



Women are sometimes sorely tempted to fancy that we have gifts and graces which have been smothered and stultified by adverse circumstances. We bewail that we have never got our chance. It is possible that men are not exempt

from this failing, but there are some reasons why they have less temptation to it. All biography is full of stories of men who have triumphed over every sort of obstacle and disability, and a man can scarcely realise any disadvantages of his own lot, whatever they may be, without recalling some other man who was strong and brave enough to master similar drawbacks. Then, again, the difficulties or hindrances to a man's career are generally of an active nature, so that if there be any "go" at all in him, he understands at once that they serve only to test his strength and energy.

But with women there is a difference, less indeed than it used to be, but still persisting and likely to persist. First, they have comparatively little biographical guidance. And such biography of women as there is, deals chiefly with women of high place and fortune, of rare, adventurous career, or of tragic eminence of some sort. The peculiar difficulties and discouragements which beset most of their sex, seldom come much into such women's lives. Those women's lives whose history, experience and result would most benefit the majority of their sisters, remain yet for the most part unwritten.

This is why we wish to have a little talk over Christina Rossetti, the poet who not very long ago passed from us, and whom the verdict of critics ventures to place in comparison not only with Jean Ingelow but with Mrs. Barrett-Browning. For we think the story of her life is one which may come with peculiar strengthening and comfort to many a disheartened girl and woman. Yet had she happened to fall even just below the very high level of poetic power to which she rose, or had she chanced to lack the one advantage which her life possessed, it is very likely the world would never have heard a word of her life's history.

She was born in a prosy, dingy district of London, one of the long uniform streets lying to the south-east of Regent's Park, and then as now, the haunt of foreign refugees of every shade of political opinion. She herself was the daughter of an Italian refugee, and her mother was the daughter of another Italian, so it was by right only of her mother's English mother that Christina Rossetti could claim to be English.

Her father, who gained his livelihood as a teacher of Italian and who eventually became professor of that language at King's College, was somewhat of a poet, a great student of Dante, and altogether a clever and interesting man. Her two brothers, a little older than herself, have both reached celebrity, the elder of the two, the poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, attaining great fame, though he was a man of an unfortunate temperament leading to an unhappy history.

But from the first, it is evident that the paramount influence in Christina's life was that of her mother, a woman of sweet character, but one who, in modern parlance, "did nothing," save the housekeeping and mothering of a little household whose means were at once narrow and precarious.

The little girl throve somewhat feebly in her London home. She did not go to school, gaining all substantial instruction from her mother. Though we hear that she enjoyed *Hone's Every Day Book* when she was nine, she does not seem to have been a specially

bookish child, not so bookish as the elder sister and the two brothers, who were her only youthful companions. For visitors, there were only bearded Italian "patriots," in whose tragic histories, however, the well-trained little ones had sense and sympathy enough to take interest—Christina, with characteristic faithfulness, cherishing a relic of one all her life long, so that it stood in the chamber of her death-bed.

For pleasures, she had games with her brothers and sister, walks in Regent's Park, every corner of which she knew, investing the more picturesque points with romantic characteristics which would have escaped less poetic eyes. Above all, she had occasional visits to her maternal grandfather at Holmer's End—about thirty miles from London, a distance which in those days involved six hours driving in a stage coach! There she got her first revelation of the beauty of genuine nature and the first inspiration of her love and sympathy for the undomesticated animal creation. For animals nearer us, she had already learned a tender affection, for some of her earliest verses, written when she was about sixteen, were "On the Death of a Cat, a friend of mine, aged ten years and a half." Her happy visits to Holmer End ceased when she was about nine, at which time her grandfather removed to London and became a near neighbour. The old gentleman was very fond of little Christina, and prophesied great things of her. To the very end of her life she cherished the memory of these country visits, and spoke of the way in which they had awakened her imagination. A book, *Time Flies*, which she wrote fully forty years afterwards, abounds with allusions to those early days, whose slight incidents, indelibly impressed on her sensitive mind, she often wove into exquisite parables.

Another youthful joy lay in visits to the Zoological Gardens, though there her feeling was that the imprisoned birds should sing "plaintive verses." It is said that, as a child, she told of a strange dream she had. "She thought she was in Regent's Park at dawn, while, just as the sun rose, she seemed to see a wave of yellow light sweep from the trees. It was a multitude of canaries, thousands of them, all the canaries in London. They had met and were now going back to captivity."

