill, died in four days, and was laid beside her father. And the words

that she wrote down then in her misery are printed here:—

‘The hardest moment in my present sad life is the morning, when I must wake up, and begin the dreary world again. I can sleep during the night, and I sleep as long as I can; but when it is no longer possible, when the light can no longer be gainsaid, and life is going on everywhere, then I, too, rise up to bear my burden. How different it used to be! When I was a girl I remember the feeling I had when the fresh morning light came round. Whatever grief there had been the night before, the new day triumphed over it. Things must be better than one thought, must be well, in a world which woke up to that new light, to the sweet dews and sweet air which renewed one’s soul. Now I am thankful for the night and the darkness, and shudder to see the light of the day returning.

‘The Principal calls “In Memoriam” an embodiment of the spirit of this age, which he says does not know what to think, yet thinks and wonders and stops itself, and thinks again; which believes and does not believe, and *perhaps*, I think, carries the human yearning and longing further than it was ever carried before. Perhaps my own thoughts are much of the same kind. I try to realise heaven to myself, and cannot do it. The more I think of it, the less I am able to feel that those who have left us can start up at once into a heartless beatitude without caring for our sorrows. Do they sleep until the great day? Or does time so cease for them that it seems but a matter of hours and minutes till we meet again? God who is Love cannot give immortality and annihilate affection; that surely, at least, we must take for granted—as sure as they live, they live to love us. Human nature in the flesh cannot be more faithful, more tender, than the purified human soul in heaven. Where, then, are they, those who have gone before us? Some people say, around us, still knowing all that occupies us; but that is an idea I cannot entertain either. It would not be happiness, but pain, to be beside those we love, yet unable to communicate with them—unable to make ourselves known. . . .

‘The world is changed and my life is darkened; and all that I can do is to take desperate hold of this one certainty, that God cannot have done it without reason.’

That is the note, struck for the first time, of all that is most significant in her work. There was a part of her, not dead but living somewhere, yet inseparably cut off. Living, where and how? That was the question to which her thoughts were incessantly to recur, with more and more instant solicitude, at every new separation. To that question only dreams could give an answer; but these dreams shaped with the clearest logical coherency and moulded into beauty, for her own comfort and the comfort of others, were to be the truly creative work of her life. Yet she returned at once to the old lines, under the double necessity of bread-

winning and of seeking a respite from thought. She worked as well as before, but in an altered spirit; the little flutter of ambition was crushed out, as she wrote to Blackwood in a sad letter about 'Miss Marjoribanks,' the novel then in hand. There was nothing in her circumstances to stop her from doing better work in these years than 'Miss Marjoribanks,' which is only a very good novel, not a great one; the defect was in herself. But in 1868 came the further blow which definitely committed her to over-hasty production. Her brother Frank, who had been the bosom friend of her youth, was married and in business at Liverpool. He failed hopelessly, as it would seem, through no special fault but that incompetence and want of fibre which stamped all the men that in her life she had to do with, and which is reflected in all the men she draws, just as her own active care of their weaker brethren is pictured in a score of her helpful self-confident heroines. The news came to her without the least preparation, but she never hesitated as to her duty. The two elder of his four children, a boy and a girl, came to her; the wife with two others joined him abroad. But in a very little time the wife died, and the man, broken down and all but paralysed, came with his two other children straight to his sister. It was not in her to retrench upon the comfortable way of living to which she had accustomed her household; but she could work double tides, and she did, and was happy, though all payments for her work were invariably forestalled, and her brother's presence in the household was far from being a source of pleasure. He and she had drifted so far apart that they were, not strangers, but worse—kin, but not kind. When he died, she wrote that she was glad to find herself sorry; it made no blank in the household; the man that he had been was dead long before. Yet happy she was in the years at Windsor while the three boys were at Eton, happy in their love and brightness and in their school successes; for at school all the boys did well, and her hopes were high. In all her books, alike the best and the worst, there is a delightful sympathy with youth—with its troubles and its pleasures. Ursula May in 'Phœbe Junior' is a charming picture of a girl; and though her young men are not strongly drawn, her kindness for them communicates itself to the reader. 1875, the year of the brother's death, was a turning point. Frank Wilson, her nephew, had passed high into Cooper's Hill. Cyril, her eldest son, was just leaving Eton for Balliol, and—at least, in his mother's eyes—was a

singularly attractive boy ; she quotes Chaucer's lines about him :—

‘ Singing he was, and flyting all the day,  
He was as fresh as is the month of May.’

