

CHAPTER XVI

THRILLS AND EPITAPHS

Later-day thrills and surprises—Why grow old?—Laws of compensation—Will power and imagination—What Walt Whitman says—Moonlight memories—The love of our dogs—What Byron and Lafayette say—Experiences during a miners' strike—Pit ponies, savage from terror—A volunteer tries to save them—"Peaceful pickets"—A perilous undertaking in the dark—The ponies saved—Author's son and a Bath ball—Hunger a good sauce—A policeman's kindness—A picket is squared—Surrounded by an angry mob—A pot of strawberry jam—A policeman volunteer—Lord Rhondda's kind note—Surprising language—Lord Rhondda's advice to discontented miners—At a mothers' meeting—The Queen's shilling—Lord Kitchener's advice—Training recruits—Off to the war—Some experiences—Stories that must not be told—A splendid son—Queen Victoria's example in old age—Lord Roberts summoned to Osborne—He weeps bitterly—Dutiful and affectionate relations—Some wistful moments—Failing memory—Some epitaphs.

As I married when very young, my boy and I have been companions and pals all his life, and we are still inseparable; that is to say, we are never apart unless circumstances insist upon it.

He still, though now six foot three and stronger than when a child, provides me with thrills and surprises. I am leaving my life behind me, and as my autumn days will soon be succeeded by those of winter, I am studying the art of growing old gracefully.

Emerson says: "We do not count a man old until we have nothing else to count." This is doubtless true to some extent, for when hearts and minds are young they have a kindly way of smoothing out wrinkles and keeping eyes bright, and the laws of compensation are great and wonderful.

Why do those who dread old age not refuse to grow old? This may sound childish, but there is more in

it than meets the eye at a glance; or why should some people look old at thirty, while others look young at sixty? The fact is that many of us are just as old as we make ourselves. Will-power and imagination are our best friends, so let us take one in each hand and go forth to meet the years.

When we are young we say, "Oh, at fifty I shall be too old for this or that," and proceed to map out our old age. It is a mistake for us to say "I am growing too old for this or that"; if we do, our convictions will engrave themselves on our faces and bring stiffness to our limbs.

At one time I thought old age must be a terrible thing, and life would be over at fifty. I have changed my views; age is more peaceful than youth. We set out to be amused with life, not realising that until we have obtained life's satisfaction we are not in a position to be amused, and that not all can sing in exile.

Walt Whitman tells us—

"Youth, large, lusty, loving; youth full of grace, force, and fascination,
Do you know that old age may come after you with equal grace, power, and fascination?"

In the autumn of our days we look back upon youth, thinking only of the health and strength of those days and its splendid faith in itself, forgetting that we had disappointments, loneliness, and griefs, which were harder to bear than the less feverish sorrows of age, when we are to a certain extent numbed. Now we can look back upon "Love's young dream" and other things with a smile.

God is good. He gives us joyousness in our youth, contentment and peace in our old age, when the kindly mist comes between us and our vanished ideals and those with our hearts in keep that have disappointed us. Yet there are days when we are

under the spell of the past, when lovely things and delightful people that have lapsed into "have beens" are again with us; a mist of memories and dreams, all true and real, to be treasured always.

Home—that magic word looms out largely in our thoughts, for it held together all the detached evidence of our lives; it was where all our hopes, ambitions, and fears were borne, and where many now lie buried in nameless graves.

I love to look back upon my life; there have been some sad, very sad days, but also many glorious ones. My mind often travels back to the days when I used to listen to our hounds singing in their kennels on moonlight nights. They seemed to have so much to say to the cold, stern-looking moon, and sang so charmingly, not the excited cry of the chase nor the voice of complaint. I used to creep down sometimes and watch them, taking care to keep out of sight. Perhaps they were talking to the good hounds and dogs that dwell there; if so, please, dear moon, be kind and gentle to them, for they did their best whilst here—did not always understand us, and so generously forgave all our injustices. I wished I could understand the burden of their song; perhaps I shall some day.

