

Chapter V.

In the career of the most unliterary of writers, in the sense that literary ambition had never entered the world of his imagination, the coming into existence of the first book is quite an inexplicable event. In my own case I cannot trace it back to any mental or psychological cause which one could point out and hold to. The greatest of my gifts being a consummate capacity for doing nothing, I cannot even point to boredom as a rational stimulus for taking up a pen. The pen at any rate was there, and there is nothing wonderful in that. Everybody keeps a pen (the cold steel of our days) in his rooms in this enlightened age of penny stamps and halfpenny postcards. In fact, this was the epoch when by means of postcard and pen Mr. Gladstone had made the reputation of a novel or two. And I too had a pen rolling about somewhere--the seldom-used, the reluctantly-taken-up pen of a sailor ashore, the pen rugged with the dried ink of abandoned attempts, of answers delayed longer than decency permitted, of letters begun with infinite reluctance and put off suddenly till next day--till next week as likely as not! The neglected, uncared-for pen, flung away at the slightest provocation, and under the stress of dire necessity hunted for without enthusiasm, in a perfunctory, grumpy worry, in the "Where the devil is the beastly thing gone to?" ungracious spirit. Where indeed! It might have been reposing behind the sofa for a day or so. My landlady's anaemic daughter (as Ollendorff would have expressed it), though commendably neat, had a lordly, careless manner of approaching her domestic duties. Or it might even be resting delicately poised on its point by the side of the table-leg, and when picked up show a gaping, inefficient beak which would have discouraged any man of literary instincts. But not me! "Never mind. This will do."

O days without guile! If anybody had told me then that a devoted household, having a generally exaggerated idea of my talents and importance, would be put into a state of tremor and flurry by the fuss I would make because of a suspicion that somebody had touched my sacrosanct pen of authorship, I would have never deigned as much as the contemptuous smile of unbelief. There are imaginings too unlikely for any kind of notice, too wild for indulgence itself, too absurd for a smile. Perhaps, had that seer of the future been a friend, I should have been secretly saddened. "Alas!" I would have thought, looking at him with an unmoved face, "the poor fellow is going mad."

I would have been, without doubt, saddened; for in this world where the journalists read the signs of the sky, and the wind of heaven itself, blowing where it listeth, does so under the prophetic management of the Meteorological Office, but where the secret of human hearts cannot be captured either by prying or praying, it was infinitely more likely that the sanest of my friends should nurse

the germ of incipient madness than that I should turn into a writer of tales.

To survey with wonder the changes of one's own self is a fascinating pursuit for idle hours. The field is so wide, the surprises so varied, the subject so full of unprofitable but curious hints as to the work of unseen forces, that one does not weary easily of it. I am not speaking here of megalomaniacs who rest uneasy under the crown of their unbounded conceit--who really never rest in this world, and when out of it go on fretting and fuming on the straitened circumstances of their last habitation, where all men must lie in obscure equality. Neither am I thinking of those ambitious minds who, always looking forward to some aim of aggrandisement, can spare no time for a detached, impersonal glance upon themselves.

And that's a pity. They are unlucky. These two kinds, together with the much larger band of the totally unimaginative, of those unfortunate beings in whose empty and unseeing gaze (as a great French writer has put it) "the whole universe vanishes into blank nothingness," miss, perhaps, the true task of us men whose day is short on this earth, the abode of conflicting opinions. The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all. I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular: a spectacle for awe, love, adoration, or hate, if you like, but in this view--and in this view alone--never for despair! Those visions, delicious or poignant, are a moral end in themselves. The rest is our affair--the laughter, the tears, the tenderness, the indignation, the high tranquillity of a steeled heart, the detached curiosity of a subtle mind--that's our affair! And the unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness may be our appointed task on this earth. A task in which fate has perhaps engaged nothing of us except our conscience, gifted with a voice in order to bear true testimony to the visible wonder, the haunting terror, the infinite passion and the illimitable serenity; to the supreme law and the abiding mystery of the sublime spectacle.

Chi lo sa? It may be true. In this view there is room for every religion except for the inverted creed of impiety, the mask and cloak of arid despair; for every joy and every sorrow, for every fair dream, for every charitable hope. The great aim is to remain true to the emotions called out of the deep encircled by the firmament of stars, whose infinite numbers and awful distances may move us to laughter or tears (was it the Walrus or the Carpenter, in the poem, who "wept to see such quantities of sand"?), or, again, to a properly steeled heart, may matter nothing at all.