Her youngest, Cecco, was, as he remained till death, clever, good, and entirely devoted to his mother. ‘ There was no ‘ prouder woman in the world than I was with the three,’ she says. But grief and disappointment were soon at their work. Frank Wilson died of the first fever that attacked him when he went to the Punjaub ; and Cyril Oliphant idled at Oxford, fell into a loose way of living, and drank—yet never without hope of recovery. In the opening chapters of ‘ The ‘ Wizard’s Son,’ published in 1884, Mrs. Oliphant sketches—not without warrant of knowledge—the agony of a mother who sees the son of her hopes drifting aimlessly at the outset of life, and who fears alike by too much reproof to widen the breach between her and him and by too much indulgence to fail of her duty. In 1890 she was still hoping to find him make a real start, when the end came, and her boy died. She had done all she could for him, and it had availed nothing ; she did not even spare herself the pang of thinking that things might have been better had she done less and taught a more strenuous lesson. He was dead, like her firstborn, her woman child ; her surviving son was weakly, and she, with her indomitable health and her fever of apprehension was left to labour in the familiar world and to spend more and more of her life in thoughts of that other dim conjecturable world whither so much of her had passed already.

Long before this her thoughts had been busy with it. In the end of 1878 she wrote the first of her stories of the Unseen—‘ The Beleaguered City’—which relates how in the city of Semur the dead by reason of the impiety of the living came back, and for a little while ousted them from their homes ; and how during those days the men encamped round about the town, which was enveloped in a thick darkness, but were at every point repulsed from it by an invisible and impassable barrier. The piece is too well known to need description, and it is hardly necessary to point out the skill of narrative by which this entirely incredible occurrence is rendered perfectly credible and even natural. Mrs. Oliphant possessed that art of circumstantial invention in which Swift, Defoe and Bunyan are the great masters. Like them she obtains a credibility for her narrative by presenting vividly through the narrative the

character of the narrator. There is no other man known to us in her books so distinctly as the Mayor of Semur, who draws up, as if officially, the *procès verbal* of the whole affair. Martin Dupin is just a good type of the French *bourgeois*—brave, homely, kindly, full of a sense of duty and of law's majesty, especially as incorporated in his own official person; Voltairian by temper and training, yet respectful to the amiable beliefs of others. He begins and ends the story of the exodus and the return. But in the meanwhile other narratives are included: the story told by Lecamus, the visionary, a living man, yet more at home among the dead than the living, to whom it was permitted to stay in the town and at last to come with a message from the dead to those who would not be convinced; the story of Madame Dupin, the Mayor's mother, who at his bidding turned her back upon her son, leaving him to head the watch outside the town, and herself took command of the strange regiment of women and children; and, chiefly, the narrative of Agnès Dupin, the Mayor's wife, one of those more spiritually minded women who saw as well as felt when the invisible hands pushed the population out of the gates. She saw what no man saw, what only some among the women could see—she saw her dead child.

