

CHAPTER II

MY BIRTHPLACE

MY parents had resided at various Highland places during the summer and autumn months, returning punctually to their winter quarters at Portobello as the days shortened, for a period of ten years, before I, their youngest daughter and seventh child, was born.

So far, I have put down only what came to me from highways and byways of their early married life ; but only a short time elapsed between my being ushered into the world, on the 17th of April 1845, and my beginning to "take notice," as nurses say, for myself—the art of putting two and two together being speedily acquired. Looking backward, moreover, it is not difficult to fit in the pieces that may have then been missing, and a tolerably clear map of the past unfolds itself before my eyes.

It was maintained by my mother, and the saying was backed up by my nurse (the "Mistress Aitken" afore mentioned), that at four years old I could read with ease. They also alleged that on urging this as a reproach and incentive to a younger brother not so far advanced, they were silenced by the sturdy retort, "Girls reads ; boys doesn't" ; which, we will hope, settled the matter. I have no recollection of it.

That at seven I read with avidity is certain, for some of the books given me at that age created impressions never effaced in after years, and even now I can quote passages

from them and behold in my mind's eye the scenes depicted in their pages. *Ministering Children* affected me greatly, and is a volume I should like to see in every child's hand. *The Little Duke*, to my view incomparably the best of Miss Charlotte Yonge's many and popular tales, was a still greater favourite. I possess still the old worn copy, and would fain see it reproduced in that, the original edition, with its large print, broad margins, and excellent paragraphing: I fancy the story of young Richard the Fearless, with his thrilling adventures at the unfriendly Court of France, and his escape therefrom concealed in a bundle of straw, would still find delighted readers, if such were the case.

Of Miss Yonge's other writings—dare I confess it?—even as a little girl, I was no great admirer,—though I have since learned to appreciate *Heartsease*, a tale full of human interest on a quiet level; but *The Little Duke* is perfect: there is not a false touch in it.

Next followed a gem of another kind, the evergreen *Struwelpeter*—so green and so fresh after all these years have come and gone, that one still meets it in the same guise in which it first rejoiced the hearts of countless small denizens of the schoolroom.

Is it not a sign that whatever is good of its kind *endures*, that elderly men and women of to-day, finding themselves in sympathy over *Shock-headed Peter* and *Augustus was a Chubby Lad*, will wax excited to the point of shouting line after line; while if one stumbles or hesitates for an instant, the other dashes triumphantly in, and stops only with the dire catastrophe at the close?

There was another book, a German book; but, alas! it had no particular name, and I have never been able to procure a copy since I lost my own. If anyone who reads these pages and remembers *Dame Mitchell and her Cat*,

Prince Hempseed and his animals, Rol, the cruel footman (whose punishment was to drink tumblers of water till he burst)—and, above all, dear, delightful Godpapa Drosselmeyer, and Princess Perlipita, and the army of rats, and the land of sweet cakes—if anyone, I say, could and would tell me if that never-to-be-forgotten book is anywhere to be had, I should be grateful indeed.

How young I was when *Holiday House* was first put into my hands, I do not know; but *Holiday House* and its author deserve more than a passing recognition, since the latter, Miss Catherine Sinclair, was my father's aunt, and figured largely on our childish canvas, as did the whole of her well-known and gifted family.

They did everything, went everywhere, and knew everybody—or so we believed. Their father—my great-grandfather—was that Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster whose portrait is one of Raeburn's masterpieces; and some at least of his sons and daughters inherited his singular beauty of person, though he did his best to rob them of it, if report be true. It was said at the time, and I have heard it repeated since, that having had several of his daughters inoculated for smallpox, and being dismayed at the result—for some were marked for life—he urged upon the doctor to *skin their faces*, and was furious at a refusal.

My own father would chuckle over this. "He wanted to flay them alive," he would say.

Among the unfortunates whose looks were thus ruined was my aunt Catherine, the authoress—and I believe she felt it keenly, though her talents afterwards gained for her considerable reputation, and her charm of manner and witty conversation made her an universal favourite.

She principally wrote novels. Her half-sister, Lady Colquhoun, gave to the world a series of feeble, religious booklets, which went down, as books of that sort did then,

fairly well ; but Catherine boldly struck out into the realms of fiction, and conveyed a moral—always a moral—so subtly, beneath vivid descriptions of fashionable life and pages of racy dialogue, that they had a real and far-reaching success.

