

SOME CANADIAN LITERARY WOMEN.—III.

LOUISA MURRAY.

PROBABLY some among the readers of THE WEEK can remember the days when the town of Belleville was considered something of a literary centre, inasmuch as within its borders flourished the *Victoria Magazine*, one of those short-lived Canadian periodicals which have had the courage to face fearful odds, and the pain of succumbing to them. Through the kindness of the subject of this sketch I am permitted to transcribe the following portion of a time-worn letter, addressed to her by the editor of the *Victoria Magazine* :—

"BELLEVILLE, Jan. 13, 1851.

"MY DEAR MISS MURRAY,—Enclosed you will find a note to me from Mrs. Cushing, the present conductress of the *Montreal Literary Garland*, expressing a strong desire to obtain for the pages of that magazine your beautiful story of *Fauna*, which you transmitted to me two years ago for the *Victoria Magazine*. Writing not long ago to Mrs. Cushing, I mentioned this tale to her, and the high opinion I had formed from it of the talents of the writer, and this is her reply.

"Sincerely do I hope that this trifling circumstance may be the means of introducing *Fauna* to the Canadian public, and prove a source of emolument and fame to its author.

"The low esteem in which all literary labour is held in this country renders it everything but a profitable employment, but Mr. Lovell's offer of remuneration, although small, is not to be rejected without due consideration. 'What is worth publishing,' my good friend Tom Roscoe used to say, 'is worth paying for,' and I have found the £5 per sheet that I have received from Mr. Lovell, for articles contributed to the *Garland* for the last twelve years, no inconsiderable help in bringing up a large family. To a young person even small sums are always serviceable in procuring extra articles of dress, etc.

"Pray do not fail to write to me on the receipt of this, and state your wishes with regard to the MS.

"In the meanwhile I remain, my dear young lady, your sincere friend,
"SUSANNA MOODIE."

The reader will also be interested in the following extract from a letter dated March, 1851, written by Mr. John Lovell to the author of *Fauna*, accompanying the first proofs of that novel :—

"Indeed it would give me pleasure to be able to say that I would accept of your contributions in future at a fair remuneration; for I am convinced that they would add much to the merits of the *Garland*, but I regret to say that the miserable support which the *Garland* receives from the Canadian public will compel me to discontinue its publication at the close of this year."

These references to the poor opinion held by Canadian people of their nation's literature have by this time a sadly familiar sound, and one cannot doubt that long practice in the art of underrating or wholly neglecting the products of home talent has brought our countrymen to their present admirable proficiency in it. Be that as it may, it is certain that the story of *Fauna* was a good deal noticed when it appeared in the last year of the *Montreal Literary Garland's* existence. It was reprinted in several newspapers, in a New York paper, and in a Belfast (Ireland) journal.

The military element is pronounced in the parentage and relationships of Miss Louisa Murray. Her father was a gallant Irish officer of Scotch descent, distinguished for his courage in the War of 1812, and leader of the light company of his regiment when that brilliant feat of tactics, the taking of Fort Niagara, was performed in 1813. At the battle of Chippewa he was dangerously wounded, and taken prisoner, and was retained on parole till peace was restored. He married the daughter of Major Lyons, an officer in the Seventh Fusiliers, who came to Nova Scotia with the Duke of Kent. Major Lyons afterwards held a military command at the town of Niagara, where he died. One of his sons joined the British navy, another was an officer in the East India Company's service, and two of his daughters married officers in the British army. As one of Miss Murray's uncles, on her father's side, was also a British officer, the ease and success with which this lady has grappled with the various military situations in her novel, *Little Dorinn*, is not so much to be wondered at.

Miss Murray was born in the Isle of Wight. Shortly afterwards her family removed to the county of Wicklow, in Ireland, and she grew up amid the picturesque scenery of that lovely land, whose mountains and glens are so beautifully mirrored in *Little Dorinn* and *The Cited Curate*. Her parents, however, retained a most affectionate remembrance of Canada, and this gifted writer recalls that her earliest lullaby was Moore's Canadian Boat Song, in which the voices of her mother and father were softly blended. Naturally the first great wonder of the world to her childish imagination was Niagara.

In Ireland, where most of Miss Murray's girlhood was passed, she enjoyed a gay and untroubled existence among intimate friends and many relations, with whom she made frequent visits to Dublin. The contrast between this life and that in the Canadian backwoods, to which they afterwards removed, would have been depressing enough to most natures, but in this case it seemed to act as a stimulus to the imagination. Mr. Grant Allen, whose early home was in the near neighbourhood of the Murrys, whose intimate family friend he was, recalls in one of his charming papers the impression left on his boyish mind by the atmosphere of culture and refinement that pervaded that home in the backwoods. Here was written *Fauna*, which well merited the attention it received. It is a

vivid romance, told with a young girl's fervid admiration of the beautiful in nature and in human life. The style is remarkably free and spontaneous, without a trace of affectation on one side or dullness on the other, and the descriptions of forest life in Canada in which the story abounds have a noticeable equality of merit. The following extract is taken almost at random :—

"In general, perhaps, the summer sunsets of America are inferior in beauty to those of Britain, the sky being commonly destitute of those light, moist clouds, whose fanciful shapes take hues so varied, and so lovely, from the departing god of day. But at times the golden-haired Helios sinks with a lustrous splendour, rivalling that which Italian skies boast as peculiarly their own, filling the heavens with heaved-up waves of gold, interspersed with a net-work of purple, rose-colour, and aquamarine, and as he drops behind the woods, his rays gleam through the green canopy which veils his glories, in every variety of light and shade, while the whole atmosphere is filled with a richness and intensity of glowing beauty."