To have dogs about us is one of the pleasures of life; they have such strong affections. Their master or mistress is the one love of their lives, and you can rely upon their faithfulness at all times; they do not care whether we are rich or poor, highly or lowly born, just or unjust, selfish or unselfish. Their love is wonderful, and, after all, we stand alone, fearfully alone on this planet, with no love like that of our dogs, who trust us without question. Neglect them, they love you all the same; ill-treat them, and they lick your hand.

Byron expresses himself charmingly in his lines—

“ Poor little dog, in life the firmest friend,
The first to welcome foremost to defend,
Whose honest heart is still his master's own
Who labours, fights, lives for him alone.”

The great Lafayette also once said: “ The more I see of man the more I love my dog.” In his dining-room was a notice fastened to the wall, addressed to his guests: “ Eat my dinners, drink my wines, command my servants, but spare my dog.”

As the days of my personal excitements are passing away, I will turn to some provided for me by my son,

During the 1910 Ton-y-Pandy riots in Wales, when the miners, without warning, went on strike and the pit ponies were left without their keepers to starve or drown, my son volunteered to go and try to save them.

It came about in this way. He and I were returning by train from London to our home we were renting in the South, and we were reading in the papers the pitiful account of the pit ponies, left with nobody to look after them, or, for the matter of that, practically nobody left to prevent the mines being flooded and ruined.

Suddenly my son said to me: “ I would like to volunteer to help in the mines and, if possible, save the ponies. As I know a good bit about motors and motor power, I might be some use. Shall I offer my services? I could write to-night.”

I replied: “ By the time you could receive an answer, in all probability the ponies will be dead; according to the papers, they have already been three days without food. Why not go straight to Ton-y-Pandy from Bristol, where we are due to arrive in a few minutes? When you arrive in Wales you can offer your services.

He thought that perhaps that would be the best

thing to do and so save time, and from Bristol he went. The next day I received a telegram saying he was just going into the mines, and I must not be worried if I did not hear from him for a day or two. His offer of help had been accepted.

The situation was difficult—only a handful of officials with a few loyal helpers were left in a practically besieged power-house, where the furnaces and engines were on which the well-being of the mines depended. If these could not be kept working the mines would be flooded, ruined, and all the ponies drowned.

As there were what the miners were pleased to call “peaceful pickets” all round the head of the mine and surrounding the power station, no food could be delivered for the besieged.

It would be too long a story to describe the particulars of how my son got into the mine and his many thrilling experiences; suffice it to say he did get in and worked hard—desperate work—night and day, helping the gallant little band, for already the water was rising alarmingly. In addition to stoking the furnaces furiously, he and some of the officials succeeded, at the risk of their lives, in saving the poor ponies.

My son said they had to swing themselves down with ropes over the rising water, which had already removed many landmarks. They jumped from place to place, clinging to the ropes, with only the light of miners' lamps to help them to find their way, and these they carried in their hands. When at last they succeeded in reaching the ponies—they were swimming about, almost mad from want and fright—many of them were most savage, screaming and biting one another.

With enormous difficulty, which seemed almost im-

possible to conquer at last the unhappy little beasts were brought to a place of safety, and my son spent a whole day and night feeding and looking after them by the aid of one small miner's lamp carried in his hand. He was all alone among some hundred savage and distracted animals, heads and tails all mixed up inextricably. Suddenly one of the crowd gave a most horrifying, unearthly scream and kicked the lamp out of his hand. Now all was total darkness, the darkness of the grave.

My son began to wonder if he would ever find his way through the crowd of ponies without being killed by them, and whether he would ever see the light again. He succeeded, by creeping about, in finding a wall, along which he groped until he arrived at a place where he could be heard, and after shouting help came.

Now it was not long before the ponies were taken above ground and safe, though many of the poor things were blind from being so long working and living in the dark. They seemed to look upon men as their bitterest enemies, to be kicked and bitten for condemning them to so terrible a life.

If all the underground work done by the ponies could be done by machinery, what a blessing it would be! For unlike the miners, the ponies cannot come up into the open air when their work is done and go home, and if they went on strike I tremble to think of their fate, poor long-suffering little beasts!

