

THE
BESANT PEDIGREE

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“GRANDFATHER” WILLIAM BESANT IN 1866.

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FOREWORD

FIFTY years have passed since the death of my grandfather, William Besant, and all his ten children have now followed him to the grave. Already the circle of those who knew and talked with these Besants has become narrowed, and though I am conscious that the family pedigree may not be of any general or outside interest, yet it has long seemed to me that such information as is still available ought to be regarded as being worthy of preservation, and should be placed on record for the use of the younger generations.

Mainly on account of my early education at Portsmouth I had the opportunity of being in close and continuous touch with these older Besants and of becoming acquainted with the family traditions. The following notes have been collected and pieced together from various sources. Of these the most important consist of two manuscript note books, compiled in 1883 by my late father, the Rev. Frank Besant, and supplemented by various memoranda written at later dates and continued methodically by him until his death in 1917. He gives the names

of the numerous brothers and sisters of his father and mother, with dates, in many cases, of births and deaths, and with a few biographical details. His records, however, extend no further back than his parents' generation.

The next most important source of information regarding the older generations of the family is provided by Sir Walter Besant's *Autobiography*. By the courtesy of Messrs. Hutchinson & Co., the publishers of that most interesting volume, I have been granted permission to quote from it various extracts which throw a vivid light upon the family surroundings in the days of Sir Walter's childhood. He gives a pleasing picture of the characteristics of both his parents, and—fortunately for my purpose—he records the place where his mother was born, with some slight details of her childhood. From the early diaries of Dr. William Henry Besant I have gleaned additional particulars of the family surroundings in 1848–50, and one or two elderly relatives and friends of the family have kindly furnished some useful notes. The information collected from all these sources has been checked and extended, so far as has proved practicable, by searches in baptismal, marriage and burial registers, and by extracts from the old rate-books of Portsea, extending over the major part of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth.

I have thus been able to trace back the history of the family for a further two generations, with the result that all the living descendants of the Portsea Besants can now link themselves with ancestors born over two hundred years ago.

Even so, I am sadly conscious of the extent to which the earlier portions of this family record are fragmentary and incomplete. Had the history been compiled thirty or forty years ago, gaps could have been filled in, from the testimony of those then still alive, which can now never be supplied. But there seems to have been little or no curiosity amongst my uncles and aunts as to their older relatives, and I cannot recall any conversations with them on the subject. All that I can claim, in submitting these notes to my younger relatives, is that no pains have been spared, on my side, to render the record as complete as possible.

A.D.B.

THE BESANT PEDIGREE

CHAPTER I

THE FAMILY NAME

THE name of Besant—which you may pronounce Besánt or Bésant as you prefer—is fairly uncommon, though one meets with it, not infrequently, throughout the eastern and southern counties of England. I have never come across it in the north. It is found under many different spellings, such as Bezant, Beasant, Beesant, Bessant, etc. No doubt all these names were derived from a common source, the variations in spelling arising mainly from variations in pronunciation. In an illiterate age such variations were perfectly natural: for when the spoken word came to be set down in writing, phonetic principles were commonly adopted, and thus divergencies in spelling were certain to occur. As education advanced, one or other of the current forms became permanently adopted by those who bore the name; and thus the many variations which, in their origin, were purely casual, became stereotyped; and from now onwards all such names will,

no doubt, remain unchanged in their present forms. An instance of this spelling variation actually occurred a century ago in the case of my own great-grandfather, John Besant. Despite the facts that he signed his name as Jno. Besant ; that he appears in the Portsea rate-books and in the Roll of Burgesses as John Besant ; in the register of his burial as John Besant ; he was recorded, for probate purposes, on his death in 1820, as John Beasant ; and his widow, the administratrix, as Mary Beasant. Yet when she, in her turn, died some ten years later, she was correctly recorded, for probate purposes, as Mary Besant.

An interesting and illuminating pamphlet on the family name was written by Sir Walter Besant in 1898 and was privately printed by him for circulation among the family. "I have only had a few copies printed for ourselves," he writes to one of his brothers. Fortunately these copies produced from the brothers a considerable amount of correspondence, much of which has passed into my hands. Mainly from the pamphlet and from the letters which ensued I have built up the history of the family name which follows. I can neither confirm nor disprove the statements therein made, but remembering the painstaking accuracy of the author of the pamphlet as trained historian and antiquary, I feel sure that we may regard his facts as being well

authenticated and his conjectures as being carefully thought out, before he committed himself to their publication. He rejects as untenable the theory that the name was a corruption of Beauséant. When I was a boy we all believed—or at least we were always told—that we belonged to a noble French family and had come over with the Conqueror. Some of the elders, indeed, wore signet rings bearing the Beauséant crest. When Walter was knighted and had to go into the question of his crest, he enquired from one of his brothers what authority he had for using the Beauséant crest. “I assumed it many years ago,” he replied. To which Walter retorted, “My dear fellow, you might just as well have assumed to be Archbishop of Canterbury.”

On the other hand, my late uncle, Dr. W. H. Besant of Cambridge, who was born in 1828, added the following comment to his brother Walter’s pamphlet :

“I remember being told that a great uncle of my father’s was, in the eighteenth century, towards the end of it, a private soldier in Napoleon’s army. This is in favour of the theory that the name is a corruption of Beauséant.

“Also a man named Besant died in America some years ago, leaving considerable property. Search was made for his heirs, and my brother Albert had a letter

from a solicitor on the subject. This old man was the son, or grandson, of the soldier in Napoleon's army."

This takes us back a long way, but it is not very conclusive. For one imagines that, at the end of the eighteenth century, relatives who were fighting under the enemy's banner would be looked at askance by the British branches of the family. Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile the chronology. William Besant was born in 1800; his father in 1762; his great-uncle, therefore, in all probability must have been born prior to 1750. As Napoleon was not born until 1769, it seems unlikely, though not impossible, that this Beauséant or Besant could have served under that great military leader.

Leaving, however, the Beauséant origin out of account, we come to what is undoubtedly an authentic example of the name as early as the reign of Henry II. In 1170, on the occasion of the marriage of the King's daughter, a tax or "tillage" was levied on the City of London. The King's Moneyers or Minters, ten in number, were separately assessed. One of these Minters was Lefwine le Besant. He must have been a man of substance, for the tax that he was called upon to pay amounted to £60—an enormous sum in those days. In 1195 appears another man of the same surname, Robert le Besant. Robert Besaunt became Sheriff of London in that year. Now at that early date surnames were rare,

and such few as existed were either trade names or place names. That of Besant—though primarily a craft-name—apparently partook of both characters. For the Besant was undoubtedly a gold coin or disc or medal, struck at Byzantium, and Lefwine le Besant was an official Minter—a maker of coins. His existence proves conclusively the extreme antiquity of our family name.

Here let me give an explanation of the name based upon a manuscript that I found among the papers of my late father. Apart from a little condensing I have inserted his notes almost verbatim.

The origin of the name Besant is obscure, though the probability is that it was connected with Byzantium. . . . The Besant or Bezant was the name given to a disc or medal struck at Byzantium and awarded by the Emperor to Crusaders passing through that city on their return from a campaign. It was a gold coin of varying size and value—generally a blank unstamped coin. This medal must be regarded as being rather a symbol of pay than as representing actual pay. The theory seems to have been that the Emperor at Byzantium regarded all Crusaders as being his own mercenary soldiers; and, as such, as being entitled to his pay. As for paying them fully or reasonably for their services on behalf of the Cross, that was, of course, out of

the question ; but the Emperor wished to retain the appearance, or at least to maintain the fiction, that all Crusaders were engaged in his service. By presenting Bezants to the homeward-bound Crusaders he made a show of payment—the smallest types of the coin being given to the rank and file ; while the leaders or “ Royal Crusaders ” would be honoured by a magnificent disc which symbolically represented payment for all subsidiary services. But, invariably, the Bezant was a present from the Emperor to a Crusader : it was a token of military service done for himself, and it was always awarded at Byzantium. The recipients carried their Bezants to their own homes in various parts of Western Europe, and there, no doubt, they were treasured and handed down to descendants, just as military medals are treated in these modern days. In course of time the majority of these Bezants probably found their way into the melting pot ; but here and there one still survives. . . .

