



BY CAROLINE A. CREEVEY.

OTHER people have always been a fascinating topic of conversation, not only to members of a time-honored sewing-society, but to men in their clubs, and women over their tea-cups. Especially if these other people are famous persons, everything connected with their private life, personal habits, family, household pets, etc., is invested with peculiar interest. Fame is a sort of halo around the heads of those whom it delights to honor. Much of the interest accorded to our distinguished neighbors is kindly and natural—a different thing from that vulgar curiosity to which the camera-fiend and the insinuating newspaper reporter cater, when they part the curtains and expose the real private life of every man, to be respected in which is his right as much as the right to be “born free and equal.”

A little gentle gossip, after the fashion set us by kindly Dr. Holmes in the “Autocrat” and the “Professor at the Breakfast Table,” can harm nobody, and will make us better acquainted with our heroes.

Especially may we shake hands in this way with our writers—the makers of our book-friends. Even the whims and weaknesses of authors only bring them nearer to us. We love them none the less for being like us.

Many times the circumstances under which books have been written endear them to us apart from their real merit. With how much pathos is “The Martian” invested by our knowing, as we now know, that its brilliant, sensitive author was a dying man at the very time when he wrote those chapters. How affecting is Barty’s grief over his lost eye read in the light of Du Maurier’s own affliction.

There is a book on the top shelf of your library, “Rasselas.” It was written by Dr. Johnson in the extreme of poverty in order to get money for his mother’s funeral. May we not take down the forgotten volume, wipe off the dust of generations and read it again for her sake? The great dictionary which made the doctor’s fame was a means of support not only to the

author, but to the singular family of pensioners which his great heart had brought into his home—a complaining and helpless widow, a bankrupt physician, a blind woman and an emancipated slave. This is the man who could not write in a clean shirt. From all we know of him, that impediment did not often lie in his way.

Shirley Brooks, at one time editor of "Punch," could write only when divested of his coat. On the other hand, Buffon, the great naturalist, could handle his pen only when faultlessly dressed, in a frilled, starched shirt and handsome coat.

George Eliot was very susceptible as to her surroundings. When about to write she dressed herself with great care, and arranged her harmoniously furnished room in perfect order. She was slow and painstaking, seldom writing over forty to sixty lines a day. When one of her books was finished, she found herself so exhausted nervously that only a trip to Italy or the south of France could restore her to normal condition.

In perfect contrast to this is the picture of that dreadful Bohemian, Walt Whitman, who used to lie upon the ground, on his back, staring at the sun in a temperature of 100° Fahrenheit. Coatless, hatless, gray-shirted, with bare neck and swarthy face, there he composed many of his poems. Or the muse came to him on the top of an omnibus, or when he was strolling along that strip of sand which was then Coney island. "I loaf and invite my soul," he used to say, and those who knew him best could not deny that loafing was an occupation in which he excelled.

The purely mechanical work of writing is so great that it is a wonder so many books have come to light. Many a flash of genius has been lost to the world because of the labor involved in putting it on paper. If only thoughts could be photographed by some instantaneous process! Says Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett: "It is all very nice to have beautiful visions and ideas floating around in your brain, and to lie back and watch them; but you won't succeed in anything unless you pin those ideas down on paper or canvas, or model them in clay, as the case may be. I am not inclined to work, but I go to my study every morning, whether

I am in the mood or not, and it is seldom that I do not accomplish something."

Emile Zola is one who has method in the arrangement of his work. He is a slow writer, setting himself the exact number of four pages of a prescribed size daily. When he has reached his limit, even if he be in the middle of a sentence, he lays down his pen. On the next day, his subject is so fresh in his mind that he resumes work without reading over what he has already written. Before beginning a new work Zola reads for months, the books bearing on his subject arising in great piles on his table. Once at work, he seldom needs to refer to anything.

The realistic Balzac wrote as if frenzied with his work—"inebriated," as Sainte-Beuve says. He would write to the very verge of mortal endurance, twenty hours a day, keeping sleep away with copious drafts of strong coffee, closely housed for, say, two months. Then he would suddenly appear in the streets, shake hands with everybody, and ask for the news as if just returned from a long journey. Soon he would again disappear and proceed with his writing. No wonder he could say: "Work! always work! Night succeeds night of consuming work; day succeeds day of meditation; execution succeeds conception, conception execution! When I am not leaning over my papers by the light of wax candles, in the room which I have described in 'La Fille aux Yeux d'Or,' or lying down from fatigue on the divan, I am panting with pecuniary difficulties, sleeping little, eating little, seeing nobody."

George Bancroft seldom wrote more than three hundred words a day. He retired regularly at ten, rose at five, was at his desk at six, and was through with his daily work by nine o'clock. He found it impossible to write except in the early morning hours. He said that mental labor at night is injurious. But as Bancroft was a great reader, and as the work preliminary to the writing of his twelve volumes of histories must have been enormous, it is safe to presume that he was not idle during the latter part of the day.