I was talking some time ago to a man who has worked in the mines, and asked him if the ponies were properly treated while hidden away underground. He said that some of the ponies keepers were good and kind—that is to say, as kind as circumstances would allow to their charges—but there were others who were brutal. I cannot repeat the stories as told to me for

it makes me sick. I am told present-day conditions are better. I hope so, but at best it is an awful life.

During the present 1926 strike I hear the ponies have been having the time of their lives out in the open. Truly it is an ill wind that blows nobody or anything any good.

But to return to my son. The next news of him reached me through some of the illustrated newspapers, where I saw him stoking the furnaces for all that he was worth, with a policeman standing by for his protection and the protection of the others working with him. The miners had found out that what they called a "blackleg" was doing the work that they had deserted, and they were vowing vengeance and thirsting for his blood.

Once, when my son was on the point of fainting from the hard manual work and from want of food, a kind policeman came to him with a piece of bread fried in dripping on the lid of an old biscuit tin; he said he never enjoyed anything so much in his life. Hunger is, indeed, a good sauce. I was amused on hearing of this dainty dish, for when at home he was distinctly particular about his food and the way it was served.

On another occasion, when hunger was pressing, he determined to try and slip out somehow in the dark, and reach the small general stores that stood near the mouth of the pit. It was jumpy work, and when he dropped out of the window of the power station he fell into the bosom of a picket. This individual proved to be peaceful, and allowed himself to be squared, and my son stole away towards the shop, hoping he was unnoticed.

Hardly had he reached the desired emporium before he found a hostile crowd gathering round the shop,

waiting for the "blackleg" to come out, when they meant having him. The police were alert, and quickly gathered together to escort the "blackleg" safely back. The angry crowd followed, while my son, surrounded by policemen, marched in the midst of them, carrying a pot of strawberry jam, the only thing he had found time to buy before he was hurried back to safety.

During this disturbance my son was due at Bath for a ball, and feared that if he failed to appear it might upset his host's arrangements and party, so he asked the mine authorities if he could be spared for a night, and was told: "Yes, but the risk be upon your own head. Remember that outside there are plenty thirsting for your blood."

Nothing daunted, he watched his opportunity, and with the help of the police he succeeded in stealing away, but had to go exactly as he stood, in black shirt-sleeves that once were white, grimy face and body. For he had been sleeping whenever he could get a chance, on the floor of the power-house amongst others, all treading on each other's faces in their frantic efforts to find a place where they could rest their weary bodies for a short spell to enable them to carry on.

Being well known in Bath, his arrival in this state caused a sensation. I had been asked to motor over from our home, not a great distance away, and to bring some clean clothes and his dress-suit; this I had done, and the relief of a tub and change into clean clothes was much appreciated.

As soon as the ball was over he returned to Ton-y-Pandy, and had more thrilling experiences. He did not tell me much about his own share of the work, but others who were working with him did. My son was so full of the splendid work done by the officials, who

were doing the work of about six men apiece, that I did not hear much from him about his own doings.

When the trouble was over, Mr. David Thomas (later Lord Rhondda), whose property the mines in question were, wrote to me a kind letter expressing his admiration of my son's conduct and valuable work, saying what a help he had been. A set of studs were presented to my son as a little souvenir.

The worst was over, but the police were still having a hard time, many being seriously injured. So now my son volunteered to help them, and became a volunteer policeman *pro tem*. The miners' wives amused themselves by throwing boiling water out of the windows on to their heads whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Some of the accounts given to me by those intimately acquainted with the lives of the miners have surprised me. I had always imagined, from their own accounts, that they were hard worked, frugal, and found difficulty to make both ends meet. Instead of this I have heard that many of them have earned from £7 to £10 a week, with coal, wood, and rent-free houses—in fact, in spite of their dirty surroundings were living in considerable comfort, and many were most extravagant, throwing away and wasting what would not be tolerated in any well-conducted household among what they call the Capitalists.

For instance, if they have a leg of mutton for dinner on Sunday, they may perhaps eat it cold on Monday, and then, rather than take the trouble to do it up in any form, throw it away. They live mostly on tinned food, so as to save the trouble of preparing dishes, and tinned food is not an economical way of managing.