The Emperor's gift did not, however, invariably take the form of a golden disc. Sometimes the Bezant might be a piece of plate ; but, whatever the nature of the gift, it would always be called a Bezant, because this name represented *always* symbolic pay for military services. And here, I fancy, may be the possible origin of the Shaftes-

bury Besant—the silver palm tree which was carried in procession, and which was still known locally as a Besant, although the origin of the symbol and of the name had long since passed out of living memory.

In Heraldry, the word Besant occupies a recognised place ; for we find that, in its nomenclature, one of the seven Roundels—the golden Roundel—is called the Bezant ; and there seems every reason to believe that the origin of this name can be traced to the Crusaders at Byzantium. After the time of the Crusades and until the reign of Edward III the Bezant formed part of the gold coinage of England—a perfectly natural sequence of events. It was a coin of moderate size, and in one of the history books used at my school when I was a boy the “Besant” was quoted as being of the value of 18s. 6d.—a comparison between this sum and my own value affording unlimited opportunities for chaff at the hands of my companions.

To what extent, then, do the foregoing notes justify us in reaching any definite conclusions as to the meaning and origin of the name ? To my mind they establish certain facts : first, that Besant was a very early surname ; secondly, that it was, in the main, a craft-name ; thirdly, that it had a Byzantine derivation ; and fourthly, that in the twelfth century its holders included persons of some distinction.

After the end of the twelfth century the name disappears completely from all public records, and for the next six hundred years it is perfectly clear that the bearers of the name were obscure people ; for, so far as can be traced, no mention of any Besant appears in either national or municipal history throughout this long period. In the seventeenth or eighteenth century the name emerges again in Dorsetshire ; but at the outset only in connection with the piece of municipal silver plate at Shaftesbury, which is referred to in my father's notes and dealt with, in more detail, in Sir Walter's pamphlet. At that date the word Besant was not linked up, so far as I have been able to ascertain, with any individual. I quote from the pamphlet :

“ There was a custom, now no longer observed, at the town of Shaftesbury which might throw some light upon the meaning of the name. The Corporation possessed a large piece of plate representing some kind of palm-tree. This was called a Besant. On May Day it was solemnly taken out, decked with ribbons, and carried to a meadow outside the town, with music going before, and the Mayor and Corporation following after. Arrived at the meadow, the Mayor and Corporation solemnly danced round the Besant. This done, it was carried back to the Guildhall, and a banquet was held. Why this palm-tree was called a Besant is not known. It has been conjectured that it had been brought from Byzantium.”

As for the custom referred to above, it has passed clean out of living memory. The author, however, once told me that he had himself seen the Besant, and that he believed it still existed, but had long since passed into private hands. Some years after his death the *Standard*, under date May 3rd, 1907, contained the following interesting note :

“ Historical Relic. Lady Theodora Guest of Inwood House, Henstridge, has presented the town of Shaftesbury with the old Byezant which was used in one of the presentations at the recent display of historical tableaux. In a letter to the mayor, the donor said that she felt it was an interesting relic of the past, and that, as such, it ought to be preserved in the town to which its history belonged. The corporation has decided to keep the relic in a cabinet in the mayor’s parlour.”

And here is another curious record which again links the word Besant with the town of Shaftesbury, but in a different and, to me, a hitherto unknown way. I came across it recently, quite by chance, in a volume of miscellaneous newspaper cuttings collected many years ago by my late uncle, Albert Besant. I never remember hearing him mention the matter ; nor is there anything to indicate the source from which he obtained the cutting, though the opening words seem to indicate that it comes from some local parish magazine. But why “ Rogation Week ” should have reminded the author of this

ancient Shaftesbury custom must, I fear, remain obscure. The passage runs as follows :

“ Rogation Week being with us once again we are reminded of the old Dorsetshire Festival called the Bezant. There is no reliable record of its origin. Its history, so far as is known, hangs upon the fact that the borough of Shaftesbury stands upon a lofty eminence, and for many years this borough had an insufficient supply of water. During scarcity it was the custom to carry water on the backs of horses and donkeys from the village of Enmore. The Bezant was an acknowledgment from the mayor of the borough for the privilege granted by the Lord of the manor of Mitcomb, of which Enmore is a part. The Bezant, a calf's head, uncooked, together with a gallon of ale, and two penny loaves, with a pair of gold-lace gloves, formed the offering of the mayor. The Bezant was usually returned and formed a dish at the dinner given by the corporation after the ceremony of bestowal was completed.”

There is a tradition that towards the middle of the eighteenth century the Portsea branch of the family—the branch with which we are chiefly concerned—migrated there from Dorsetshire. It is probably true, though documentary proof is lacking. Another Dorsetshire branch settled down in the Eastern Counties. The late Mr. Leonard Christopher Besant, who traced his descent direct through six generations of Christopher Besants, starting with a Christopher Besant of Weymouth, told me in 1925 that many

years ago Sir Walter Besant had dined with his uncle and aunt at Kings Lynn; that some time afterwards Sir Walter had called again and had told them that, so far as he could make out, his father, William Besant, who belonged to Portsmouth, was a cousin of Christopher Besant (the fourth Christopher) who was born in 1782 and who was the grandfather of my informant, Leonard Christopher Besant. To some slight extent this confirms the tradition that the Besants of Portsea came originally from Dorsetshire. There is also another Besant from Dorsetshire whom I have had the pleasure of meeting, but he does not belong to the Portsea branch and so far we have not been able to prove our kinsmanship.

For the rest, the family name will be found scattered by ones and twos throughout most of the professions—the Church, the Navy and Army, the Civil Service, the Law. It will be found, too, in the lists of the Architects and of the Actuaries—but, curiously enough, it does not now appear in the Medical Register. For the most part, however, the holders of the name are tradesmen or quite humble folk. Their names and occupations will be found mainly in the commercial columns of the Directories both in London and elsewhere. And lest we, the surviving Besants, should grow too proud, while thinking of our immediate ancestors, let me close this

chapter by a further extract from Sir Walter's pamphlet :

" . . . The name is still and has long been held by persons of quite humble position, as well as by others of respectability, and even of distinction. As a rule, it may be said that the family in most of its branches has been remarkable for one quality, namely, a dogged resolution *not* to rise in the world. This resolution has been transmitted and faithfully obeyed from father to son. Moreover, when they exchanged one village for another, they carried with them no tradition or stories of the past, so that it is now quite impossible to know the village from which they originally came, or whether they have always been villeins, agricultural labourers, or village blacksmiths, or whether, like many village folk—Tess of the Durbervilles, for example—they belong to a family at one time of consideration."

As to the pronunciation of the name, the following doggerel verses have come down to us :

From Walter Besánt himself :

" Gladly would I slit the weasand
Of the wretch who calls me Beesant :
Nor are things a whit more pleasant
When fellow-creatures call me Bésant.
If you'd give me what I want,
Gentle stranger, say Besánt."

Brother Albert, on the other hand, preferred the accent to be thrown on the first syllable. A friend wrote to him :

“ To call you aught but Albert Bésant
Would spoil the past and mar the present :
To alter now, I really can’t
But let Sir Walter be Besánt.”

