

M O R N I N G M A G A Z I N E .

presented by MARGOT HEATH

RAMBLING REMINISCENCES

by

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During the course of my somewhat varied life, I've had the good fortune to meet, ~~(not through any merit on my part, but just by chance)~~, quite a lot of literary people of real interest. ~~I'll tell you about some of them, as many as time permits.~~ *Here were.*

First, those met with during my early childhood, in Moscow. I had an aunt and uncle, Louise and Aylmer Maude, at whose home I spent a lot of time, for they had sons, (my cousins of course), of my own age. The Maudes were members of the "Moscow Intelligentsia", not favoured by the authorities because of their slightly Socialist leanings, but being British subjects, they were left alone, and therefore their home was a favourite meeting place for the literary and artistic lights of the time. Strange to say, we children were rather encouraged to attend at these "Salons" - as one might call them.

Although I was very small at the time, I can vividly remember the greatest playwright of them all, Anton Tchekov, author of "Uncle Vanya", "The Cherry Orchard", "The Three Sisters", and many other plays written before Tuberculosis carried ^{him} off in 1904 while still in his forties. He was ^a small, dark, thin little man, with burning brown eyes, partly hidden by pince-nez, and a dark beard, of the "Imperial" type, an insignificant figure really, but he radiated kindness and strength, and his personality must have been exceptionally strong to have impressed itself so deeply on the little girl who was me!

Count Leo Tolstoi, the head of the "Intelligentsia", was a very great friend of the Aylmer Maudes, who translated his books from Russian into English - a huge task when one considers the number and length of these novels, "Anna Karenina", "War and Peace, and many, many more. Tolstoi, at the time when I remember him, had already renounced the ownership of his vast possessions. He was the first Russian emancipationist, that is to say, the first of the great Russian noblemen to free the serfs on his estates. He had handed over everything he owned to his wife and family, who, with the exception of his daughter Margaret, were in bitter opposition to his Socialist views, but they were all devoted to him, and he to them, so he continued to live with them, although disapprovingly. He used to wear coarse peasant's clothes, straw sandals and all, and had long grey hair, and a very long untrimmed beard. One afternoon, in my Aunt's drawing-room, Tolstoi was, as usual, surrounded by a deferential crowd, when a shrill childish voice was heard to say "Why has that dirty ^{away parklike} "moujik" (Russian for peasant) come to tea?" Followed consternation and embarrassment, and forcible ejection of me, the culprit!

A few years later, Uncle Aylmer, Aunt Louise ~~and~~ ^{with} their four young sons, all left to live in England, for they felt they could write more easily in the peaceful atmosphere there. On arrival, they immediately joined the Fabian Group, then rapidly growing, and built for themselves a house on a farm in a small Essex village, not far from Chelmsford. There they entertained their Fabian friends, and on at least one occasion the Fabian Summer School was held there. By this time my mother had brought us over to be educated in English Public schools, and I used sometimes to spend my holidays at "Ladywell", the Maudes' home. There I met some of the Fabians, among them H.G. Wells, Sydney and Beatrice Webb, the Dowager Countess of Warwick, and many others - best known of all, Bernard Shaw, who offended me very much one day, when I was playing in the garden outside Uncle Aylmer's study, by complaining about my "dreadful, shrill voice". I was then about

~~It was only after I had seen his play "Arms and the Man" at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin about 8 years later, that I would condescend to read any of his books.~~

These Fabians used to play a most peculiar type of hockey on the rather rough field near the Maudes' house. Everyone, regardless of numbers, would crowd on to the field, some with hockey sticks, others with branches pulled from the trees, and enter into the melée, probably not knowing at all who was friend or who foe. ~~(My youngest cousins found it a marvellous opportunity to get even with the ones they most disliked!~~ Most people suffered from hacked shins after these fierce games, which have been immortalised in one of H.G. Wells' books, "Mr. Ditchling Sees It Through."

Later on Marie Stopes was a frequent visitor to Ladywell, in fact one of her secretaries married one of my Maude cousins. ~~(By the way, Uncle Aylmer was a cousin of Cyril Maude's, and also General Maude. When the Russian Royalist Regime collapsed, Uncle Aylmer became a keen anti-Bolshevist, and to the end of his days wrote reams of anti-Bolshevik and anti-Communist propaganda.~~

~~By the way,~~ One of the ideals of the Fabians, was to lead "simple" lives. Aunt Louise told me that she was highly amused at Lady Warwick's idea of the "simple life". She went to tea there, and in deference to the "Simple life" ideal, there was no cake, only thin bread and butter on exquisite Crown Derby plates handed round by a powdered footman! But they were mostly very sincere in their beliefs. Aunt Louise and her husband lived the simple life with great fervour, and in what I considered great discomfort. They considered all men equal, so their servants - raw Essex country girls - had to sit at table with them, too embarrassed to eat, and their sons had to go to the local village school, and how they hated it! A terrible handicap for four really clever boys.

After I left school, I went to Trinity College,

Dublin, and there again I was very fortunate. I was just in time to attend lectures given by the eminent Shakespearian scholar, who was also a poet, Edward Dowden, one of the last of the great Victorian literary figures. [I'll never forget an incident that occurred during one of his lectures. He had given us an essay to write, and one incredibly stupid undergraduate had merely written out an essay of Emerson's on the same ^{formed it off as his own.} subject. Professor Dowden started quite mildly, praising the essay, then he got more and more wrathful as he exposed the man, and ended by shouting "I can forgive the miserable wretch for the fraud, after all it was better for him to copy out a masterpiece than try to compose some rubbish of his own, but what I cannot forgive is the incredible impertinence of him! How dared he think that I could be deceived by his imposture!" With that, he threw the essay on to the floor and left the Lecture Theatre. He died very soon after that episode.

At the Provost's House, (the Provost was the well-known raconteur, Professor Mahaffy) I met George Russell, poet and editor of the "Irish Statesman", better known as "A.E." George ^{Moore} Russell, painter, poet and novelist, Lady Gregory, poetess and playwright, and, last but greatest, W.B. Yeats. These were all founders of the "Irish Literary Revival", and directors of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

Yeats was a noble figure. He was tall and thin in those days, and his height was accentuated by the clothes he wore, a flowing cape, flapping tie, wide collar, and large broad-brimmed hat. The most striking thing about him to my mind, was his beautiful voice. He had a slight but lovely brogue, I think they now call it an 'Irish Voice', and he spoke, so to speak, with measured tread, so that every sentence seemed like a poem. I don't think I'll ever forget him.

Well, Time has marched on so quickly, I have no time for more, but perhaps it's as well. Perhaps the earlier giants are more interesting than the ones I met later on.