The casual quotation, which had suggested itself out of a poem full of merit, leads

me to remark that in the conception of a purely spectacular universe, where inspiration of every sort has a rational existence, the artist of every kind finds a natural place; and amongst them the poet as the seer par excellence. Even the writer of prose, who in his less noble and more toilsome task should be a man with the steeled heart, is worthy of a place, providing he looks on with undimmed eyes and keeps laughter out of his voice, let who will laugh or cry. Yes! Even he, the prose artist of fiction, which after all is but truth often dragged out of a well and clothed in the painted robe of imaged phrases--even he has his place amongst kings, demagogues, priests, charlatans, dukes, giraffes, Cabinet Ministers, Fabians, bricklayers, apostles, ants, scientists, Kaffirs, soldiers, sailors, elephants, lawyers, dandies, microbes and constellations of a universe whose amazing spectacle is a moral end in itself.

Here I perceive (speaking without offence) the reader assuming a subtle expression, as if the cat were out of the bag. I take the novelist's freedom to observe the reader's mind formulating the exclamation, "That's it! The fellow talks pro domo."

Indeed it was not the intention! When I shouldered the bag I was not aware of the cat inside. But, after all, why not? The fair courtyards of the House of Art are thronged by many humble retainers. And there is no retainer so devoted as he who is allowed to sit on the doorstep. The fellows who have got inside are apt to think too much of themselves. This last remark, I beg to state, is not malicious within the definition of the law of libel. It's fair comment on a matter of public interest. But never mind. Pro domo. So be it. For his house tant que vous voudrez. And yet in truth I was by no means anxious to justify my existence. The attempt would have been not only needless and absurd, but almost inconceivable, in a purely spectacular universe, where no such disagreeable necessity can possibly arise. It is sufficient for me to say (and I am saying it at some length in these pages): "J'ai vecu." I have existed, obscure amongst the wonders and terrors of my time, as the Abbe Sieyes, the original utterer of the quoted words, had managed to exist through the violences, the crimes, and the enthusiasms of the French Revolution. "J'ai vecu", as I apprehend most of us manage to exist, missing all along the varied forms of destruction by a hair's-breadth, saving my body, that's clear, and perhaps my soul also, but not without some damage here and there to the fine edge of my conscience, that heirloom of the ages, of the race, of the group, of the family, colourable and plastic, fashioned by the words, the looks, the acts, and even by the silences and abstentions surrounding one's childhood; tinged in a complete scheme of delicate shades and crude colours by the inherited traditions, beliefs, or prejudices--unaccountable, despotic, persuasive, and often, in its texture, romantic.

And often romantic! . . . The matter in hand, however, is to keep these

reminiscences from turning into confessions, a form of literary activity discredited by Jean Jacques Rousseau on account of the extreme thoroughness he brought to the work of justifying his own existence; for that such was his purpose is palpably, even grossly, visible to an unprejudiced eye. But then, you see, the man was not a writer of fiction. He was an artless moralist, as is clearly demonstrated by his anniversaries being celebrated with marked emphasis by the heirs of the French Revolution, which was not a political movement at all, but a great outburst of morality. He had no imagination, as the most casual perusal of "Emile" will prove. He was no novelist, whose first virtue is the exact understanding of the limits traced by the reality of his time to the play of his invention. Inspiration comes from the earth, which has a past, a history, a future, not from the cold and immutable heaven. A writer of imaginative prose (even more than any other sort of artist) stands confessed in his works. His conscience, his deeper sense of things, lawful and unlawful, gives him his attitude before the world. Indeed, every one who puts pen to paper for the reading of strangers (unless a moralist, who, generally speaking, has no conscience except the one he is at pains to produce for the use of others) can speak of nothing else. It is M. Anatole France, the most eloquent and just of French prose writers, who says that we must recognise at last that, "failing the resolution to hold our peace, we can only talk of ourselves."

This remark, if I remember rightly, was made in the course of a sparring match with the late Ferdinand Brunetiere over the principles and rules of literary criticism. As was fitting for a man to whom we owe the memorable saying, "The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his soul amongst masterpieces," M. Anatole France maintained that there were no rules and no principles. And that may be very true. Rules, principles and standards die and vanish every day. Perhaps they are all dead and vanished by this time. These, if ever, are the brave, free days of destroyed landmarks, while the ingenious minds are busy inventing the forms of the new beacons which, it is consoling to think, will be set up presently in the old places. But what is interesting to a writer is the possession of an inward certitude that literary criticism will never die, for man (so variously defined) is, before everything else, a critical animal. And, as long as distinguished minds are ready to treat it in the spirit of high adventure, literary criticism shall appeal to us with all the charm and wisdom of a well-told tale of personal experience.