And again :

“ Tell me is it right or decent
To refer to Walter Beesant ;
Should the name be rhymed with crescent,
Should it be Sir Walter Bésant.
Or do eager maidens pant
After novels by Besánt.”

And finally :

“ These grievous vexed varieties
My spirit and my rest have broken,
How can I learn which form to use,
How should this awkward name be spoken ? ”

We must leave it at that !

CHAPTER II

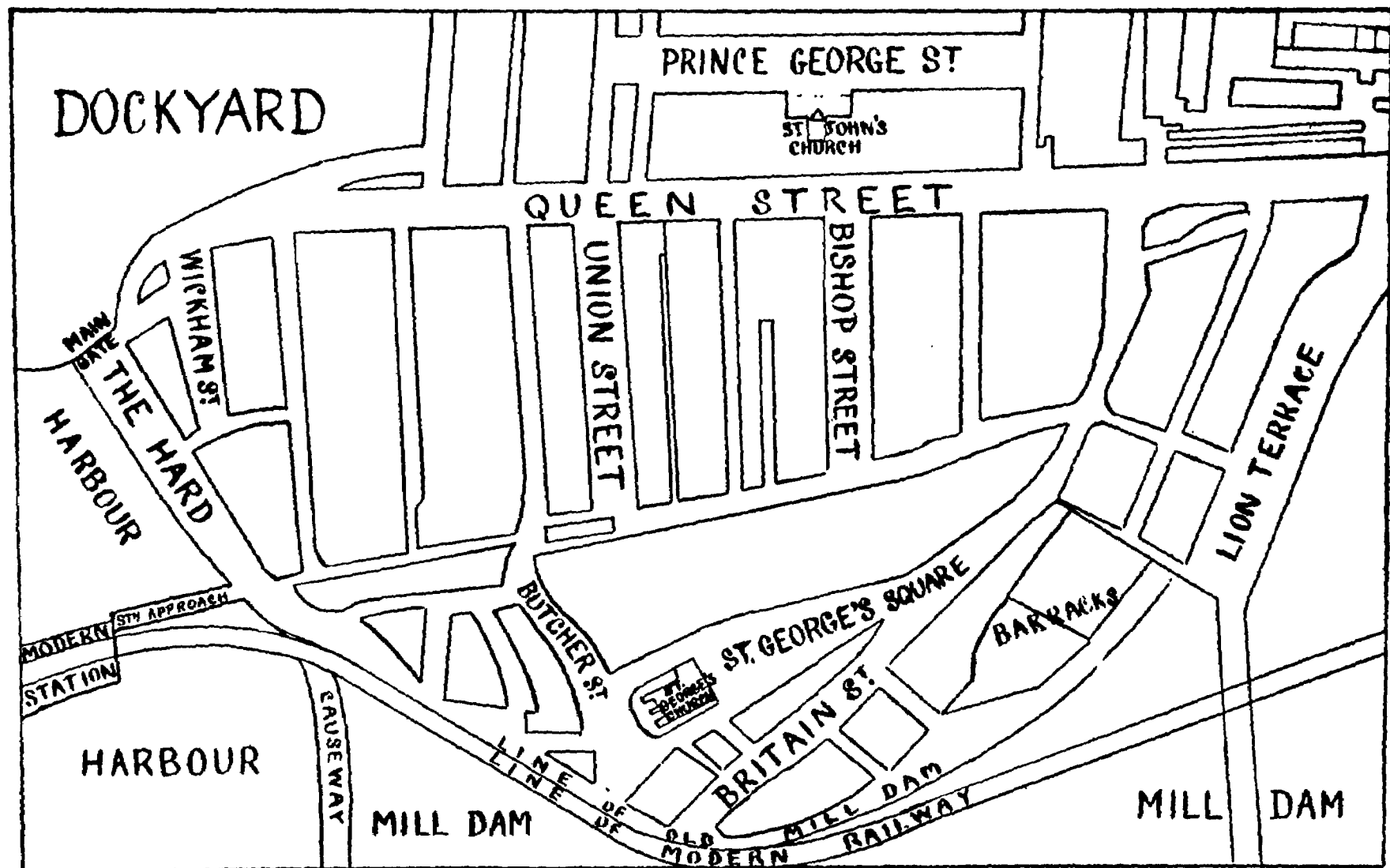
PORTSEA

THE history of the particular branch of the Besant family with which we are chiefly concerned is so closely interwoven with the parish of Portsea that a short sketch of the foundation and development of that town may usefully be included in this little volume.

Portsea Island, which is separated from the mainland by the two sea channels linking together Portsmouth and Langstone Harbours, is to-day an area about three miles long and two and a half miles wide, roughly oblong in shape. It consists entirely of low-lying ground, much of it formerly flooded at high tide, but now reclaimed from the sea and drained. On the western extremity of this island and at the mouth of the Harbour there was founded, in the far distant past, the town of Portsmouth. Owing to its strategic position, the place gradually became a great naval centre, protected on all sides by ramparts and stone walls. Indeed until a period well within living memory the town

still remained entirely surrounded by fortifications. On the north, outside the walls, was a branch of the Harbour known as the Mill Pond and beyond its tidal limits lay Portsmouth Common, a tract of rough land, mainly marshy. Still further north lay the historic Dockyard, itself also enclosed completely by stone fortifications. As time went on, the area subject to the tidal waters was gradually curtailed, and a causeway, linking Portsmouth with the Dockyard, was built, leaving only a wide passage under the King's Mill to unite the waters of the main Harbour with those of the Milldam—as the old Mill Pond had by then come to be called. The northern end of this causeway, leading to the principal gate of the Dockyard, was built in the reign of Queen Anne and by 1717 had already become known as the Common Hard. The existence of the causeway and the gradual drainage of the marshes of Portsmouth Common naturally brought about a demand from the artificers employed in the Dockyard that they should be allowed to build houses near their work. For a time these requests were refused, as the military authorities feared that the Dockyard defences might thereby be endangered; but matters were at last amicably arranged through the good offices of Prince George, the Consort of Queen Anne, and the erection of houses on Portsmouth Common was sanctioned.

Thus began the building of the town now known as Portsea. In a technical or legal sense only could it then have been regarded as a suburb of Portsmouth ; for between the two lay, at high tide, half a mile of shallow water, and at low tide half a mile of mudbanks. Ecclesiastically, Portsea was attached to Kingston, an ancient parish situated in the centre of the island, a mile or more from the newly-founded settlement. Portsea in its origin was a somewhat curious town. For long before even the first house had been erected upon Portsmouth Common, the building area of the future Portsea had already—owing to the exigencies imposed by its site—been rigidly laid down ; and at no stage in the subsequent history of the town has there been any possibility of expansion. From the beginning Portsea found itself hemmed in on every side. On the north was the Dockyard ; on the west it possessed a narrow frontage to the sea ; on the south lay the tidal waters of the Milldam ; and on the east, the marshy common. As the drainage of the marshes and of the foreshores gradually proceeded, the Government took over and occupied the whole of the lands so reclaimed. To-day these sites are occupied by the Gunwharf, the Dockyard extensions and the numerous Army Barracks, Hospitals and Recreation Grounds. The latter, it may be noted, occupy the last remaining section of the Milldam,



PLAN OF PORTSEA.

which was finally drained about the year 1866. The northern boundary of the Milldam coincided then, as it had done many years previously, with the position now occupied by the embankment of the Portsea Extension Railway—the short line which runs from the Town to the Harbour station.