There you have the key to it all. To certain men perhaps the dead are not dead; the wife of Lecamus comes back to him, and for a moment they have the joy of each other's presence: Mrs. Oliphant writes of this as if she believed it; but that the dead are to many mothers truly living is more than a belief with her; it is a kind of revelation. What she writes of again and again in all these fancies of the Unseen is the meeting and greeting between mother and child. The only blessedness that she can conceive of is something like the highest blessedness that she knew in this world, but perfected and completed. Writing in her sketch of her life about the days when anxieties of all kinds were thickest, she sets this down:—

'Lately in my many sad musings, it has been brought very clearly before my mind how often all the horrible tension, the dread, the anxiety which there are no words strong enough to describe—which devoured me, but which I had to conceal often behind a smiling face—would yield in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of a voice, at the first look, into an ineffable ease and the overwhelming happiness of relief from pain, which is, I think, our highest human sensation, higher and more exquisite than any positive enjoyment in this world. It used to sweep over me like a wave, sometimes when I opened a door, sometimes in a letter—in all simple ways. I cannot



explain, but if this should ever come to the eye of any woman in the passion and agony of motherhood, she will more or less understand. I was thinking lately, or rather, as sometimes happens, there was suddenly presented to my mind, like a suggestion from some one else, the recollection of these ineffable happinesses, and it seemed to me that it meant that which would be when one pushed through that last door and was met—oh, by what, by whom?—by instant relief. The wave of sudden ease and warmth and peace and joy! I felt, to tell the truth, that it was one of them who brought that to my mind, and I said to myself, “I will not want any explanation, I will not ask any question—the first touch, the first look, will be enough, as of old, yet better than of old.”

And because she was an artist this strong central pre-occupation of her life took shape in form of art. ‘The ‘Beleaguered City,’ which is, properly speaking, not a story but a poem, though it is pitched studiously in the key of prose, and touched often with a delicate humour, was the first work of her life which she wrote neither for amusement nor to make money, but because she was possessed by it. When it was in the doing she wrote to Blackwood about it: ‘It is very much enlarged and altered, you will ‘perceive. I have wasted a good deal of time upon it, which ‘is foolish, but the subject struck my fancy.’ Mr. Townsend, who knew her well, and has written in the ‘Cornhill ‘Magazine’ the keenest judgement of her life and work that we have seen, seems to be misled by this utterance, which says so little. But the habit of speaking lightly of her own work was native to her, and was of long standing; and where that habit is formed, the closer any piece of work lies to the heart of the artist, the harder it is to speak of. When Mrs. Oliphant said this to her publisher, she was saying, we are certain, as much as she could bring herself to say. It is the true *ειρωνεια*, that untranslatable word of the Greek. And to the end of her life—if these letters be representative—it was only of kindred productions that she cared to speak as if they concerned her. Stories of the unseen she could only write—as she expresses it herself—when they came to her; they were not written to order or for money.

‘The Beleaguered City’ was refused by Blackwood, and appeared in the ‘New Quarterly’ before it was issued in a volume. Two years later, in 1882, it was followed by ‘The ‘Open Door,’ a short story published anonymously in ‘Maga.’ This is nothing more than the story of a voice—not an apparition, but a voice—and of its effect upon various temperaments, told with extraordinary skill and knowledge of human nature. It argues no more than the belief that the dis-

embodied creature roams about familiar places, seeking to re-establish communication with the living, and may by an act of faith or submission, which is practically a recognition of God's parental love, find its way to peace. The story can be fitted into Mrs. Oliphant's theory—if that be the right word—of the unseen world, but it does not imply, much less express, that theory. Her first attempt to set into coherent form by the dramatic means most familiar to her hand the result of her ponderings on what death might mean, was made a few months later when she wrote 'The Little Pilgrim 'in the Unseen.' Here, for the first time, she tells us that she worked upon a definite suggestion given by her own experience: the death in sleep of a dear neighbour of hers, a very simple, almost childish, little old maid.