For Englishmen especially, of all the races of the earth, a task, any task, undertaken in an adventurous spirit acquires the merit of romance. But the critics as a rule exhibit but little of an adventurous spirit. They take risks, of course--one can hardly live without that. The daily bread is served out to us (however sparingly) with a pinch of salt. Otherwise one would get sick of the diet one prays for, and that would be not only improper, but impious. From impiety of

that or any other kind--save us! An ideal of reserved manner, adhered to from a sense of proprieties, from shyness, perhaps, or caution, or simply from weariness, induces, I suspect, some writers of criticism to conceal the adventurous side of their calling, and then the criticism becomes a mere "notice," as it were the relation of a journey where nothing but the distances and the geology of a new country should be set down; the glimpses of strange beasts, the dangers of flood and field, the hair's-breadth escapes, and the sufferings (oh, the sufferings too! I have no doubt of the sufferings) of the traveller being carefully kept out; no shady spot, no fruitful plant being ever mentioned either; so that the whole performance looks like a mere feat of agility on the part of a trained pen running in a desert. A cruel spectacle--a most deplorable adventure. "Life," in the words of an immortal thinker of, I should say, bucolic origin, but whose perishable name is lost to the worship of posterity--"life is not all beer and skittles." Neither is the writing of novels. It isn't really. Je vous donne ma parole d'honneur that it--is--not. Not all. I am thus emphatic because some years ago, I remember, the daughter of a general. . .

Sudden revelations of the profane world must have come now and then to hermits in their cells, to the cloistered monks of Middle Ages, to lonely sages, men of science, reformers; the revelations of the world's superficial judgment, shocking to the souls concentrated upon their own bitter labour in the cause of sanctity, or of knowledge, or of temperance, let us say, or of art, if only the art of cracking jokes or playing the flute. And thus this general's daughter came to me--or I should say one of the general's daughters did. There were three of these bachelor ladies, of nicely graduated ages, who held a neighbouring farmhouse in a united and more or less military occupation. The eldest warred against the decay of manners in the village children, and executed frontal attacks upon the village mothers for the conquest of curtseys. It sounds futile, but it was really a war for an idea. The second skirmished and scouted all over the country; and it was that one who pushed a reconnaissance right to my very table--I mean the one who wore stand-up collars. She was really calling upon my wife in the soft spirit of afternoon friendliness, but with her usual martial determination. She marched into my room swinging her stick . . . but no--I mustn't exaggerate. It is not my speciality. I am not a humoristic writer. In all soberness, then, all I am certain of is that she had a stick to swing.

No ditch or wall encompassed my abode. The window was open; the door too stood open to that best friend of my work, the warm, still sunshine of the wide fields. They lay around me infinitely helpful, but truth to say I had not known for weeks whether the sun shone upon the earth and whether the stars above still moved on their appointed courses. I was just then giving up some days of my allotted span to the last chapters of the novel "Nostromo," a tale of an imaginary (but true) seaboard, which is still mentioned now and again, and indeed kindly,

sometimes in connection with the word "failure" and sometimes in conjunction with the word "astonishing." I have no opinion on this discrepancy. It's the sort of difference that can never be settled. All I know is that, for twenty months, neglecting the common joys of life that fall to the lot of the humblest on this earth, I had, like the prophet of old, "wrestled with the Lord" for my creation, for the headlands of the coast, for the darkness of the Placid Gulf, the light on the snows, the clouds on the sky, and for the breath of life that had to be blown into the shapes of men and women, of Latin and Saxon, of Jew and Gentile. These are, perhaps, strong words, but it is difficult to characterise otherwise the intimacy and the strain of a creative effort in which mind and will and conscience are engaged to the full, hour after hour, day after day, away from the world, and to the exclusion of all that makes life really lovable and gentle--something for which a material parallel can only be found in the everlasting sombre stress of the westward winter passage round Cape Horn. For that too is the wrestling of men with the might of their Creator, in a great isolation from the world, without the amenities and consolations of life, a lonely struggle under a sense of over-matched littleness, for no reward that could be adequate, but for the mere winning of a longitude. Yet a certain longitude, once won, cannot be disputed. The sun and the stars and the shape of your earth are the witnesses of your gain; whereas a handful of pages, no matter how much you have made them your own, are at best but an obscure and questionable spoil. Here they are. "Failure"--"Astonishing": take your choice; or perhaps both, or neither--a mere rustle and flutter of pieces of paper settling down in the night, and undistinguishable, like the snowflakes of a great drift destined to melt away in the sunshine.