Once building in the new town had begun, progress was rapid. By 1754 St. George's Square had been laid out in its present form and the Church erected. The houses on the south side of the Square backed on to the Milldam. By this date, or a little earlier, Queen Street—which runs from the junction of the Hard and the Dockyard Gates to Lion Terrace on the eastern residential edge of Portsea—had also been constructed, with all its network of narrow streets and alleys on either side. St. John's Church, north of Queen Street, was opened in 1787, and by that time the whole of the building area had been closely covered. So meagre, indeed, is the housing space available that Portsea contains scarcely any trees or gardens standing on private land. There are two fine old elms in front of St. George's Church and in recent years some trees have been planted in the Square and along the broad roadway of Lion Terrace. As regards gardens, the position is even more dismal. There are no front gardens at all; and such few back gardens as exist belong only to those houses in Britain Street and St.

George's Square which abutted formerly upon the Milldam.

In still one other respect Portsea presents a special feature of interest. The bulk of the streets are laid out in a rectangular pattern, modified in places by the boundaries imposed by the Harbour, the Dockyard and the Milldam; but every street, however narrow, has been built in a perfectly straight line; running either from east to west, as does Queen Street, with five parallel little streets on its north side; or north to south as do the eight parallel streets and alleys which lead out of Queen Street on the south side. Eighteenth-century Portsea might, in fact, have formed the pattern on which every modern American city has been laid out.

The best residential districts were St. George's Square and Lion Terrace. Even here the houses back everywhere on to a maze of slums and alleys. The chief shopping streets were the Hard and Queen Street. The Hard belongs, of course, to national history. Along it have marched for generations countless regiments of our soldiers on their way to war or to garrison service abroad. From its tiny jetty Nelson and all our famous Admirals have embarked and in those old fighting days it must have presented at all times a busy scene. It was a turbulent and a wild place when the sailors disembarked here after foreign service. Those were

thirsty days and more than half the buildings on the Hard are public houses—in one spot there are five of them standing alongside each other. But the Hard is peaceful enough now and the taverns well conducted. A few boatmen still ply for hire and occasionally persuade a tourist to take a row round the harbour. No longer, alas, can they row one out to the Victory; for the timbers of this stout old ship—the oldest ship in the world—have rotted, and, to save her from destruction, she has been removed from her old anchorage in the Harbour and has found a permanent resting place in dry dock. The Victory dates back over one hundred and seventy years, for she was laid down at Chatham Dockyard in 1759—when George II was still our King and when Nelson was an infant a few months old. Six years elapsed before her launch took place in 1765, and she had been afloat for four years when Napoleon and Wellington were born. She was an old ship even at Trafalgar, when, despite her forty years of active service, she was selected by Nelson as his flagship on account of her fine sailing qualities. She was finally paid off as a seagoing ship in 1812, and then for a century or so found a home of honourable retirement in Portsmouth Harbour, where she long acted as flagship of the Commander-in-Chief.

Reverting now to the story of Portsea, we find that

in two generations the marshes of Portsmouth Common, with their few scattered huts, had been transformed into a busy and much overcrowded town, still occupied mainly by the workmen employed in the Dockyard. To a large extent this sudden development was brought about by the increased numbers engaged in the Yard on naval construction during the long American and continental wars. How great had been the influx of population is indicated by the rather startling fact that, at the Census of 1801, the population of Portsea had grown to be more than three times that of Portsmouth itself. The general appearance of the town, so far as concerns its buildings and streets, is much the same to-day as it was at the end of the eighteenth century. The crowded houses then looked, no doubt, a little less shabby ; the windows of the shops were fitted with small panes in place of plate glass ; but the private residences then erected remain almost unchanged. Throughout the whole town there is not a single building with any pretensions to architectural or antiquarian interest. The two churches are spacious brick boxes ; the majority of the streets narrow and depressing ; the alleys and courts dreadful. Some of the worst of the old slums have now been cleared away, but in my boyhood we were strictly forbidden to go into any of the courts which lay between Queen Street and

Kent Street ; for the population there was of the lawless type which regarded the Jack Tar and Tommy Atkins of the day as rightful prey.

But Portsea, drab as it perhaps may be, has yet one special beauty of its own. No one who has visited Trèves, that ancient city on the Moselle, can ever forget the colouring of its old tiled roofs, as seen from the summit of the mediæval stone staircase of its leading inn. Let any of my readers who may think of Portsea as a dull or even sordid town take the short railway journey from the Town to the Harbour station. As the train passes slowly along the high embankment, he will see just such another cluster of crowded roofs, all massed together in apparent chaos, their tiles weathered into every tone of glorious red. And from the other window of the railway carriage, as he looks down upon the Army Recreation Grounds, he can picture to himself in imagination these spacious fields all covered by the muddy waters of the Milldam, stretching far away from him on either side to right and left, while in front they reach nearly as far as old Portsmouth Parish Church, a full half mile away.

CHAPTER III

THE PORTSEA BRANCH OF THE FAMILY

I. THE TRACING OF THE FAMILY RECORDS

THIS is, perforce, a chapter of shadows. It records a series of facts, gleaned in the main from such baptismal, marriage and burial certificates relating to the family as, after prolonged search, I have been able to collect. These certificates have been supplemented by information extracted from the municipal records of Portsea, which have been most kindly supplied to me by the Town Clerk. I have endeavoured to add some small touch of human interest to these formal records: first, by incorporating such scanty references to the earlier generations of the family as the Autobiography affords; and, secondly, by making full use of various manuscript notes compiled by my father between 1883 and 1908.

Those of an analytical type of mind may perhaps notice a few minor discrepancies between statements made in the Autobiography and those given in this

chapter. The explanation is a simple one. When the Autobiography was being written, the author was already a sick man : he did not even live long enough to revise his manuscript, much less to verify, in detail, the somewhat cursory references which he had made to the older generations of the family. Indeed, for his purposes, it was unnecessary to follow up any of these clues, seeing that the careers of his various uncles and aunts had little or nothing to do with his own life story.

But for my task these clues were of the utmost importance ; and I decided, therefore, at the outset to collect all such information as might be found to be available about my grandparents' brothers and sisters—some sixteen or eighteen in number—in the hope that by this means I might be enabled to learn something, not only as to their immediate parentage, but still more as to the history of their forbears. For a study both of the Autobiography and of my father's notes had already made it quite clear to me that, although each of these writers had recorded a few vague and purely traditional references about the earlier Besants, yet neither Walter nor Frank really knew much about any of their grandparents. They did not, in fact, know even the names of any one of the four. The reason for this, of course, was that long before the author of the Autobiography was born—and my father was his junior by four

years—three out of his four grandparents had died ; while the surviving maternal grandmother, throughout her long life, had had her home somewhere on the far side of Southampton water ; and in her widowhood was hardly likely to remain much in touch with her Portsea descendants. Thus the Autobiography does not carry us far.

The only other family statement connected with these early days is Dr. W. H. Besant's addendum to the pamphlet, " A Family Name." He there refers to his father's great-uncle, who, as already recorded, is stated to have served as a soldier under Napoleon. Be that as it may, the interesting fact embodied in this record is that Grandfather William Besant—born in 1800—had been in touch with one of his great-uncles ; or at least with some older generation of relatives who knew of this great-uncle's existence. It seems fair to presume that those older Besant relatives must have been living at Portsea long before the birth of Grandfather William, although unfortunately the exact links between him and them cannot now be traced.

Returning to my grandparents' generation, I was fortunately able to trace at Kingston Parish Church, Portsea, the baptisms of two of my grandfather's sisters, and thus to learn the names of their parents. Curiously enough there is apparently no record there either of my grandfather's own baptism

or of that of any of his brothers; and as no other church was then available for the baptism of the children of Portsea citizens, the presumption is that neither he nor any of his brothers were ever baptised. So far as my grandfather is concerned, this idea is supported to some extent by family tradition. The baptismal history of my grandmother's family is even more peculiar. All the children, whether boys or girls, were baptised—indeed, some of them were baptised twice over, once privately and once publicly. But on at least two occasions the ceremony was postponed until the children could be baptised in pairs. It is difficult to understand the reason for this, but it is possible that at the close of the eighteenth century the question of baptismal fees had to be taken into consideration.