Miss Murray's next literary venture was also a Canadian tale, which was published in the then popular London (England) magazine, *Once a Week*. At one time (not long before his assassination) Mr. D'Arcy McGee purposed setting up a magazine, and sent Miss Murray a printed prospectus, asking her to become a contributor; but the project was never carried out. For the *British American Magazine*, which lived only one year, she wrote *The Cited Curate*, a serial story which elicited much praise. In the *Canadian Monthly*, which came out next, appeared several of Miss Murray's stories, essays, and poems. Old readers of this magazine will recall with pleasure the serial tales of *Marguerite Kneller*, a story of artist life in Paris and Rome; *Little Dorinn*, in which the lights and shadows of Irish life are almost photographed; and *Carmina*, which exhales the fervid breath of Italy. Another serial was burned accidentally in manuscript, and still another, accepted by a magazine, which was about to be started in Toronto, was lost when the enterprise was dropped. A legendary poem called *Merlin's Cave*, which appeared in the *Maritime Monthly* (St. John, N.B.), has been greatly praised. Miss Murray has also written that portion of *Picturesque Canada* relating to the Niagara District, and she has contributed a great many papers to the *Toronto Nation*, and some to THE WEEK.

If it had not been for this writer's strong literary bent, she could never have persevered as she did in the face of much disappointment, little encouragement, and no stimulus. Indeed it is clearly to be seen from every page of her work, that Miss Murray is a born story teller—using the words, let me hasten to add, in a literary, by no means in an ethical sense. It is out of the abundance of the heart that her pen writeth; and in consequence, her stories give the same sort of pleasure that is derived from every sort of work, which is the outcome of a vigorous personality. She produces works of fiction for the same reason—and with as little appearance of strain or affectation—as a peach tree produces peaches; and it is proof of the strength of her genius that the good and wholesome fruit it has borne has not been winter-killed.

Everything that Miss Murray has written has a distinct moral tone, without being clogged with the faintest shadow of a moral purpose. Her object is not to denounce wrongs, expose abuses, or teach a lesson, but to entertain the reader, and this she never fails to do; but the entertainment she provides leaves a pure taste in the mouth, and pleasant thoughts in the heart. The style is vivid and picturesque, and one looks in vain for the dullness and redundancy so apt to characterize those who, like her, write because they cannot choose but write.

To my mind the weak point in Miss Murray's novels is her character-drawing. Features are described in detail, but the personality is shadowy. Nearly all her men are brave, and with the exception of Marguerite Kneller, most of her women are fair. The tragedy of poor Marguerite's life lay in her nonconformity to the high standard of beauty which her other heroines maintain. The picture of Marguerite is as pathetic as that of her sister is lovely :—

"Claire was sleeping the deep sleep that follows exhaustion. Her rich golden hair, loosened by her restless tossing, streamed over the pillow; long eye-lashes, darker than her hair, fringed her closed lids; her cheeks were flushed like the heart of a damask rose. The coverings had partly fallen off, and Marguerite could see one little white hand pressing a little bunch of purple and white pansies, which Maurice had gathered for her in the garden that afternoon, against her breast. Beautiful she looked as Psyche when she first wept herself to sleep after Cupid had flown, and the memory of her lost bliss still lingered in her dreams. . . . But in Marguerite's heart what a tumult of passionate pain! Deep tenderness for Claire, and jealous bitterness against her; a wild yearning love for Maurice, and something that was almost contempt for his fickleness and weakness, contended with each other; and the struggles of wounded pride and slighted love, of anger and pity, of hopeless regret and conscious wrong, were renewed again and again through all that long night. There are dark chambers in the soul, of which only misery holds the keys, and into these poor Marguerite got fearful glimpses now."

In some of Miss Murray's other novels the chief piece of characterization is a similar contrast between the purity and deep feeling of a noble nature and the barren selfishness of an ignoble one. But there is no sign of weakness in this writer's grasp of the characteristics of *Swift* and *the Women who Loved him*, a critical essay which appeared in the *Canadian Monthly*. This and her *Notes on George Eliot's Life*, and her review of Heavysege's *Saul*, are written in her best vein. This power of making the reader acquainted with every aspect and appreciation of every trait of the people to whom she introduces him is less marked in her