To what extent *Modern Accomplishments* and *Modern Flirtations* would appeal to the present generation, it is perhaps as well not to inquire ; but we, of another, loved them and pored over them ; while *Beatrice*, the most ambitious and ingenious, had a special hold on our imaginations because of its being, as we learnt with awe, “founded on fact.”

Holiday House was indeed also founded on fact—or facts—but that was a different thing. “Harry and Laura” might be Archie and Catherine Sinclair (the author and her brother), and the deer-park at Rossdhu the scene of the supposititious Lord Rossville’s flight from the bull—while Laura’s starched frock?—we drew from my great-aunt’s own lips the history of that thrilling misadventure which happened to herself ; but the realism of these simple episodes was one thing, and that of the mysterious depths of *Beatrice* another. On the latter, however, I need not enter.

Sir John Sinclair was said to have jocularly asserted that he had “six-and-thirty feet of daughters”—which, being interpreted, meant that he had six, all six feet high.

The remark is legendary, and much more likely to have been said for a parent given to *bons mots*, than by him ; but certainly the Sinclair ladies, as well as their brothers, were, as Pet Marjorie might have had it, “more than usual” tall. We could always detect the corkscrewy figures of the two old gentlemen as they grew into old gentlemen, among any number of people ; and our aunt’s bonnets towered high above the crowds in Princes Street, or George Street.

Moreover, there was a piece of pavement in front of

their Edinburgh house, which Sir John had caused to be paved with immense slabs brought from his own lands in Caithness, and did not some wag christen that piece "The Giants' Causeway"? And did not the name stick?

Yes, they were very tall—very large altogether, but at the same time handsome—nay, some of them were beautiful. Julia, Countess of Glasgow, was the belle of the family; and how lovely we children thought her when she came to dine at the Portobello house, robed in pale blue velvet, which showed off to perfection the milky fairness of her neck and shoulders, and with plenty of diamonds in her hair and bosom! After her widowhood, Lady Glasgow was irresistibly drawn back to the lively house in George Street, which was doubtless a contrast to a dull dowager residence in the country, and she regularly took up her abode there every winter, going on to London in the spring, accompanied by her sister Catherine. My father used to laugh a little at the coalition; hinting that the handsome Julia, for all her looks and her diamonds, would never have collected such fine company as she did in Chesham Place, but for the wit and wisdom of poor, plain, pockmarked Catherine. "She can *talk*—and that's the thing," he would aver. "Catherine keeps a whole table going."

N.B.—He said "Catherine," because the second family of the Sinclairs were his own contemporaries, and it was reserved for his children to call them uncles and aunts.

Sir John Sinclair was dead, and his bones laid beneath a grey tombstone in Holyrood Chapel, before I can remember; but his unmarried sons and daughters continued for long to reside at "133 George Street," and to make it a centre of Edinburgh society.

They loved entertaining, and carried to a high pitch the art of entertaining *well*. Also they adored impromptu, and loved especially to show impromptu hospitality. Albeit an

affectionate family, they rarely sat down to dinner by themselves ; they wanted someone from without—someone to warm up their powers of conversation—notably someone on whom a *pun* would not be wasted. I am ashamed to say that these really clever talkers were sadly given to puns ; and the story went that, in place of having the tendency checked in childhood, it had been fostered by the promise of half-a-crown for every good pun proved to be original. Now, a good pun is the worst kind of pun. Any other pun might be borne, but our uncle Alexander Sinclair's puns made his audience wince.

Besides his partiality for this cheap form of wit—if wit it can be called—Sir John had other naïve fancies, one being for framing aphorisms which his children were expected to appreciate, but which they were not always in a position to profit by. I suspect that there are not a few young people to whom the following will come home, even as it did to my brothers and sisters and me when it was handed down to us.

It chanced that our great-grandfather was in need of a shilling to complete a cab-fare, and applied to his eldest son, a schoolboy, who had to confess his inability to produce the coin. However, it came from somewhere, and Sir John, with portentous solemnity, proceeded to improve the occasion. He leaned on his stick, and thus addressed the delinquent in slow, emphatic, measured accents :

“ Archie—in future, Archie—recollect that—a gentleman—*should always—have change in his pocket.*”

“ But where the change was to come from was quite another pair of boots,” my father added, when telling the tale ; “ not out of *his* pocket, you may be very well assured. He was a regular screw to them all.”