One clue led to another, and by piecing together the information which was gradually accumulated, the record which follows has now been built up. But I am conscious that this chapter still retains all the characteristics of a catalogue; and that, strive as I will, I cannot present a reasonably vivid picture of these ancestral ghosts.

II. THE ORIGINS OF THE PORTSEA BESANTS

The earliest record of any Besant at Portsea is found in 1763. In that year John Bezant was buried

in Kingston Churchyard. Unfortunately the registers of that period do not record the age at death, so I have no means of tracing when this John Bezant was born. The next record occurs in 1791—nearly thirty years later—when Grace Besant was buried at Kingston. During the next twenty years come a whole series of Besant burials : James in 1793, a second John in 1794, a third John in 1802, Susannah in 1805 and Mary in 1810. No ages are given in any of these cases, but unless there were many branches of the Besants then living at Portsea—which seems extremely unlikely—some of these deaths were presumably those of children. The Kingston marriage registers of this period contain a record of still another John ; for in 1803, John Besant, Bachelor, was married to Ann Walters, Spinster. Thus, in all, the names of eight members of the Besant family are recorded at Portsea between the years 1763 and 1810. In the absence of any statement as to ages, we can only conjecture as to what relationships existed between them. But I think that from these meagre records we can safely draw two or three deductions. First, that there were Besants living at Portsea prior to 1763, and possibly for many years before that date. Secondly, that from the John Besant who was buried in that year were descended some of the other seven Besants whose names I have given. And thirdly, that the



OLD KINGSTON CHURCH IN 1845.

repetition of the name John indicates that during the latter portions of this period we have been dealing with at least two separate Besant families.

Turning now from the church registers to the Portsea municipal records, the earliest entry of any Besant that I have been able to discover carries us back to 1789. In that year the name of John Besant is included for the first time in the list of Portsea ratepayers. Now this John is, beyond all doubt, the great-grandfather of all the Besants of my own generation—which is now, unfortunately, fast becoming a generation of elders. And the curious thing is that this John—our John—is not identical with any of the four Johns previously mentioned. Our John, as his burial registration shows, was born in 1762. The whole of the evidence thus presented convinces me that our John Besant (1762–1820) was not really the founder or the original source of the Portsea branch of the family. But he was clearly the first of the family stock to rise sufficiently in the social scale to become a householder and a ratepayer. Unfortunately I have failed, despite all my efforts, to trace his baptism, which might have afforded some clue as to the names of his parents. I fancy that in all probability our John was not baptised, thus following the tradition of his forbears—a tradition which he himself maintained so far as regards his sons, but broke through in

the case of some of his daughters. Be that as it may, I feel tolerably certain that our John was born in Portsea—or possibly in Portsmouth—and there can be no question that in 1762, the year of his birth, other Besants were living in the town. Doubtless they were humble folk, for otherwise the name of Besant must have appeared in the ratepayers lists far earlier than in 1789. When our John Besant thus raised himself to a slightly higher status than his kinsmen, he must, I feel sure, have had many local relatives—brothers, or cousins, or second cousins as the case may be—and everything indicates, in my judgment, that there was a local ancestry in common. In confirmation of this view I may add that at a later date than that with which we have been dealing there were other Besants in the town. One of them, who died in 1868, was born in the eighteenth century, was a workman in the Dockyard and was illiterate. Another was a small tradesman. Another, at a quite recent period was a domestic servant. Fifty years ago I fancy that the name was more common at Portsea than it is now ; but it still persists and is usually found associated with people of humble position.

As, however, I have not succeeded in linking up any of these remote ancestors definitely with our John Besant (in whose babyhood the senior John Besant of 1763, died) I am compelled to treat

John Besant the fifth as forming, for all practical purposes, the starting point of this record.

III. JOHN BESANT (1762–1820)

John Besant, according to the evidence afforded by his burial registration, was born in 1762. He was married about 1784, and there is no record available either of the place of his birth or of his marriage. Nor can I discover where he lived during the first five years of his married life. But in 1789, as already noted, his name appears as the resident occupier of premises in Wickham Street, Portsea—a narrow and uninviting street lying immediately behind the Hard, and bounded at its northern end by the Dockyard Wall. Even at that date Wickham Street could have possessed little attraction as a residential neighbourhood; for, as we have seen, the buildings along the Hard were mainly public houses, and the adjacent streets must have been turbulent in the extreme. To-day the street presents a decayed appearance, but in 1789 the houses were no doubt in better condition and the general air of reduced gentility which the street now exhibits had not yet set in. It could never, however, have been anything but a street of somewhat mean type.

Here, then, John and his wife Mary lived from 1789 to 1799. Their fortunes must have improved

somewhat during this period, for after ten years of Wickham Street they moved to a much more pleasant quarter of the town. Their new home was in Britain Street, a quiet thoroughfare which lies behind St. George's Square, and where the houses on the south side had strips of garden leading down to the Milldam. But Britain Street is by no means aristocratic, even as Portsea residences go ; and it is certain that John and Mary Besant remained in comparatively humble circumstances throughout their lives.

In the Autobiography it is stated that John Besant was "in some branch of the Civil Service." In my father's notes he is referred to as being "a tax collector or in some way connected with the taxes." If so, it must have been in some subordinate capacity, for his official position does not appear in the town records. He died at his Britain Street house in 1820 and was buried in a family vault at Farlington, a village on the mainland, about six miles from Portsea and on the main road leading to Chichester. This family vault is rather a mystery. It had then certainly been in existence for at least ten years, for two of John's children had been buried there in his lifetime. But beyond the existence of the vault no connection can be traced between the Besant family and the parish of Farlington. Even the site of the vault is not now known. The Farlington



WICKHAM STREET, PORTSEA.

registers contain the record of at least five family burials there between 1810 and 1848 ; but there does not seem to have been any inscription on the stone ; and repeated efforts made by several of my late uncles and by myself, though coupled with the help of successive Rectors of the Parish, have failed to locate it. Of John's character and mode of life the Autobiography records that there is :—

“ no tradition save that he went to his club every evening—this means his tavern—returning home for supper at nine punctually ; that he was somewhat austere—or was it only of uncertain temper ?—and that his daughters on hearing the paternal footsteps outside always retreated to bed.”

As the founder of a family John does not appear to have afforded what would commonly be regarded as first-class material. Nor on the financial side did he much shine, for his total effects at his death were sworn for probate at £200. His widow lived on, in the same Britain Street house, for another ten years—probably at first with some of her unmarried children. She died there in 1830 and was buried beside her husband in the Farlington vault.

For many years the family were attendants at St. John's, Portsea, a Church built in 1787 as a Chapel-of-Ease to supplement that of St. George's, which had been erected in 1754—a generation previously—to meet the needs of the growing

population of Portsea. Even when the move to Britain Street took place in 1799, and when St. George's Church had thus become far closer to their residence and more convenient as a place of worship than that of St. John, which lay on the north side of Queen Street, the old traditions of Wickham Street were maintained and the family remained loyal to St. John's. I have in my possession a little leather bound volume, printed in 1817 and entitled "Portions of the Psalms of David, to which are added a few Hymns, intended for the use of the Congregation assembling in St. John's Chapel, by W. S. Desantoy." This book bears on its title page the autograph "Jno. Besant," written in a neat clerkly hand, and the signature is indubitably that of my great-grandfather, the founder in the direct line—so far as can yet be traced—of the Portsea branch of the family.