"How do you do?"

It was the greeting of the general's daughter. I had heard nothing--no rustle, no footsteps. I had felt only a moment before a sort of premonition of evil; I had the sense of an inauspicious presence--just that much warning and no more; and then came the sound of the voice and the jar as of a terrible fall from a great height--a fall, let us say, from the highest of the clouds floating in gentle procession over the fields in the faint westerly air of that July afternoon. I picked myself up quickly, of course; in other words, I jumped up from my chair stunned and dazed, every nerve quivering with the pain of being uprooted out of one world and flung down into another--perfectly civil.

"Oh! How do you do? Won't you sit down?"

That's what I said. This horrible but, I assure you, perfectly true reminiscence tells you more than a whole volume of confessions a la Jean Jacques Rousseau would do. Observe! I didn't howl at her, or start upsetting furniture, or throw myself on the floor and kick, or allow myself to hint in any other way at the

appalling magnitude of the disaster. The whole world of Costaguana (the country, you may remember, of my seaboard tale), men, women, headlands, houses, mountains, town, campo (there was not a single brick, stone, or grain of sand of its soil I had not placed in position with my own hands); all the history, geography, politics, finance; the wealth of Charles Gould's silver-mine, and the splendour of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores, whose name, cried out in the night (Dr. Monygham heard it pass over his head--in Linda Viola's voice), dominated even after death the dark gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love--all that had come down crashing about my ears. I felt I could never pick up the pieces--and in that very moment I was saying, "Won't you sit down?"

The sea is strong medicine. Behold what the quarter-deck training even in a merchant ship will do! This episode should give you a new view of the English and Scots seamen (a much-caricatured folk) who had the last say in the formation of my character. One is nothing if not modest, but in this disaster I think I have done some honour to their simple teaching. "Won't you sit down?" Very fair; very fair indeed. She sat down. Her amused glance strayed all over the room. There were pages of MS. on the table and under the table, a batch of typed copy on a chair, single leaves had fluttered away into distant corners; there were there living pages, pages scored and wounded, dead pages that would be burnt at the end of the day--the litter of a cruel battlefield, of a long, long and desperate fray. Long! I suppose I went to bed sometimes, and got up the same number of times. Yes, I suppose I slept, and ate the food put before me, and talked connectedly to my household on suitable occasions. But I had never been aware of the even flow of daily life, made easy and noiseless for me by a silent, watchful, tireless affection. Indeed, it seemed to me that I had been sitting at that table surrounded by the litter of a desperate fray for days and nights on end. It seemed so, because of the intense weariness of which that interruption had made me aware--the awful disenchantment of a mind realising suddenly the futility of an enormous task, joined to a bodily fatigue such as no ordinary amount of fairly heavy physical labour could ever account for. I have carried bags of wheat on my back, bent almost double under a ship's deck-beams, from six in the morning till six in the evening (with an hour and a half off for meals), so I ought to know.

And I love letters. I am jealous of their honour and concerned for the dignity and comeliness of their service. I was, most likely, the only writer that neat lady had ever caught in the exercise of his craft, and it distressed me not to be able to remember when it was that I dressed myself last, and how. No doubt that would be all right in essentials. The fortune of the house included a pair of grey-blue watchful eyes that would see to that. But I felt somehow as grimy as a Costaguana lepero after a day's fighting in the streets, rumped all over and dishevelled down to my very heels. And I am afraid I blinked stupidly. All this was bad for the honour of letters and the dignity of their service. Seen indistinctly

through the dust of my collapsed universe, the good lady glanced about the room with a slightly amused serenity. And she was smiling. What on earth was she smiling at? She remarked casually:

"I am afraid I interrupted you."

"Not at all."

She accepted the denial in perfect good faith. And it was strictly true. Interrupted--indeed! She had robbed me of at least twenty lives, each infinitely more poignant and real than her own, because informed with passion, possessed of convictions, involved in great affairs created out of my own substance for an anxiously meditated end.

She remained silent for a while, then said with a last glance all round at the litter of the fray:

"And you sit like this here writing your--your . . ."