Anthony Trollope set daily limits to his writing. His rule was two hundred and fifty words an hour four hours a day, often

finished before nine o'clock in the morning. He worked on Sundays, fifty-two weeks in a year. He was accustomed to read his manuscripts over three times before sending them to the printer.

Perhaps writers are peculiarly susceptible to habit. Funny tricks of this sort are related. The minister dependent upon his wad of paper for inspiration during his sermon, was not more helpless when his wife abstracted the roll from his pocket, than was Tennyson without his tobacco. A box of clay pipes and a jar filled with tobacco were placed in the poet's den at the top of the house. Here he wrote mornings, refusing to be disturbed, amid clouds of smoke. He would never smoke the same pipe twice. He was accustomed to fill one, smoke it empty, break it, throw it away and fill another. When his day's work was finished, he would announce, by ringing a bell, his willingness to receive visitors. He clad himself in eccentric costume at such times, and when weary, rested by lounging on a divan under the window, with some choice book.

Less harmful to himself, but inconvenient to his wife, must have been Hawthorne's habit of cutting and whittling while composing a book. While writing "The Scarlet Letter," one day he took a garment from Mrs. Hawthorne's sewing-basket and snipped it to pieces, wholly unconscious of the mischief he was doing. He cut up an entire table in this manner, and whittled off the arms of a rocking-chair, which is said to be now carefully preserved among the archives of the family.

It is related of Beethoven that he often stood by the hour pouring cold water upon his hands, when composing. Sometimes he could write only on the north side of the house, again only on the south.

What shall we think of Schiller's fondness for the smell of decaying apples, which he is said to have kept in an open drawer of the table on which he wrote? When expostulated with by Goethe, who detested the odor, Schiller would close the drawer, and open it again when his friend had departed.

Before Freeman, the historian, could write, he had to breakfast on toast burnt to a crisp.

Buckland, the naturalist, could write

only when his shoes were off. So he used to kick them from his feet, and leaving them, walk about his room in his stockings. Once, when traveling, he fell asleep in the railway coach. His feet were upon the sill of the open window. He must have dreamed of writing, for during the nap he kicked his boots off, and arrived at his station stocking-footed, being obliged to walk to his hotel in that condition.

Haydn had a ring which had been presented to him by Frederick, King of Prussia. He insisted that he could not write his best if he had forgotten to place this ring on his finger.

Sterne is another who found his inspiration in a signet-ring.

These things seem like the affectations of genius, but at least they are harmless. During the time of composing, either in letters or in music, the brain is abnormally active. The body, for the time being, is in subjection to the thought. So Montaigne's action of stroking his favorite black cat whenever puzzled for a word, is in keeping with what we know of brain activity. The cat's answering purr seemed to give, in this instance, the signal for unlocking those cerebral cells in which the word or sentence was hidden.

Gray could write his best after reading and pondering over a canto of "The Faerie Queen." This stimulant will scarcely encourage people of to-day. Those more potent tonics of drink, such as strong coffee, and wine and whisky, can be better understood. Many of our writers, like Balzac, have done their work under the nerve-inspiring power of coffee. Byron, we know, drank, unfortunately, more than was good for his poetry. So did our American genius, Edgar Allen Poe. Addison used to walk up and down a long gallery at Holland House, composing his beautiful essays, drinking from bottles of wine, one of which stood at each end of the hall. De Quincey and Coleridge ate opium. Of the former, some queer pranks are told. Given a joint of mutton, cut with mathematical precision, and his allowance of laudanum, he was perfectly happy. After eating, he would stretch himself at full length before the fire, in deep opium slumber. Awakening at two or three o'clock in the morning, he would pour

forth streams of eloquence to a crowd of friends and neighbors who had meanwhile gathered in anticipation of the performance. He once went to spend a night with Christopher North and stayed a whole year.

As for penmanship, we think a monument should be raised to the army of martyrs—the printers who have had to decipher the scrawly, microscopic, often nearly illegible handwriting which has marked so many of our authors. The story has often been told of Horace Greeley, how he wrote a letter to James Gordon Bennett in which even the signature was illegible. After trying in vain to decipher the words, Mr. Bennett handed the letter back to the messenger, with the words, "He must be a fool." The boy returned the note to Mr. Greeley, who, thinking it was the answer to his note, and failing to recognize and read his own handwriting, handed it to the boy, saying, "He must be a fool." "That's just what the other fellow said," remarked the boy.

This is almost matched by Thomas Carlyle's naïve remark when handing some of his horribly scrawled manuscript to his patient secretary. "I cannot make any sense of this, but doubtless you can," he said.

Dickens was not accustomed to copy his manuscript, but sent it all covered with erasures and scratches to the printers. Sometimes it was a veritable Chinese puzzle.

The original manuscript of "Kenilworth" is in the British Museum. The chapter which describes Amy Robsart's death is the neatest in the book. Scott, owing to ill health, in the latter part of his life used to dictate his novels. "A Legend of Montrose," "The Bride of Lammermoor" and "Ivanhoe" were among these. He dictated so fast that his amanuensis could hardly keep pace with him. While composing "The Bride of Lammermoor" Scott was often in such pain he would cry out in the midst of a sentence. When begged to stop work, at least till he was easier, he would answer: "Nay, only see that the doors are fast. I would fain keep all the cry as well as wool to ourselves; but as to giving over work, that can only be when I am dead."

