

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## DICKENS AND THE DARLINGTONS

By Mabel Nelson Thurston.

The Darlings had, as they declared, "grown up on Dickens." This statement, it was sometimes necessary to explain, did not include Mr. Darlington nor his mother, although they were important members of the family. Mr. Darlington caring nothing for any novels, and Grandmother Darlington sitting unmoved while her daughter-in-law and the girls, taking turns reading aloud, were wiping tears of laughter from their eyes. Grandma Darlington could see nothing to laugh at in "such foolish-looking persons."

There was a time, before the girls were old enough to be brought up on anybody except Mother Goose, when Mrs. Darlington worked long and patiently with her husband and her husband's mother.

She would leave "David Copperfield" lying about on rainy afternoons when old Mrs. Darlington, who was a great reader in her way, had finished her library book and could not get down to the village to exchange it; or she would artfully introduce Mr. Pickwick after her husband had finished his newspaper, or quote from "Our Mutual Friend." All in vain—or so at least after seven years of persistent effort, in which Dickens had apparently gained no foothold in the family circle, she was constrained to believe. She was at last thoroughly disheartened—she had so longed for some one to enjoy him with her.

Then she became conscious that the eldest of her small daughters, aged six, was preferring a petition.

"What is it, Ruth?" she asked.

Ruth's blue eyes, under a bewitching floss of baby curls, looked at her mother with calm decision.

"I want to read Dickens," she announced.

"You—what?" her mother gasped.

"I want to read Dickens," the small aspirant repeated, patiently.

Mrs. Darlington, with a rush, gathered her daughter in her arms.

"O Ruth, you beloved! What a blind, stupid mother you have! Of course you shall read Dickens. What are daughters for if not to read Dickens with their mothers? But not quite yet, sweetheart. Wait till you are—say, fourteen. Then won't we have good times—you and Bab and Phyl and I! Ruth Darlington, you blessing, you have actually shown your mother the first gleam of compensation in the law of nature which decrees that you've got to grow up."

"Can I," Ruth persisted, gently, "can I look at the pictures now?"

"I should say you could!" her mother returned. "And when you're fourteen—!" The sentence ended with an ecstatic hug.

Ruth, however, did not wait until she was fourteen. She was a shy, quiet little thing, but she had a way of making life conform to her purposes. Not, Mrs. Darlington conceded, not, of course, that she deliberately caught the measles, only they happened along so very opportunely. Things always came so for Ruth.

Ruth was "going on eleven" when the measles happened along, and of course Barbara and Phyllis, who always copied her, had them, too. For a week Ruth and Phyllis were too sick to want amusement, but after they began to get better, while their eyes were still weak, the problem of entertainment was a large one.

Toys failed, books and pencils were of course forbidden; even additions to their button-strings, sent by friends, and judiciously presented one at a time,

could not fill all the long hours. But one resort remained—reading aloud. Even this had its difficulties, since Ruth, who was a book-worm, had read everything in the house that her mother had allowed her. So one dull, gray afternoon, Mrs. Darlington began "The Old Curiosity Shop."

It was the beginning of the end. Long before she was fifteen Ruth had read through the set of green volumes, and many of them over and over. Little Nell, Florence Dombey, Betsy Trotwood, the whole long procession of characters, possible and impossible, were as familiar to the Darlington girls as their next-door neighbors.

They nicknamed each other, the names changing according to mood and circumstance; they even, to Grandma Darlington's horror, nicknamed her, till they saw that it genuinely distressed her, when they kissed her and petted her and promised never to do it again. But, curiously enough, it was not until Ruth was eighteen that Mrs. Darlington had a name that "stuck."

Mr. Darlington's business was not going well that winter,—Phyllis declared that they all belonged to the Pinch family,—and there were many serious discussions over the family wardrobe. They all took it very bravely, even Barbara, to whom "made-overs" came hardest; Ruth would have gone actually shabby had not her mother made very firm decrees.

"How about yourself, mother?" Ruth retorted, at last, one day when she had been defeated in a long discussion. "You say I must have something new in the way of finery because I'm the oldest, but you aren't planning a single thing for yourself except a pair of shoes."