I once heard another old gentleman deliver himself of a rebuke and an aphorism which brought this old memory up before me.

It chanced that I was at a country railway-station when the late Earl of Mansfield, a very high and mighty grandee, appeared, accompanied by a youthful grandson, who was all attention to his venerable relative, whom he had been deputed to see off by the train.

Servants and luggage had gone on by a preceding train, and so it came to pass that when the old lord had seated himself in his corner seat, and suddenly discovered that he had no morning paper, there was no one to scold for omitting to bring it, and no one—yes, there was : the long-limbed lad was off like a shot to the bookstall.

In half a minute he was flying back at the top of his speed, breathless but triumphant. What was his reward? Pleasure, gratitude? Lord Mansfield scowled as he took the paper. Note, he took it; but all he said to the donor was : “Edward—recollect, Edward—that *a gentleman should never hurry himself in public.*”

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The talk round the dinner-table of the old George Street house must often have been stimulating, even brilliant. Edinburgh was in its intellectual zenith at the time, and attracted savants and wits of all nationalities. The Sinclairs were not content with having an enviable circle of friends and acquaintances, they were for ever on the lookout to add to it; and it was expected of each brother and sister by the rest, that he or she should do his or her part. Next to Catherine, whose literary reputation opened for her every door, the brothers Archie and Alexander had the most opportunities; and my father used to say that it was their first business every morning on entering the New Club, to ascertain if any person of note, any distinguished stranger or foreigner, had appeared on the scene—then obtain an introduction, and ask him to dinner on the spot!

And very well pleased that distinguished personage would be to go, no doubt. He would find hosts, accomplished and cultivated in themselves, and surrounded by agreeable people—occasionally by scions of royal houses—or again of scientific or intellectual eminence.

“Every second person at table was a celebrity!” exclaimed a young American, on one occasion—“and I was only invited a few hours before!” But such a *tour-de-force* was easy for a Sinclair, with resources at command and energy to grasp the situation.

Those who have experienced the cordial and courteous hospitality of the Chapter House, St Paul’s Cathedral, at the present time, will easily perceive whence the Archdeacon of London inherits his delightful gift. Well pleased indeed would his venerable uncles and aunts have been, had they lived to see the traditions of their house so ably carried out.

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The family of Sinclair was, however, under a shadow about the date of my birth, owing to the demise of the eldest sister, my grandmother. Lady Colquhoun had been a widow for some years, during which she had headed her eldest son’s household; but as he married in 1843 Miss Jane Abercromby, daughter of Sir Robert Abercromby of Forglen, she retired from the scene—to return only too quickly, however, for the young wife died at the birth of her first-born child, a son and heir. The little boy, delicate, and difficult to rear, was the supreme object of his grandmother’s care, and must have cost her many anxious hours—as I gather from her letters written to various members of the family, and now in my possession; doubtless she would have been surprised could she have known he would live to be over sixty. He succeeded his father in 1874, and died in 1907.

To return. "The good Lady Colquhoun" being taken to her rest, it behoved her two daughters, who were her literary executors, to have her Memoirs written; and will it be believed that the person they pitched upon for the task had never seen its subject?

But he was a clergyman—or rather a minister—and a Free Kirk minister to boot; and her ladyship, with all her family then resident at home (save and except her eldest son), had "seceded" in the "Disruption." In addition, Dr Hamilton was a writer of religious literature, and bore a high reputation among "devout and honourable women." The ladies were confident that he would do every justice to their mother's memory.

Nor were they disappointed. There was a certain poetic vein in all Dr Hamilton's writings which took greatly with the public; and probably his present task appealed to his imagination, for he gave it full rein in passages which, though too flowery and sentimental for the present taste, are not without merit. The book was also well illustrated, and excellently printed.

In consequence, it flew over Scotland like wildfire; soon there was not a house with any pretensions to piety or culture which did not boast a copy; the daughters were enchanted—and only my father raised a discordant note.

Whether he did so at the time or not, of course, I cannot say, though I believe there was some coolness between him and his sisters, for a whisper of it reached my ears later; but it was reserved for his own fireside to hear his real opinion, as I have often heard it, after arriving at years of discretion.

"*That* my mother! Why, he makes her out a perfect saint! You would think she was a sort of angel! And she was nothing of the kind; she was only a cheerful, sensible creature, with a kind heart and a very good temper.