Thackeray's manuscript was clean, almost entirely free from erasure. The handwriting was clear and regular, the words were well separated. He dictated "Henry Esmond" and "Pendennis." Thackeray wrote in the morning, never at night.

The manuscript of Fenimore Cooper looked as if written with a burnt stick. Macaulay wrote always on foolscap paper. Alexander Dumas, the younger, had piles of paper cut in one size, of different tints. He would choose certain colors on different days, and write neatly and carefully. George Sand wrote only on ruled paper. Bryant used the backs of old letters, and waste-paper, for the first draft of his poems. He could not bear to see anything wasted. Once when asked how he kept his literary style from degenerating owing to his occupation of journalism, he said: "Because my writing for the 'Evening Post' also is done in my carefulest manner. I always write my best. I would sooner the paper should go to press without an editorial article than send one to the printer that I was not satisfied with." Letters to the baker or butcher were written with the same scrupulous care. Bryant rose at five, and practised an hour at light gymnastics before his breakfast. Pope was his pocket-companion. Is it the modern newspaper which has crowded out of men's pockets Young's "Night Thoughts," Pollock's "Course of Time" and the "Essay on Man"?

Wilkie Collins drafted a synopsis of a proposed novel, worked it over and then filled it out. He altered and amended the copy a great many times, sending it in at last often type-written. He wrote most of his novels seven times.

Charles Reade used very large paper. Miss Braddon scribbled on torn envelopes and scraps. Ouida uses large blue paper, writing in a bold, firm hand. Her writing is, however, exceedingly difficult to decipher. Mark Twain covers a folio sheet of cardboard to write one of his short jokes. R. D. Blackmore uses small sheets of note-paper, and writes an almost microscopic hand.

General Lew Wallace drafts his story first on a slate, then copies upon large white, unruled sheets of paper, in handwriting that is faultless. This author says of

himself: "My characters are essentially living persons. They arise, sit, talk, look and behave like themselves. In dealing with them, I see them. I know them by their features. They answer my call. Some of them I detest. Such as I most affect become my familiars. In turn they call me, and I recognize their voice."

Mr. Trollope, already referred to, on the other hand, seems never to have formed his plot when he began to write. Having fixed on a general run of thought, he would begin writing, and his subject would open up to him. He did not review or correct till all was written once through.

I am told that F. Hopkinson Smith has his entire story in his mind before sitting down to write a word. Even the division of chapters and the details of dialogue are vividly in his mind, so that when he does begin his task of writing, his work goes on amazingly fast.

Miss Wilkins never copies. She says that life is too short to write a story twice.

Maurus Jókai, the Hungarian novelist, is one of the most voluminous of writers, an edition of his works consisting of three hundred and fifty volumes. He thus writes: "I am transported into the psychological world of each individual [his character]; I absorb them; I adapt myself to the humor and disposition of each. . . . The suggestions of an evil heart or a corrupt mind, as a libertine, an assassin, a miser or a despot, excite me to much suffering; the neurotic state torments me; the insensibility of an atheist irritates me; the suffering of all these people affects me to tears. Therefore I must be alone when I write. Generally I walk about when composing, and for this reason I do better work in summer, under the trees, than I would in winter, between four walls. I elaborate my novel to the very last dialogue, mentally. I

then write with great rapidity and without erasure."

Of our two greatest Scandinavian novelists, Henrik Ibsen and Björnstjerne Björnson, we find a little gossip. Ibsen is fastidiously neat in his habits, and punctual, although never in a hurry. He has taken two years to write some of his plays, erasing and altering so that scarcely a word of the original would remain. Upon his writing-table a visitor saw a small tray containing a number of grotesque figures, a wooden bear, a tiny devil, two or three cats (one of them playing a fiddle) and some rabbits. Ibsen has said: "I never write a single line of any of my dramas without having that tray and its occupants before me on my table. I could not write without them. But why I use them is my own secret."

Björnson is neither tidy nor methodical. He writes until two, his dinner-hour. His manuscript is nearly illegible, but his wife copies it for the printer, sometimes twice. When about to write a book, he walks up and down, muttering to himself, while forming the plan chapter by chapter. Once ready, the book almost writes itself.

These few pages of gossip suggest that the eccentricities of genius are as varied as the features on different faces. What to one man is a source of inspiration, to another would be the merest folly.

The smooth printed page tells no tale of the prolonged, earnest toil which lies behind it. Our authors also, like the rest of mankind, live by the sweat of their brows. The technique of the expression of genius, like the technique of anything else, can be obtained only by persistent effort, by patience in work. Pegasus must come down to earth, and suffer himself to be harnessed. "Without firmness of purpose," says Lord Chesterfield, "genius wastes itself in a maze of inconsistencies."

