

## MISS GIBERNE.

MISS AGNES GIBERNE needs no introduction to the reading world; it is her readers who ask for an introduction to her, and desire to know something of her life and the circumstances under which the books that have helped and entertained them were written. Miss Giberne (the name is pronounced with the G soft and a slight stress on the second syllable) comes of an old Languedoc family, of which the branch settled in England alone survives. She is the third daughter of Major Charles Giberne who, over seventy years ago, went out to India as a young officer in the "Company's" army and retired after twenty-two years service. He traces descent directly from "Noble Jean de Giberne, Seigneur de Gibertain and Co-Seigneur de St. Germain de Calberthe" who, early in the sixteenth century, lived in a valley of the Upper Cevennes Mountains, some twenty miles or more from Alais. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, in the days of the "wars of religion," the Château de Gibertain was burnt to the ground by the rebels who also killed Louis de Giberne, then the head of the family. It was possible to rebuild the château, but not to resuscitate the documents which had been destroyed in the conflagration. The King of France, therefore, granted the De Gibernes a fresh patent of nobility which belongs to the present head of the family, Harold Buller Giberne, Miss Giberne's cousin, who is now a minor at Eton.

When the "de" was dropped is uncertain; probably when Miss Giberne's direct ancestor, Jean René de Giberne, having alienated his father and brother by his marriage, came to England and in various ways showed a desire to Anglicise himself. In a French document of that date Jean René was spoken of as a "mauvais Catholique"; later, both he and his wife joined the Church of England, which perhaps explains the family wrath at his choice. His descendants, for the most part, have not been behind him in preferring to be "English."

Miss Giberne tells us that when, as a child, she was travelling on the Continent with her parents and sisters, the family crest and coat-of-arms were shown to an expert in such matters. He at once remarked that they would undoubtedly be recognised in any court of heraldry, and asked Major Giberne why he did not go back to France. "Louis Napoleon," he said, "is always delighted to get hold of any of the old noblesse."

Young as she was, Miss Giberne was deeply impressed by her father's reply; "I would rather be an English gentleman than a French nobleman!"

With his strong, clever face, and his silvered hair, Major Giberne is to-day one of the finest types of the old English gentleman. Though ninety years of age, he retains his upright, vigorous, soldierly bearing, shows few signs of his many years, and loves to be constantly occupied, whilst keeping a keen interest in what goes on in the world outside the home he shares with his two daughters at Eastbourne.

Neither Miss Giberne nor her sisters were sent to school, and they attended few classes or lectures. After the return of the family from India, in Miss Giberne's infancy, they led rather a wandering life, partly in England, partly in Switzerland, Heidelberg and Brussels. Doubtless the mental activity induced by this frequent change of scene and the contact with a foreign life, helped to develop early a natural literary gift. She was only

seven when she "began to scribble," and by the time she was ten it was the favourite diversion of the three elder sisters. The eldest of all, Mary, died of cholera, in India, before any of the four younger sisters were born. Major Giberne was entirely in sympathy with the "scribbling" propensities of his children, providing them with plenty of pencils and paper and doing all in his power to guide and encourage them. Whilst in England, governesses had been engaged to teach them, but on going to Switzerland Mrs. Giberne undertook their education herself, with the help of her husband and various masters.

Mrs. Giberne, whose death took place in May, 1890, was the eldest daughter of the Rev. William Wilson, D.D., of Over-Worton, Oxfordshire, and vicar of Walthamstow, Essex, also first cousin and brother-in-law to Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta. For the



[From photo: Elliott and Fry.]  
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task of educating her children Mrs. Giberne was singularly well endowed, possessing a vivid mind and an eagerness and enthusiasm expressed on her mobile face and in her dark speaking eyes, which never to the last lost their brightness. "Not the least part of the education she gave us," says Miss Giberne, "was in her keen appreciation of what she read and made us read. It was her endeavour to infuse into our minds her own passion for history, poetry and music."

Miss Giberne confesses to caring little, up to the age of thirteen, for anything but stories, with the exception of Gleig's *Battle of Waterloo*, in which she delighted. Then Miss Strickland's *Queens of England* was put into her hands and history became one of her prime interests. She is of opinion that there are advantages and disadvantages in a home education, as compared with school training, for a literary career. "Greater freedom of development was secured," she observes; "possibly the style of my early books might have been improved by a more stiff, modern,

critical education, such as was not then in vogue, but harder work in girlhood might have lessened the power of hard work later."

Two heavy losses came to Miss Giberne before she reached her sixteenth year—the death of the next younger sister, Florence, who had always been her especial playmate until she fell ill, and later, that of her sister, Helen, two years older than herself, who died at the age of seventeen. Until this time Miss Giberne had made no girl friends, partly because she was intensely shy, chiefly because Helen's companionship had been all-sufficient. She was happy, therefore, in possessing a mother who could be at once friend and mother. "She was," says Miss Giberne, "by far the most intimate friend I have ever had. I cannot recall ever once going to her for interest and sympathy and for a moment failing to find either. And this to the end of her life."

In her literary efforts Miss Giberne had especially her parents' sympathy. They followed with an interest as keen as her own the fortunes of her first book, published when she was eighteen, and soon followed by other stories for children, to which she did not put her name. She thinks now that it was rather a mistake to publish so early, and strongly advises young writers in general to wait some years before giving their work to the public. It is better to give time to preparation, especially to the study of language and of human nature.

*The Curate's Home*, which appeared in 1860, was one of the author's most successful early books. When first written, it was much longer, and, says Miss Giberne, "unutterably doleful." She sent it to Mr. Seeley, who decided against undertaking its publication. A year later, however, he suggested that, with some alterations in the way of added cheerfulness, the story might prove a success. Its author therefore set to work, "resuscitated the heroine, who had died of a very lingering decline, and gave her a husband, introduced into the tale for this purpose. Even so, the story was quite sad enough, but by no means too sad for reality." Perhaps one of the greatest charms of Miss Giberne's books is just this sense of the mingled cloud and sunshine of life; we feel that she has been a loving and sympathetic student of human nature and her knowledge, particularly of girl-life, is wide and intimate.

*The Curate's Home* was followed by *Aimée*, the present edition of which was revised in later years, and which the author considers one of the best of her early books. *Floss Silverthorn*, *Conyng Castle*, *Beryl and Pearl*, *Duties and Duties*, *The Rector's Home*, *Decima's Promise* are among the best known of a list too long to enumerate.

In answer to a question as to which of her later works is their author's favourite, Miss Giberne mentions *Miss Devereux*, *Spinster*, a story, some of the scenes of which may be said to be drawn "after" the Yorkshire dales, and into which many life observations, life lessons, and certain mental elements of her own life are interwoven. She is inclined to think *The Girl at the Dover House* the best book for girls she has written.

The old question as to whether the "story with a purpose" is an artistic blunder or not crops up whenever fiction is discussed, but in the hands of Miss Giberne, a story never loses its charm because it conveys deep lessons and holds up the cardinal virtues as an inspiration to her girl-readers. I remember once being told by a girl that the reading of *Decima's*