The miners' wives do not, in most cases, do their family washing in the old-fashioned and thrifty way, but put it out and pay others to do it for them. A

policeman once told me that the language used by the miners' wives was a revelation to him, being so unpleasant and disgusting.

It must be unpleasant and risky working in the mines, but nobody insists on their doing it; the miners can choose their own profession, and when they have done so they should not grumble at the work and the conditions attached to it. If not content, why do they not choose some other more congenial calling, and work twelve or fifteen hours a day, as many are doing now since the war, and being done by people who before the war had never done hard work? They are the thrifty, honest people, who would think it a disgrace to go on the dole and live on other people's charity.

Lord Rhondda once said to the miners when they made trouble on another occasion: "Why do you not buy some of the property and work the mines yourselves, take the profits, risks, and losses, provide the brains and the capital? You have plenty of money belonging to your unions."

That was not advice that they cared for; they did not want risks and losses, or to provide new plant, machinery, etc. It is surprising to find how little some of the discontented working-classes use their brains or think of anybody but themselves. When I was speaking at a mothers' meeting not long ago on matters of interest to them, the question of better wages for men and women cropped up. I was told: "All that we want is a living wage; everything is so dear now." It seemed to be quite a new idea to them when I pointed out that each rise in wages was paid for by themselves, as each rise in wages meant a rise in the price of the commodities being made. The boot factories, for instance. When the wages were raised, the price of boots had to be raised accordingly, as factories are not run out of charity; the owners have

to live also. So the discontented ones were arguing in a circle. One woman said: "I wish we could go back to the old days, when wages were less and things cheaper."

Personally, I would like everybody on earth to have time and money enough to enjoy their lives and live in pleasant conditions, but I do not think that anybody, no matter what their position, is happy who does not work in some capacity—congenial work for choice if possible.

The next excitement provided for me by my son was when war was declared, for he at once enlisted in one of the regiments of guards, as he said he must do his bit and at once. On his arrival in barracks a sympathetic sergeant said quietly in his ear: "This is no place for you; slip over the wall to-night."

This advice was not taken, and my son stuck to it until my kind old friend Lord Kitchener, who had played at soldiers with my boy when he was a small person in sailor clothes, said that he ought to go into his father's old regiment, which was a well-known Highland unit. So as soon as the necessary training was over he was given a commission in the first battalion of that Highland regiment, and went off to the war.

His description of the training of some of the new recruits before leaving England was very funny. He said the poor dear splendid fellows, all anxiety to do their bit, used to come on to parade in all sorts of extraordinary kit, proper uniform at that early date being unobtainable for such vast numbers. Some turned up with parcels under their arms containing boots, others in caps of all shades and patterns; some in Glengarry caps, frock coats, and shorts—anything they could muster. Think of the feelings of the immaculate old "Contemptibles" who were training

them, and who had been accustomed to men arriving on parade without a hair out of place or a dull button; but they realised the spirit that had made these men come and offer themselves for future powder and shot.

My son's letters from the Front were always cheerful and at times amusing, yet one could read between the lines of the awful tragedies being enacted. In one letter I was told that it had been his duty to go out one dark night to seek certain information that was desired, while the enemy trenches were so close that they could be heard talking from our own. He went off with a sergeant to carry out his orders, and shortly found himself swimming about in a big cesspool, with his kilt floating round him like a halo; and it ended in his being empaled on some barbed wire by parts of his body not protected at the moment by his kilt!

There are many stories I would like to tell of that time, but I had better not. Some were told to me by a General holding a most responsible position—stories almost unbelievable. Oh, humanity! poor humanity! Some of these stories will no doubt be told at some future time, but that time is not yet.

My son was badly gassed early in the war, and so was winged for life—no more hunting, no more dancing, no more junketings for him. But now, after some years of careful nursings and sanatoriums, he is able to be useful, and enjoy his life once more in a gentle and mild sort of way.

His activities now occupy my mind more than my own, as becomes mothers of big sons, and I thank God for having given me one of the best sons the world has ever seen.