What she does in her story, if story it can be called, is to picture the awakening of this little woman after her painless death. It is a happy awakening, yet the pilgrim does not know what has happened; but, as Mrs. Oliphant gently imagines it, there are people set to receive the newcomer and explain. It is difficult to write of these things at all. One can only say that this woman creates with a beautiful and intimate familiarity the most human picture of heaven which is known to us. Whether it be heaven or not, whether it be a final state or an intervening one, she has no care to decide: but it is the state of the blessed after death. Her 'Little Pilgrim' is confronted at once when she awakens beyond the passing with thoughts of her past life: so it is always, as Mrs. Oliphant pictures the future. But she has in all her life done nothing but kindness, and she has left none behind her from whom it is an agony to part; so there is nothing in her mind but tenderness as she thinks of others. In her great tenderness she thinks of the friend she has left, and thus for the first time this unseen world is related directly to her who imagines it. As the Pilgrim is thinking 'what a pleasure it would be to make something clear that had been 'dark before to this friend,' there stands by her a maiden, with something in her look by which the Pilgrim divines that she was one who 'had come here as a child and had 'grown up in this celestial place.' And looking at her she recognises the likeness to 'the homely and troubled face 'of her friend.' That is how the mother pictures to herself her child in paradise, not as one who has become a stranger, but grown as she would have grown, only with a diviner growth, dwelling neither out of sight nor hearing of this world, but so near it that she recognises and welcomes her

mother's friend. Of all these writings this is, perhaps, the most beautiful; and its boldness is not less than its beauty. For the Little Pilgrim, being of those for whom no purgation is needed to fit her for a land where love is the only law, is taken to see great mysteries and is set upon high employments. In that country, as Mrs. Oliphant conceives it, there is no inequality, since there is no envy or rivalry, but there is endless diversity of gifts and of tasks; and each task is its own reward. The Little Pilgrim, when she has seen the tasks of others, is set to receive those who come in, and their awakening is not always gentle like hers; some are in terror, some strange and doubting, and they are sent on different ways. Those different ways Mrs. Oliphant has elsewhere tracked out; but when she wrote this book she was happy and thinking only of those whom she could not conceive as other than blessed.

The next of her stories in this kind was also suggested to her by the personality of a friend who, beautiful in her youth, remained beautiful and courted in extreme old age. 'Old Lady Mary' is one of the finest short stories in the language. The picture of the old lady, with her delicacy and her beauty, her soft shawls and laces, the soft rustle of her dress, and all her daintinesses, is presented to the eye in a way that Gainsborough or Reynolds could not have surpassed in paint; and by a wonderful subtlety of suggestion it is shown how one whose life has run all on velvet and never so smoothly as towards the close, may come almost to disbelieve in death, till she neglects even to provide for the future of the girl companion whom she loves. Lady Mary dies quietly in her sleep, and she also awakens with a sense of wonder, and is set to contemplate her life. Then there rises up this awful thing she has done: for a jest, merely to show her lawyer, who has always urged her to make her will, that she can manage everything quite well for herself, she has made her will secretly and hidden it, meaning to surprise him with it some day. No one knows that it exists, and for want of it her godchild must be a beggar; and she cries out for means to set it right. That is why she comes back to the world as a ghost, invisible among those she loves, but hearing the hard things that are said of her, and powerless to put the wrong right, or to assure her child that it was through no lack of love. At last, but after long bitterness, love breaks through the barrier; Lady Mary does not achieve her purpose, for the will is only discovered by a chance, but she sees her godchild for a moment face to face through the

veil, and knows that love has never doubted of her. The other three writings which have to be mentioned are not so perfect as works of invention, but in some ways of keener interest. 'The Land of Darkness,' published in 1888, is a complement to 'The Little Pilgrim,' where Mrs. Oliphant has sketched such an Inferno as her imagination permitted her to conceive: a hell where no one is kept but by his own unsubmitted will. There are stages in this Inferno, the city of lawless men, the city of dreadful law, the city of unrelenting pleasure, the city of soulless art; but from all these a way of escape, difficult indeed, and terrible, but not impassable, lay always open over the Dark Mountains; and the last chapter in the book describes the ascent as seen from above by the watchers on the mountains, to whom it is appointed as their task in heaven, to sit in towers on the outposts and signal the approach of each wanderer coming, and to hope that at last it may prove to be the one for whom they wait, and whom they shall accompany homeward, leaving their post to some new watcher awaiting some other wanderer.