CHAPTER IV

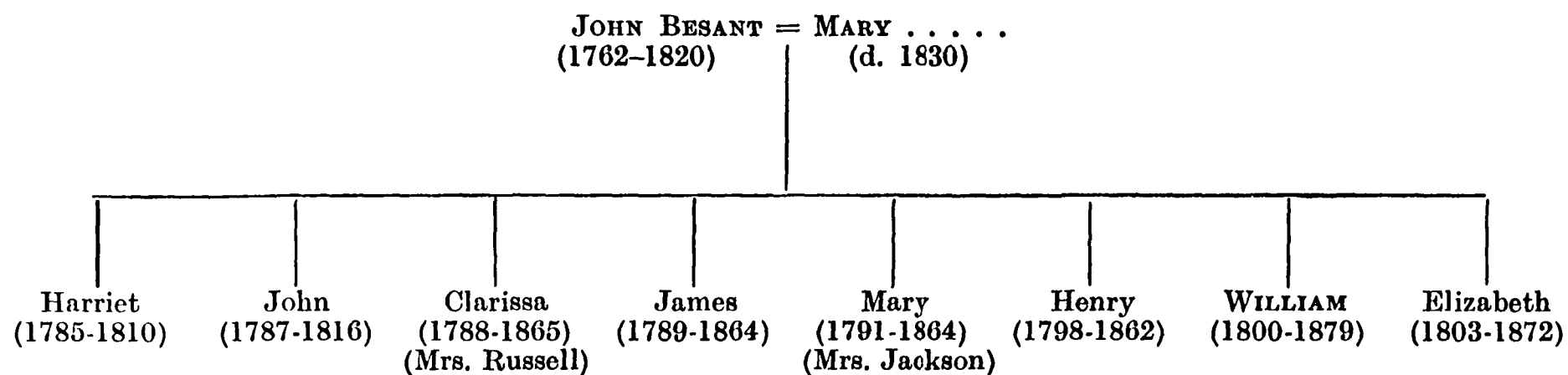
THE CHILDREN OF JOHN AND MARY BESANT

JOHN and Mary Besant had many children, probably ten, the names of eight of whom have come down to us. These, arranged in the order of their births, were Harriet, John, Clarissa, James, Mary, Henry, William and Elizabeth. Three of them, Clarissa (Mrs. Russell), Mary (Mrs. Jackson) and William, were married at Portsea, lived there most of their lives and at their deaths were buried in three family vaults, which lie close alongside each other in the old cemetery at Portsea.

The eldest daughter, HARRIET, was born in 1785. She died unmarried in 1810, and of her nothing whatever is known, save that her burial is recorded in the Farlington register, and that she lies buried in the family vault there.

The next child was JOHN. He was born in 1787, and in 1813 was married to Catherine Coombs at St. Thomas' Church, Portsmouth—now known as Portsmouth Cathedral. He died three years later

THE CHILDREN OF JOHN AND MARY BESANT

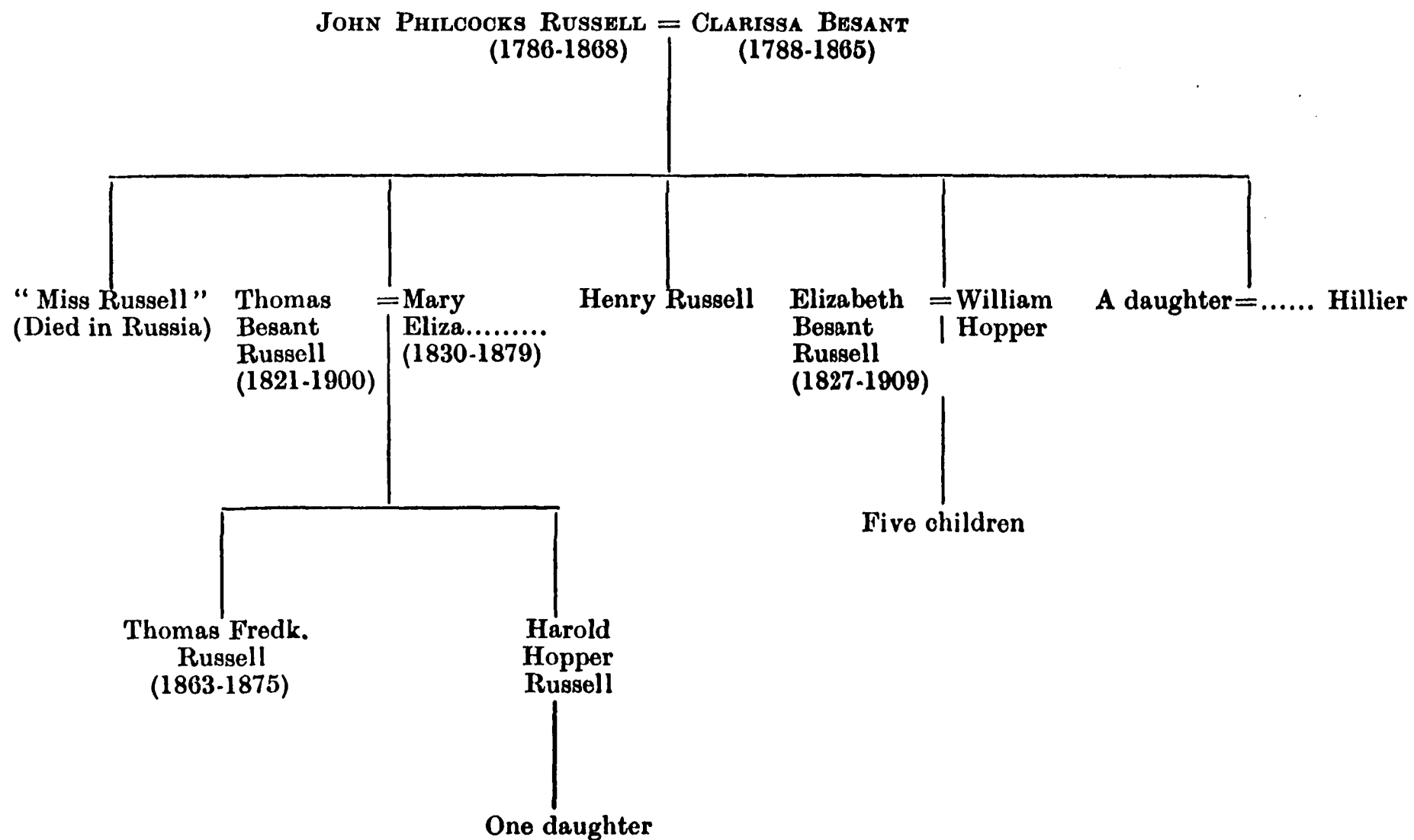


John married (1813) Catherine Coombs.
 Clarissa married (1812) John Philcocks Russell.
 Mary married (1821) Thomas Jackson.
 Henry married Mrs. Lavell.
 William married (1826) Sarah Ediss.

and was buried beside his sister, Harriet, at Farlington. It is believed that John Junior left children, but, if so, they were not baptised at Portsmouth or Portsea, and they can now no longer be traced.