Every day when he is away from me, when it is humanly possible, he writes, telephones, or telegraphs to me, and never in his life has he said an unkind

word to me. As our winter days approach we find what we thought would be horrible has now lost its terrors. Providence has mercifully ordained that age descends upon us gradually, almost imperceptibly. By degrees we find less pleasure in our activities of the past, we grow tired sooner, and then give them up without regret, and are glad we came nor sorry to depart.

But I am a believer in sticking to the harness. I always admired the way that Queen Victoria stuck to her harness. When age came upon her, it found her full of pluck and tenacity of purpose, though gradually giving up one thing after another that was beyond her strength; but her spirit and deep love for her country and people made her work for them to the last.

Indeed, to within a few days of the end, though recognising that her days were far spent, she insisted on getting up and attending to the affairs of State.

Just at this time Lord Roberts was due home from South Africa; his ship was in the Solent. The Queen ordered it to be stopped, and requested Lord Roberts to proceed to Osborne at once to see her.

On his arrival he was immediately summoned to her presence, and remained with her for half an hour. The visit would have lasted longer, but it was considered unwise to overtax Her Majesty's strength. There was much that she wished to hear about South Africa and the war; besides, Lord Roberts had lost his only son on the Tugela River in 1899, and the Queen had lost her grandson, Prince Christian, at Pretoria, so we can well imagine it was an emotional half-hour.

I know that when Lord Roberts left he was weeping bitterly. Their conversation had been trying, also he was much upset at the altered appearance of the

Queen since he had last seen her, just before leaving for South Africa.

Within a few days of this visit to Osborne Mr. Balfour was sent for urgently at 6.30 in the evening of January 22, 1901—the Queen had entered her rest.

It may not be generally known that King Edward, the Duke of Connaught, and the Kaiser lifted the Queen into her coffin; no other hands were allowed to carry out this last office.

As age creeps on we cease to strive after impossibilities, we are less feverish and turbulent, our ideals no longer beckon us, we no longer kick against the pricks; instead, we gather up the threads of the past, look back dispassionately upon the days when everything seemed so overwhelmingly important and now so trivial and insignificant.

There are some wistful moments in the lives of mothers. It is hard on a woman when she loses her partner late in life and he is succeeded by his son, who takes possession of the home, while the mother, who has borne the heat and burden of the day, has to seek pastures new, face the world afresh, under new and often less pleasant and sheltered surroundings, at a time when she has not the health and strength of youth and the confidence that comes with it. Consequently, she feels terribly uprooted. It is right and proper for a son to succeed his father, but it means some wistful moments for the poor old mother:

I remember when I was about to be married, and the marriage settlements were being read over to me before being signed. It struck me, though I was very young and thoughtless, that it would be a cruel thing for my mother-in-law to have to turn out of her home if her husband died before she did and my husband came into the property, so I spoke of this

to my young man, and we agreed that his mother should end her days in the home where she had spent so many happy years. And so it happened, she died there in peace.

Another wistful moment is when a mother finds her babies want her no more, for having found their wings, they want to use them and fly away, and all that is left to her is to watch them sail away with white sails set, until in the mist and the rain they are out of sight. We mothers pray so earnestly that we may be spared until our bairns can do without us, are no longer dependent on us for their happiness, but when the time comes we feel it. Something, a big something, has gone out of our lives, leaving them empty.

Failure of memory in old age is both a blessing and an annoyance. Happily, many do not know how funny they are when their memory plays them tricks, like the old lady who had been to see Doré's picture of Christ leaving the Prætorium, and on her return home said she had much enjoyed seeing Christ leaving the Criterion!

Then, again, there was an old man who was not feeling well, having overeaten himself, and when asked what was the matter said he had a pain in his brisket!

Now it is time I left off writing and turned my attention to a suitable epitaph for my tombstone. The one on the Lisington tomb always amused me—

“ Six sons went to heaven to be with their father,
Six daughters remained on earth to be with their mothers ”

For mine I think I should like something like this—

“ Life is mostly froth and bubble,
Two things stand like stone.
Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in our own. ”



THE AUTHOR'S FAVOURITE WALK IN THE GARDEN OF HER NORTH-COUNTRY HOME