The iron had gone deep in her woman's heart when she wrote. Her eldest son, Cyril—whom she loved with that passion that a woman gives most to those who give love but also give pain—had long harassed her life with his failings, and the failure of his health made the end inevitable. Yet when it came, the shock was appalling. 'I am like stone,' she writes, but not torpid; her only refuge was in work, and her mind was always 'quicken'd into intolerable life by 'calamity.' For another four years she nursed her one remaining child, living in his life, and regaining even cheerfulness. But in October 1894 her Cecco also died. 'He is gone from me,' she cries, 'my last and dearest, and I am left here a desolate woman with the strength of a giant in me, and may live for years and years.' Her happiness that had survived so many blows now lay dead in her, and for a moment it seemed as if her energy was dead too. She could not even work. But she rallied and found some comfort in her sorrow in writing the beautiful paper called 'Fancies of a Believer.' Here she sets out with an imagination strangely logical the groundwork of all her conception of what lies beyond the grave. These are what she calls her 'fancies,' yet to the imaginative mind imagination is not less real than belief; they are the outcome of a mind which, born 'in an age at once more believing and more unbelieving than many of the ages that have preceded it,' was one 'whose

'nature it is to believe rather than to doubt.' And thus accepting the general framework of Christianity and the outline of the material universe as science shows it, she seeks some answer to the perpetual question—the riddle of the painful world. Believing in God and a loving God, she sees in the world a great experiment created for God's glory and the delight of the angels. She has the feeling inalienable from the human race that, whatever other worlds may whirl in space, this one has a special and high significance. She conceives of it as offering to a universe, where law reigns absolutely, the spectacle of one world in which there is the power to choose evil, and as showing to the angels a glory of creatures in so many ways infinitely inferior to them, 'but in this for ever greater than they, that, having the gift of free will and choice, they chose for God.' There are limits set to the power to choose. 'This is not a consistent world any more than it is a just one.' But God does not take back His gift; and the Land of Darkness which she has pictured is a land of men exiled from God's intervention, and left merely to the devices of their own heart, yet for ever endowed with the power to remember and turn to God and to love. A beautiful passage in that book describes the pleading of the angels with man before the judgement seat of his own soul; while all that God will do is, not to take back His gift, but standing face to face with the soul sometimes to remove it from the consequence of its own acts and set the created thing to a new start in a new career. Thus what seems cruelty, and is cruel to those who love, may be kindness to the one cut off; and she comforts herself with a fancy of Christ's special companionship made up by young men, like Himself cut off in their prime; some of them, perhaps, defeated in this world, with no blazon on their shields, but set to a new hope and new life in the same service.

The last remaining of these pieces, 'The Land of Suspense,' is surely one of the strangest things ever written: a mother's vision of the punishment meted to her first-born son. It is a gentle doom yet a stern one; she pictures him as living in a beautiful land peopled only by voices, for there dwell those, like himself, who keep the consciousness of their bodily selves and bodily members, but are to themselves and to each other invisible though able to converse. In a city of that land which stands with open, but impassable, gates, his father waits for him in the

transfigured shape, and knows his coming, but sorrows that it should be in this manner; and the young man puts from him the offered consolation and rebels in his heart till at last he sees his brother, too, coming by the way he came, but coming with his man's shape, and, then, for the first time he rises beyond his own self, and thinks for the mother left desolate; and so in his agony and prayer for her he finds the way for himself. The answer to his prayer for his mother is the end of punishment for himself; that is how the desolate woman consoled herself with thoughts that her own sorrow might work out her son's deliverance. Yet the last word of all is in its pathos almost unbearable: 'As for the prayer which he made, and which was answered in a way which he asked not, it is still unfulfilled; yet they know it is not forgotten, for nothing is forgotten before God.'

So she wrote in her faith; and the words will stir in many that faith in the faith of others which lives often when faith itself is dead or withered or torpid. Motherhood was the soul of her life; it was the hindrance, as we hold, to high achievement in the way of art which she chose in the outset; it was the inspiration of the wisest and most beautiful things that she wrote, things than which few have been written in her lifetime wiser or more beautiful. It made of her life the tragedy of happiness, but bestowed upon her memory a noble and tragic beauty.