

[The following pages contain the opening chapters of an original story, a portion whereof was written some years ago by a Canadian author with a view to publication. It became necessary, we are informed, for the author to turn his attention to a different order of composition, and the writing of the story was abandoned when not more than a third of it had been placed on paper. As a consequence, the MS. still remains incomplete. It was never offered for publication, and in fact not a line of it has ever been seen by any one except the author himself and two or three members of his family. So far as can be judged from the fragment, the completed story would have been of exceptional power and interest. Even as it stands, it contains pictures of odd phases of rural life in Canada which we believe to be well worthy of preservation, and we are strongly of opinion that the readers of ARCTURUS will derive much pleasure from its perusal, all incomplete though it be. It will be continued from week to week until the MS. is exhausted.]

THE EAGLE'S NEST;

OR,

THE MARVEL OF SEBASTIAN GEE.

A Canadian Story.

PART FIRST.—THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK WILFORD.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE THRESHOLD OF "THE SHOOTING STAR."

I HAVE often been told by those who are entitled to speak upon the subject with authority that I have from my earliest years been distinguished for the possession of a singularly retentive and far-reaching memory: a memory which treasures up not only the most noteworthy incidents of my life, but which is equally tenacious with respect to insignificant matters of detail which might very well be forgotten. Waiving, for the nonce, any enquiry as to how far such a possession is to be regarded in the light of an unmixed blessing, I may say, without affectation, that the persons who have pronounced this eulogy have not done so upon meagre or insufficient grounds. My memory dates back almost to the commencement of my third year, and retains a nearly complete record of the subsequent experiences of a life which, to say the least, has not been altogether a monotonous or prosaic one. After mature deliberation, I have resolved to turn this faculty to account, and to embody in the form of a personal narrative such passages in my life as seem likely to prove of general interest.

In carrying out this resolution I shall occasionally be compelled to depend upon the recollections of other persons; but, as a rule, I shall draw upon the stores of my own memory alone. That memory, I will add, presents pictures of the remote past to my mental vision with almost photographic distinctness; and if I fail to interest the reader in the details which I purpose to set forth in these pages, my failure will certainly be due to a want of power to impart to those details an air of vivid reality corresponding to that which they present to my own mind during retrospection. It is, of course, quite possible—nay, very probable—that I may be unable to command any such degree of power; for I can only describe; and description, at best, is but a sorry substitute for actual observation. What to me have been veritable experiences will to the reader be mere narrations; and I can scarcely hope to make my pictures in words as lifelike and effective as a series of landscapes from the cunning hand of Dame Nature herself.

And then, so much depends upon the point of view from which one looks at a landscape. Yon beetling crag, viewed from the southwest, presents to the eye merely a rugged outline of unbroken stone, bearing no particular resemblance to anything but itself, and not worth a second glance. But just let us walk half a mile or so farther south, and then contemplate the scene once more. What do we see now? The crag is tame and uninteresting

no longer. Tame! Uninteresting! As well apply those epithets to the Spectre of the Broken. The rugged outline has become a hideously repulsive stone face, of gigantic proportions, with the lineaments so distinctly traced that the wrinkled visage seems literally to scowl in fiendish rage upon the quiet scene beneath: a monstrous ogre, hovering over his prey, and seeming only to wait till the keen, hungry air shall have whetted his fell appetite to open those terrible jaws, and gobble up those flocks of innocent sheep that are pasturing in the vale, all-unconscious of the fate impending over them.—Now, let us stroll but a hundred yards farther, and the spreading branches of yonder intervening oak will have entirely hidden the frightful object from sight. And yet, during the whole of our walk, the scene itself has remained precisely as it was at first. The changes have been not in the object contemplated, but merely in the point of view from which our contemplation has been indulged. And the conclusion to be deducted from the foregoing rhapsody is simply that writer and reader do not at all times enjoy a common vantage-ground, so that what appears perfectly obvious to the mind of the one, may not be even remotely suggested to the mind of the other.

It is true, that at certain more or less rare intervals in the annals of literature, some happily-endowed mortal has appeared to whom the foregoing observations are inapplicable: some heaven-born genius whose masterly hand has been able to so bend the souls of others to his own conceit as to make them see only with his eyes, hear only with his ears, and understand only with his understanding; in a word, to render his delineations, even when wholly imaginary, not less real than the characters and occurrences of every-day life. Falstaff, Mrs. Quickly, and Ancient Pistol—nay, even Titania and Oberon—are as distinctly individualized to our minds as are the persons with whom we daily come in contact. We are as familiar with Uncle Toby and Widow Wadman as we can ever hope to be with the members of our own families; and I doubt whether my dearest and most intimate friends are more real personages to me than are Wilkins Micawber, Richard Swiveller, and Samuel Weller. These are creations which, stamped by the hand of undying genius, are not for an age, but for all time. They will be as well known to our children's children as they are to us, and will be the admiration of our remote descendants in centuries yet unborn. But such triumphs as these are for the few. For such leather and prunella as we of the rank and file of authorship there is no such thing as literary immortality. We cannot put our readers in our places. We cannot imbue them with our sympathies, aversions—prejudices, if you will; and must perforce be content if we can now and then enable them to beguile a few hours which, but for our efforts, might have hung heavily upon their hands.

One of the most pleasing of contemporary humorists has remarked that writing is like shooting with a rifle, inasmuch as you may either hit your reader's mind or miss it: whereas talking is like playing at a mark with the pipe of an engine; if it be within reach, and you have time enough, you cannot help hitting it. This, it must needs be confessed, is by no means the most brilliant of the author's analogies, being somewhat too suggestive of Fluellen's comparison between Macedon and Monmouth. With all its faults, however, it will serve my present purpose as well as a better one; because it paves the way to my suggesting that if either an author or a marksman fail to hit a reasonably fair target, the explanation is generally to be found in the fact that he is unskilled in his craft; and that as the writer of this autobiography has hitherto had but little practice at targets of this sort, it may very well be that he will sometimes shoot wide. Some of the incidents to be related may perhaps be regarded as trivial and commonplace; but there are others which, unless the narrator shall make a much more inartistic use of the materials at his command than he hopes to do, will not be liable to any imputation on the score of dullness. Should the result prove that he has been too sanguine in this respect, he can only shelter himself behind that most lame and impotent of all excuses for prolixity—an underlying design.

The managers of a certain public entertainment which was more or less popular in the British capital some years back, were