A most interesting reminiscence of her childhood we find, when, veiling her own identity, she told—

"I know of a little girl who, not far from half a century ago, having heard that oil calmed troubled waters, suggested to her mother its adoption for such a purpose in case of a sea-storm.

"Her suggestion fell flat, as from her it deserved to fall. Yet nowadays here is science working out the babyish hint of ignorance."

She called herself "the ill-tempered one of the family," there having been, in her earlier life, a decidedly irritable strain in her disposition, partly caused by the infirmity of her health. "In later life," says her last biographer, Mackenzie Bell, "this was entirely conquered, and this conquest strengthened her character, as moral conquests ever do strengthen the character."

As Christina advanced into young womanhood the family means grew narrower. The brothers had not yet had time to make any mark in their respective careers, the father was growing old and feeble, and not only so, but his subject, Italian, was giving place to German as a favourite study. One of those critical times came when a household is brought to realise that "something must be done." It was decided that Mrs. Rossetti and Christina should start a little school. The experiment was first made in the house where the family had lived for some time, near Mornington Crescent. Fifty years ago this school-keeping was the favourite resource of

gentle poverty. It would be as wrong as it is idle to wish that such avenue of profit was still open, for too often it admitted women who had little to impart beyond their own prejudices and ineptitude. It must, however, be owned that it had some advantages, since it could offer an opportunity to such women as Christina and her mother. Neither of them might have been found able to pass modern examinations or to fulfil present-day "requirements," and yet surely their sweet, conscientious natures would be a priceless influence on any young girl with whom they came in contact.

The London school-keeping, however, did not succeed. Accordingly Christina and her mother, the invalid father accompanying them, resolved to renew the experiment at Frome, Somersetshire, the brothers and the elder daughter struggling on in London.

In Frome they stayed for about a year. It is significant that this was the longest period that Christina ever lived out of London. She was not very happy while she was there; it was scarcely likely that she could be. Her father's health was failing day by day, so that he died almost immediately their sojourn at Frome came to an end. The school venture succeeded no better than the first one had done. Also Christina had not long before had her first love-affair, receiving an offer of marriage which, as happened with another offer later on, she resolutely put aside in the belief that both were accompanied by circumstances which would not have conducted to her highest spiritual life.

But all these shadows, outer and inner, did not prevent her from keeping her mind and heart open to impressions and influences. Among those dull, grey days she laid up beautiful thoughts, albeit they may be sometimes tremulous with the misgivings of a self-mistrustful heart. She tells us that on one of her country walks she found a four-leaved trefoil. She did not then know of its rarity. She says—

"Perhaps I plucked and so destroyed it: I certainly left it, for most certainly I have it not. . . . Now I would give something to recover that wonder: then, when I might have it for the carrying, I left it.

"Once missed, one may peer about in vain all the rest of one's days for a second four-leaved trefoil.

"No one expects to find whole fields of such: even one for once is an extra allowance.

"Life has, so to say, its four-leaved trefoils for a favoured few; and how many of us overlook once and finally our rare chance!"

It is pretty to know that one who read this parable sent her a gift of a four-leaved trefoil, and doubtless Christina saw a still sweeter parable in the substitution.

After the return to London, and the father's death, the little family struggled on again, its path, however steep, being at least upward. Christina did some literary work in the way of compilation and translating; she also began to publish her poems. But she was not a voluminous writer, nor was any of her work, prose or poetry, from first to last, of the class which readily commands "a large market." Consequently, though her name was more or less before the public from 1855 to her death in 1894, and though some of her best poems were produced comparatively early, yet her income from literature never exceeded—and seldom reached—£45 per annum, until 1890!

Nevertheless, through the success of the brothers and other circumstances, the family affairs grew easier. In 1861 and 1865, the younger son took his mother and Christina for visits to the continent. Neither trip exceeded six weeks in duration, nor did either go beyond tracks tolerably beaten even then: the first was to Paris and Normandy, returning by the Channel Islands; in the second, Basle, Como, Milan, Freiburg and the Black Forest were