Of course she was a religious woman, no one could doubt that ; and did her duty, and made a wonderful wife to a rather tiresome husband." (If this candour shocks anybody, I beg them to understand that it was simply due to my father's extreme and innate truthfulness, which made him revolt against the extravagant and, as he conceived it, artificial attitude enforced on children towards their parents in the days of his own youth.) "I always used to admire the way in which she listened to and laughed at all his old stories, told over and over again," my father would continue ; "he would address himself to her ; and as soon as she saw he was nearing the point, her laugh rang out and led the rest. She never failed him. But Hamilton's idea of her ? I wonder now what he would have thought of this ? I have known my mother rise up and leave her seat in church, a great Edinburgh church, right in the middle of one of Chalmers's finest perorations,—and away she would go, sailing down the aisle to the door, with a whisper to a friend as she passed, 'It's getting near Sir James's dinner-hour.'"

Sir James's dinner-hour, everyone's dinner-hour, at that time was five o'clock ; and though we had passed the period when only a tray with cakes and fruit and wine was brought in as a stop-gap, luncheons were light and were often dispensed with by the hardy and strong. My father never touched a morsel between breakfast and dinner until he was well past middle age, when he so far yielded to entreaties as to partake of a "hunk" of cake and a bunch of grapes, and these in their turn yielded in old age to a bowl of soup.

By then, I must add, the dinner-hour had also advanced, as we all know—but our home was always one of the last to move with the times.

My mother had, however, a fancy of her own ; she did

not like that friends and relations who had driven down to Portobello from Edinburgh, or in from some place in the surrounding country, perhaps many miles away, should come and go without experiencing any kind of hospitality, and accordingly instituted—I had almost said “invented”—offering them coffee—coffee, not tea,—and the coffee was of a quality to satisfy the most epicurean taste. This I have often been told since, and also that it was accompanied by cake and biscuits, so that it must really have been a precursor of the afternoon-tea of to-day.

When that popular institution could no longer be warded off, the men—yes, the men—began it in Edinburgh. It was the judges in the law-courts who first succumbed to “Kettledrum”; and a certain Lord Benholme, a dear and intimate friend of my parents, was, if I mistake not, the first to fall. He described once in my hearing the pleasures of that cup of tea secretly partaken of in the robing-room, after a long and arduous sitting; and one can fancy how the witty Lord Neaves shone on such an occasion. A cup of good tea is one of the most inspiring of stimulants.

Dinner being then so early, and luncheon so quickly disposed of—while it did not exist for my father,—he was free to be off betimes on his afternoon walk, which, during the months he resided at Portobello, was the substitute for tramps “o’er crag and corrie, flood and fell” at other seasons of the year. As soon as a child was old enough, he or she was permitted, nay, desired to join in long, leisurely rounds by Duddingston Loch, Craigmillar Castle, or the quaint little seaports of Joppa and Musselburgh; and as quite little creatures we trotted happily along, for it is amazing what staying power a healthy child possesses, provided the pace is adapted to its requirements.

Then our father entertained us. He was never dull; never morosely sunk in his own thoughts. On the contrary,

he would talk, talk, talk the whole time, and that without ever boring or wearying his audience.

Nor did he talk *down* to us—a practice abhorred of children; whatever his theme was, he discoursed on it as naturally and unguardedly as though among his own familiars; and often, I know, we would giggle to each other in the supreme delight of hearing stories of his youth, of his tutors, of his brothers, sisters, and even parents, which a more cautious, possibly a more prudent spokesman would have kept to himself.

After years of experience we got to know tolerably well the subjects which would afford us the best amusement, and would turn on one of these as easily as a tap. He would perhaps offer a feeble protest: "Hoots, you've heard that often enough"; but a few adroit leading questions soon set him off, and the only interruption would be from his attention being arrested by some sight or sound in Nature, for which he always kept eyes and ears on the alert.

"See, what's that?" He would stop dead, and point with his stick. It would be the first swallow of the spring skimming over the water of some lakelet.

Or he would suddenly break off short, head on one side, as a warble descended from the Salisbury Crags, and immediately we were instructed how to distinguish the note of a lark from that of a thrush, a blackbird, or a wheat-ear.

Then there was the hedge in a sunny lane between Duddingston and Craigmillar—the hedge that was so extraordinarily in advance of its kind that it put forth tiny shoots of green in February or even earlier, for during one very mild winter I have distinct recollection of seeing it in full leaf during the last week of January! We always called it "The Hedge"; and I believe that on the occasion I refer to, my father wrote to some paper an account of "The Hedge's" prowess.