"I--what? Oh, yes, I sit here all day."

"It must be perfectly delightful."

I suppose that, being no longer very young, I might have been on the verge of having a stroke; but she had left her dog in the porch, and my boy's dog, patrolling the field in front, had espied him from afar. He came on straight and swift like a cannon-ball, and the noise of the fight, which burst suddenly upon our ears, was more than enough to scare away a fit of apoplexy. We went out hastily and separated the gallant animals. Afterwards I told the lady where she would find my wife--just round the corner, under the trees. She nodded and went off with her dog, leaving me appalled before the death and devastation she had lightly made--and with the awfully instructive sound of the word "delightful" lingering in my ears.

Nevertheless, later on, I duly escorted her to the field gate. I wanted to be civil, of course (what are twenty lives in a mere novel that one should be rude to a lady on their account?), but mainly, to adopt the good sound Ollendorffian style, because I did not want the dog of the general's daughter to fight again (encore) with the faithful dog of my infant son (mon petit garçon).--Was I afraid that the dog of the general's daughter would be able to overcome (vaincre) the dog of my child?--No, I was not afraid. . . . But away with the Ollendorff method. However appropriate and seemingly unavoidable when I touch upon anything appertaining to the lady, it is most unsuitable to the origin, character and history of the dog; for the dog

was the gift to the child from a man for whom words had anything but an Ollendorffian value, a man almost childlike in the impulsive movements of his untutored genius, the most single-minded of verbal impressionists, using his great gifts of straight feeling and right expression with a fine sincerity and a strong if, perhaps, not fully conscious conviction. His art did not obtain, I fear, all the credit its unsophisticated inspiration deserved. I am alluding to the late Stephen Crane, the author of "The Red Badge of Courage," a work of imagination which found its short moment of celebrity in the last decade of the departed century. Other books followed. Not many. He had not the time. It was an individual and complete talent, which obtained but a grudging, somewhat supercilious recognition from the world at large. For himself one hesitates to regret his early death. Like one of the men in his "Open Boat," one felt that he was of those whom fate seldom allows to make a safe landing after much toil and bitterness at the oar. I confess to an abiding affection for that energetic, slight, fragile, intensely living and transient figure. He liked me even before we met on the strength of a page or two of my writing, and after we had met I am glad to think he liked me still. He used to point out to me with great earnestness, and even with some severity, that "a boy ought to have a dog." I suspect that he was shocked at my neglect of parental duties. Ultimately it was he who provided the dog. Shortly afterwards, one day, after playing with the child on the rug for an hour or so with the most intense absorption, he raised his head and declared firmly: "I shall teach your boy to ride." That was not to be. He was not given the time.

But here is the dog--an old dog now. Broad and low on his bandy paws, with a black head on a white body and a ridiculous black spot at the other end of him, he provokes, when he walks abroad, smiles not altogether unkind. Grotesque and engaging in the whole of his appearance, his usual attitudes are meek, but his temperament discloses itself unexpectedly pugnacious in the presence of his kind. As he lies in the firelight, his head well up, and a fixed, far-away gaze directed at the shadows of the room, he achieves a striking nobility of pose in the calm consciousness of an unstained life. He has brought up one baby, and now, after seeing his first charge off to school, he is bringing up another with the same conscientious devotion, but with a more deliberate gravity of manner, the sign of greater wisdom and riper experience, but also of rheumatism, I fear. From the morning bath to the evening ceremonies of the cot you attend, old friend, the little two-legged creature of your adoption, being yourself treated in the exercise of your duties with every possible regard, with infinite consideration, by every person in the house--even as I myself am treated; only you deserve it more. The general's daughter would tell you that it must be "perfectly delightful."

Aha! old dog. She never heard you yelp with acute pain (it's that poor left ear) the while, with incredible self-command, you preserve a rigid immobility for fear of

overturning the little two-legged creature. She has never seen your resigned smile when the little two-legged creature, interrogated sternly, "What are you doing to the good dog?" answers with a wide, innocent stare: "Nothing. Only loving him, mamma dear!"

The general's daughter does not know the secret terms of self-imposed tasks, good dog, the pain that may lurk in the very rewards of rigid self-command. But we have lived together many years. We have grown older, too; and though our work is not quite done yet we may indulge now and then in a little introspection before the fire--meditate on the art of bringing up babies and on the perfect delight of writing tales where so many lives come and go at the cost of one which slips imperceptibly away.