"Oh, I!" Mrs. Darlington laughed. "That's a very different thing. People didn't dress so much when I was young, and I never had a whole new suit in my life. I didn't even when I was married, for three weeks before the wedding-day your father was ordered West on business, and he wanted me to go, too, so we got married in a hurry, and my travelling-dress wasn't done; and by the time I came home and could have my dress, my new bonnet had been spoiled in a storm."

"Now I know exactly who mother is!" Phyllis suddenly exclaimed.

"Who?" cried Ruth and Barbara, for they had all agreed that Dickens had everybody else in his books, but by some lamentable oversight he had no one like mother.

Phyllis's eyes danced. "Pa Wilfer!"

"Phyllis!" Ruth cried in horror.

But the next moment she had to yield to the laughter to which the others had succumbed—mother most merrily of all. She was such a little, plump, dimpled, absurdly young mother, and her soft hair had such rebellious locks that never would stay in order! Phyllis's protest that the resemblance was simply and solely in mother's wardrobe was hardly noticed.

"Poor little Pa Wilfer!" Barbara murmured.

"Happy Pa Wilfer," mother retorted. Ruth alone said nothing, but she was thinking.

Christmas at the Darlings' that year passed with a great deal of celebration in the way of fun and laughter and very few gifts. Mother had made everybody promise not to spend more than fifty cents for her, and Ruth insisted upon the same agreement. Barbara declared that she belonged in the conspiracy, too, but she did not insist, and everybody knew that she wanted a piece of fur, and so somehow—no one knew just how it happened—they combined resources and

bought her one. It was hard to deny Barbara pretty things when she looked so pretty in them. And besides, as Ruth pointed out, Barbara never could be seventeen again. Ruth, having so recently been seventeen herself, was in a position to know.

But when mother saw Barbara's light-hearted acceptance a shadow crept into her eyes. Was it possible—could it be possible that they were helping Barbara to be selfish? Mother crowded the thought back at once; of course Barbara saw that she would hurt them all if she let the expense of the gift hurt her, and yet—the tiny haunting fear would not go.

It was ten days after Christmas that something wonderful happened—an invitation from an old school friend of mother's to spend a month with her in Washington. The great dream of mother's life had always been to see Washington, and when the letter came, the whole family was in a tumult of excitement.

"She'll go to Mount Vernon!" Ruth cried, with shining eyes.

"She'll be there while Congress is in session," Grandma Darlington calculated. Grandma Darlington was always interested in Congress.

"She'll see the White House," asserted Barbara.

"And perhaps shake hands with the President!" Phyllis added, rapturously.

Mother smiled brightly round the circle.

"You dear day-dreamers," she said, "did you suppose for one moment I thought of going? I couldn't, of course. But a hundred trips to Washington wouldn't compare with having you all care—so much to have me go."

The girls looked at each other with blank faces. Not go! Oddly enough, it was Phyllis who understood first.

"It's—Pa Wilfer," she said, in a voice that choked in spite of herself; and she rushed hastily out of the room. Phyllis always hated to be seen crying.

The others talked for a long time. When the council finally broke up, it was sorrowfully agreed that the thing seemed impossible. But, well as they all knew her, nobody guessed that up in her own room, Mrs. Darlington, for the first time in her life, was almost rebellious.

"It does seem as if a woman might have a whole new suit of clothes once in her life!" she sighed.

The next moment she had thrust the thought passionately away. "As if anything in the whole world could compare with having such daughters!" she rebuked herself. "Mary Darlington, I didn't know you could be so selfish. And Ruth urging me to take her new winter suit because it would 'just fit'! You don't deserve to have a Ruth or anybody else. I am ashamed of you through and through! Think of the people who haven't a single daughter—much less three—to say nothing of my three! I wouldn't change with the Queen of England!" And before she went downstairs to supper she had discovered a score of most excellent reasons why she would not have gone if she could.

One afternoon a week later, Mrs. Darlington, coming in from a neighborhood call, found the house deserted. Wondering a little where all the girls were, she went up to her room. At the door she stopped, an excited color leaping to her face. On the bed were a suitcase, a bandbox, an envelope and half a dozen packages.

With trembling fingers she opened them—a new blue suit with hat and silk waist to match, a lace waist, handkerchiefs, gloves, collars, shoes, and a ticket to Washington.