Even if sometimes not over well disposed to start on these walks—and girls and boys do have their own fancies—we were sure to come home in good spirits. On the homeward way, moreover, a small voice might occasionally be heard in petition. A few pennies would buy us a goodly packet of brown sugar to make toffee, and we had the first authority in Europe for asserting that toffee was good for us. How was this? Sir James Simpson, the famous physician, though not yet “Sir” James, was beginning to make the name which was afterwards to ring so far and wide,—and my parents were among the first to divine his greatness. He attended my mother in all her serious illnesses; and one day on leaving her room at Portobello his nostrils were assailed by a powerful and delicious odour. He snuffed it up, and pronounced without hesitation, “I smell toffee. Toffee’s very wholesome.” Do I need to add that the enchanted toffee-makers surrounded their enlightened friend and protector like a swarm of bees; that he had more of the hot savoury condiment pressed upon him than he knew what to do with; and that his dictum was our joy and bulwark forever after?

Dear little fat “Simmy”; we owed him much—apart from toffee. He was never too grand nor too busy to attend us in our childish ailments, confident that he would not have been sent for if another would have done; and when I was eleven years old one of these summonses was despatched on my behalf. I had an abscess in both ears, contracted from bathing in the sea too late in the season, and had been hurried into Edinburgh from Oban by my anxious parents. The abscesses were frightfully painful, and also rendered me almost stone deaf. Part of the journey was made by steamboat, and I lay in my berth still as a stone, when a hoarse, tremulous whisper in my ear, “Dearie—dearie, *are ye deid*, dearie?” made me laugh even then. It

was only the well-beloved Aiky, our nurse ; but a few hours later when I again woke to consciousness there was a sense of something warm, soft, heavy and suffocatingly close, hanging over me. It was " Simmy " putting on leeches !

It was the middle of the night, but he had come, as I learned afterwards, on the instant ; and as the little patient was sleeping, he proceeded to apply his leeches without waking her ; finally forgetting his proportions in the ardour of his task, he well-nigh smothered the poor little unresisting body. But he brought her through.

I remained deaf for a month or more, but subsequently quite recovered my hearing, and mention this as it may encourage others suffering for a time in like manner from a like cause.

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In later years I went occasionally with my mother to Dr Simpson's well-known breakfasts, this being the only meal at which he ever received, or, as some said, " sat down." And it was not always he was there ! On the contrary, an assemblage would have gathered, ushered straight into the breakfast-room as they came—and there would be no host to receive them ! They would be people of many kinds and nationalities ; occasionally one could not but surmise that they bore names not unknown to fame, but as no member of the Simpson family was present to act as intermediary, nothing could pass but polite interchanges of civility between strangers, or snatches of subdued conversation among such as belonged to the same party.

All would be eating and drinking with a sense of disappointment : the busy man, whose moments were precious, would be frowning ; the nervous lady, whose fears had sent her flying from her bed at this unearthly hour, would be trembling,—when on a sudden a carriage would dash to the

door, there would be a general cry of "There he is!" and all would be on their feet.

Then some to the window, among them myself; well, and what do we see? The very short, very broad, very great little figure, enveloped in its familiar sealskin coat, waddling across the pavement. We turn to fix our eyes on the door of our room. It opens, and there he stands, he of whom it has been said that some beholding his noble, his sublime countenance have thought it was the face of an angel!

He has been travelling all night: he has come from London—from Paris—from St Petersburg; it matters not from where,—he makes nothing of it, has no intention of secluding himself, is delighted to see so many kind friends, and goes round the table with warm and cordial greetings.

He pours out his own coffee—says the servants never give him enough milk; and chats of this and that in an easy, natural, unaffected manner, while never for a moment usurping the general attention.

With consummate tact he contrives to make known to each other people who he considers will be congenial. He is as leisurely over this delayed meal and as free to enjoy it socially, as though he had all the day before him; but at length there is a pause, and those who out of consideration are willing to postpone their coveted interview, withdraw. They will look in another day.

The rest are seen immediately, each in turn; and often it is a long, close, searching cross-examination the patient has to go through; and when the last is gone, the real labours of the day are only supposed to be beginning in the plain, undistinguished, world-known house in Queen Street, in which *chloroform* was first given and taken.