After John came CLARISSA, who was always referred to in later life as Aunt Clara. She was born in 1788, just before her parents went to Wickham Street, and she lived throughout her life at Portsea. There, on February 11th, 1812, at the Kingston Parish Church, with her father signing the register as witness, she married John Philcocks Russell, who held an administrative position of some sort in the Dockyard—I believe in the ship-building department. He was not a pushing man and never secured much professional advancement. His energetic brother-in-law, Thomas Jackson, used to tell him that it was his own fault, for he “was always content just to do his own routine work in the Dockyard and never offered to do anything more.” Clarissa, “though oppressed by having a large family and a small income,” seems to have been of a cheerful disposition and to have made light of her financial anxieties. Little or no details have come down to us about this couple, but from old diary records it is clear that “Aunt Clara” always kept in close touch with her sister, Mary Jackson, and her brother, William Besant; and that this family intimacy continued amongst their children throughout their

THE RUSSELL-BESANT PEDIGREE



Portsea days. Clarissa died in 1865 at the age of seventy-seven, her husband surviving her for three years. Both are buried in the Russell vault in Portsea Cemetery. They had five children. The eldest, always referred to as "Miss Russell," became a governess in Russia and died there unmarried. The next was Thomas Besant Russell who was born in 1821, lived all his life at Portsmouth and died there in 1900. He married and had two children, of whom one now survives. Then came Henry who went to Canada and had a successful career in Montreal. The next child was Elizabeth Besant Russell, who was born in 1827 and who lived to be well over eighty years of age. She married William Hopper, a Russian merchant and resided with him in Moscow for many years. She paid frequent visits home and I am informed that her five children were educated in Scotland. After her husband's death she returned to England and died at Norwich in 1909. Her body was taken to Moscow for interment beside her husband. Clarissa's youngest child was a daughter who married a Mr. Hillier, but I have not succeeded in learning anything of her subsequent history.

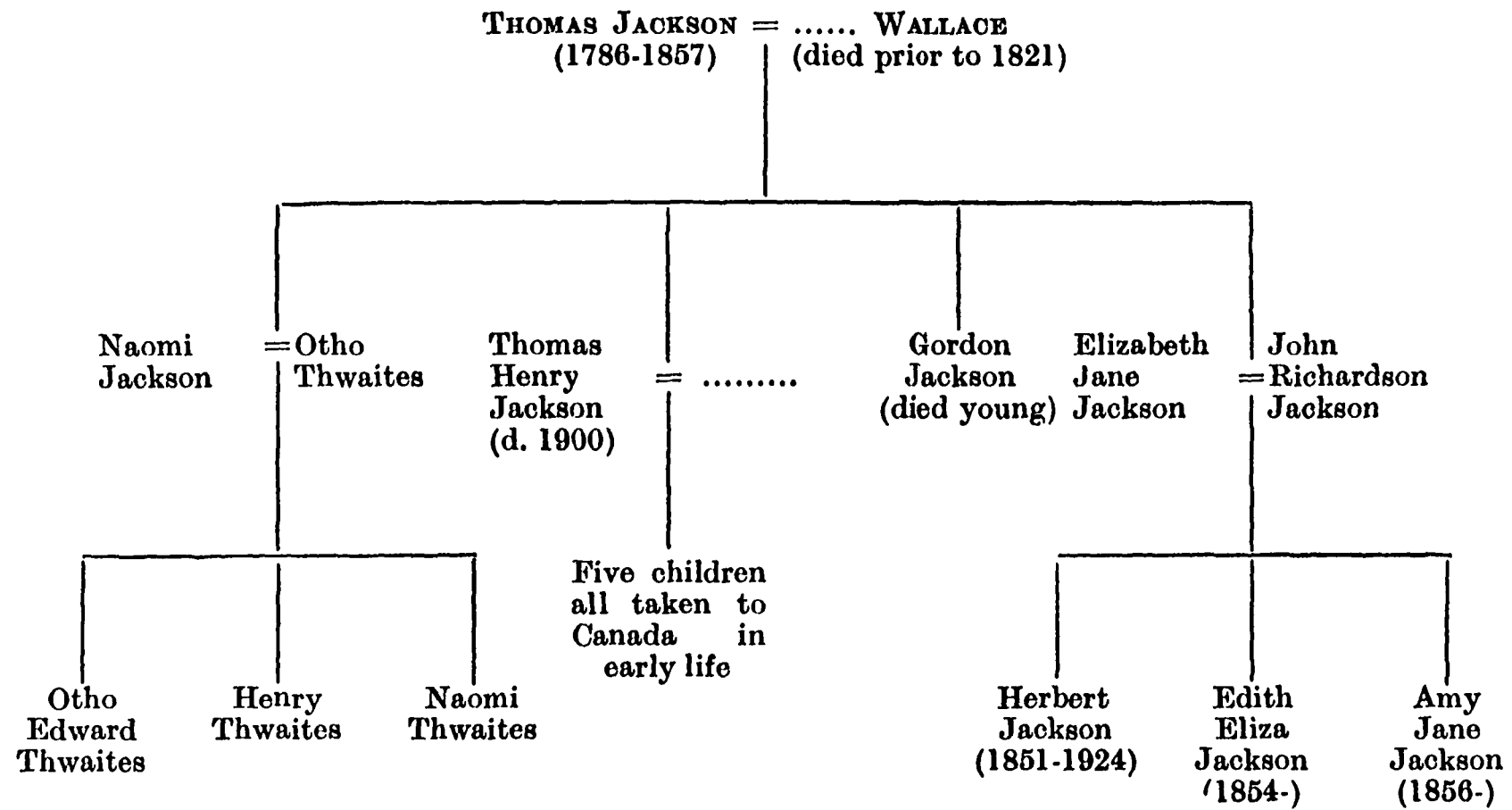
The fourth child and the second son of John and Mary Besant was JAMES and of him some few details remain. He was born about 1789—the year when the family moved to Wickham Street—and at a very early age became a Midshipman in the Royal

Navy. Shortly afterwards, and while still only a boy, the ship in which he was serving was wrecked on the Dutch coast ; and as Holland at that time was practically under the control of France, young James remained a prisoner of war for the next two years. He does not seem to have had at all a bad time in Holland, for he was allowed out of prison bounds, and the Dutch women, according to his own account, made rather a favourite of him. He was also given leave, at intervals, to visit the neighbouring town on errands and commissions for his companions. Eventually a party of them managed in some way to secure a small sailing boat and, by this means, succeeded one dark night in making their escape. After an adventurous voyage across the Channel, they landed, safe but exhausted, on the English coast. After his escape from Holland, James rejoined the Service for a time ; but not very long afterwards he retired from the Navy, and for many years thereafter nothing is known of his career. At some stage or other he married and settled in London. He had one child only, a daughter, who married and went with her husband to New Zealand. In 1850 we find James occupying a subordinate position in the Custom House, London, where on two or three occasions his nephews William and Frank visited him. It is from their records that these notes have been pieced together. He was

then described as an elderly man, rather below the average height and size, and in poor health. He lived on, however, for a good many years after that, and died, I believe, in 1864. His wife, who survived him, emigrated after his death to New Zealand and rejoined her married daughter there.

In 1791 another daughter was born: she was named MARY, after her mother, and was baptised at Kingston Parish Church on May 22nd, this being the first Besant baptismal record that I have been able to discover at Portsea. On June 2nd, 1821, shortly after the death of her father, and when Mary was about thirty years of age, she married Thomas Jackson, a widower with three young children, Naomi, Thomas Henry and Eliza. Thomas Jackson was a man of considerable fortune, and he was, as his tombstone states, "for many years a Magistrate of the Borough of Portsmouth." He was also on three occasions Mayor of that important city—once in 1840, the year of Queen Victoria's marriage, when he is said to have been offered a Knighthood, which he refused. I learn from Miss Amy Jackson, one of his grand-daughters by his first wife, that he began his career as an accountant; but that not making sufficient money at this profession he started or acquired a corset factory—then the staple trade of the town—at Mile End, Portsea. In this business he prospered, and it is clear that by the

THE JACKSON-WALLACE PEDIGREE



date of his second marriage in 1821, he had already become a person of substance and was held in high repute by his fellow citizens. Mary, on her side, had lost her father a year or two before her marriage and was living with her mother, and probably with two or three of her brothers and sisters in the Britain Street house. The family income must have been small ; she was no longer in her first youth, and both she and her relatives must, I fancy, have regarded a marriage with Thomas Jackson as being both suitable and advantageous ; while he, on his side, found in her a much needed guardian for his motherless children.

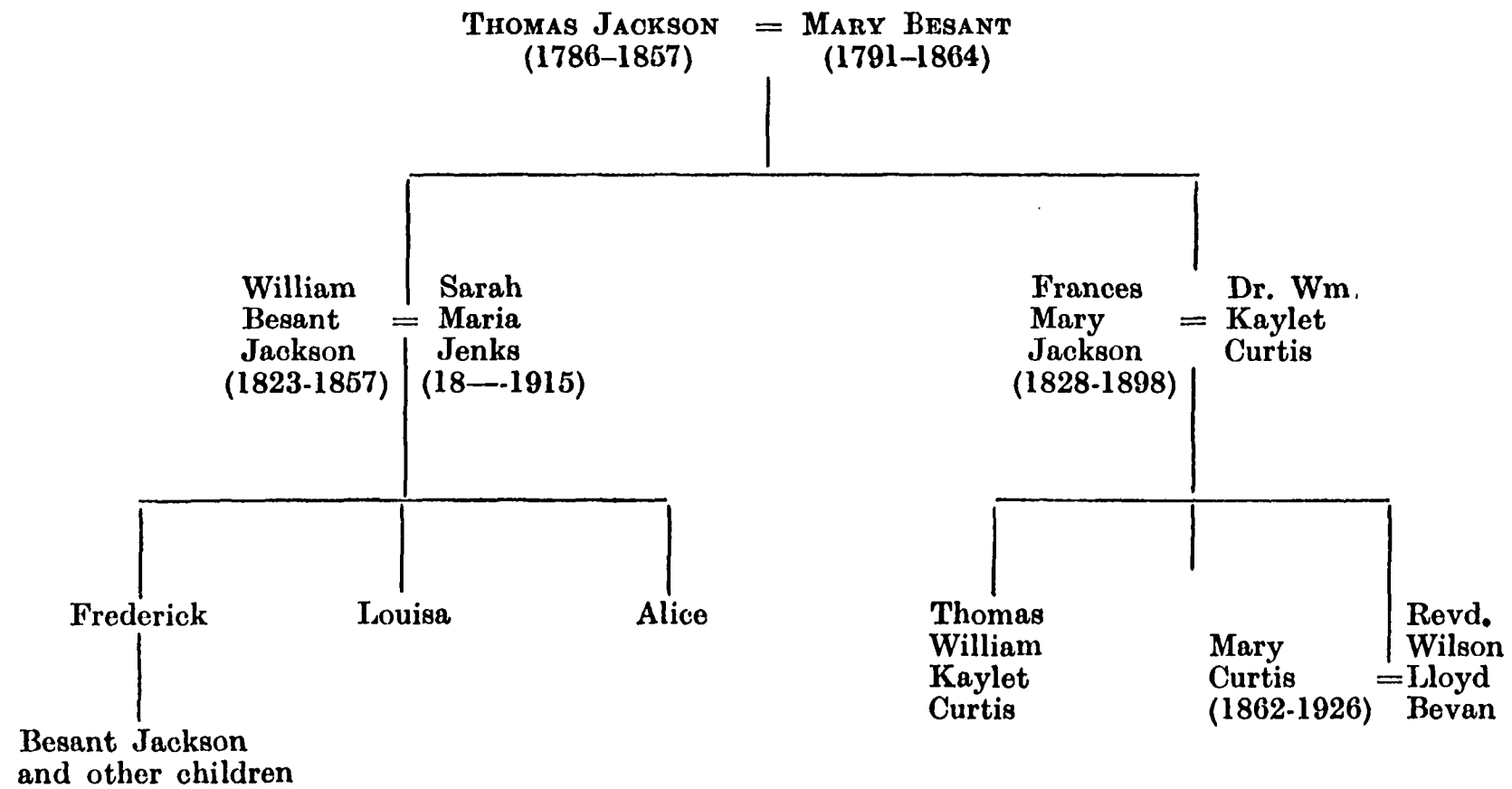
According to the accounts that have come down to us, Mary Jackson, despite her wealth, appears to have been of a jealous and somewhat unhappy disposition. She does not seem to have been popular at home, for the tale runs that on the occasion of her marriage the Besants all danced round the table for joy—they had not dared to do so before. The thirty-six years of her married life were spent at Kingston Cross, but after her husband's death in 1857 she removed to London and lived in the Adelaide Road until her death. There she was in touch with her brother Henry and her younger sister Elizabeth, who were both then living in the north of London. It is said that Elizabeth acted as a buffer between her sister and the servants, and

this may well have proved to be the case, for Elizabeth, like Clarissa, appears to have been a friendly type of person. Mary died in London in 1864 and was buried beside her husband in the Jackson family vault at Portsea.

She had two children, William Besant Jackson born in 1823, and Frances Mary Jackson born in 1828. The son left Portsmouth at an early age and became a civil engineer, practising first in Birmingham and afterwards in London. There he married Sarah Maria Jenks, who survived her husband for nearly sixty years, and died at an advanced age in 1915. As for William Besant Jackson himself, he died in London in 1857, at the early age of thirty-four, and according to the inscription on the tombstone was buried in the Jackson family vault at Portsea. I learn, however, from his daughter that this statement is incorrect, and that he was buried in a Jackson family grave at Kensal Green Cemetery, London. He left three children, Frederick, Louisa and Alice, to the last of whom I am indebted for many of the above particulars. Frederick, in his turn, married and had a large family. It is interesting to find that to his eldest son—the great-grandson of the original Mary Besant—he gave the christian name of Besant.

Mary's daughter—the Frances Mary Jackson mentioned above—married in 1861 Dr. William Kaylet Curtis of Canterbury. She survived her husband

THE JACKSON-BESANT PEDIGREE



and died at Canterbury in 1898. They had two children who survived infancy. Their son, Thomas William Kaylet Curtis, went to Cambridge, and at the end of his college career returned to Canterbury. He does not, however, appear to have followed any career there, and some years ago was reported to have taken up his residence in Florence. Their daughter Mary, whom, in my young days, I remember as an occasional visitor—sometimes accompanied by her mother—to her Southsea relatives, was an attractive girl with artistic tendencies. She married in 1890, the Rev. Wilson Lloyd Bevan, and died, leaving no family, in 1926. Genealogical tables of Thomas Jackson's descendants, by his two wives, are given on pages 60 and 63.

HENRY, the next son, became in course of time the most important member of John's numerous family. He was born at Portsea about 1798 and was educated at the school attached to St. George's Church. There is no record of the earlier stages of his career, but it seems likely that he worked for a time under his father in the Portsea Tax Office, as we find him appointed in 1821 to a position at Liverpool in the office of the Inspector of Taxes there. That he quickly made his mark at Liverpool is indicated by the fact that in 1834, when he was still under forty years of age, his portrait was painted in oils and exhibited at the Royal Academy. The



HENRY BESANT, CIRCA 1834.

picture itself has long ago disappeared, but a steel engraving of the portrait was published soon after the Academy closed and a few copies of this still remain in the hands of different members of the family. From one of these copies, the reproduction published on the opposite page has been made. In 1845 he was presented by his colleagues with a handsome silver jug, bearing the following inscription :

“ Presented to Henry Besant Esqr., as a mark of esteem from his sincere friends Edmund Treherne Esq., Messrs. Price, Reeve, Anwyl, Rowed, H. J. Laking, Goode, Hopwood, Leigh, Bohn, Strachan, F. Laking, Tattersall, Goodair. 1845.”

Notice the delicate class graduation between Edmund Treherne Esq. and the remaining donors. Probably Mr. Treherne was Henry's superior officer, while the remainder were his colleagues.

The jug bears Henry's crest—a female figure standing upright beside an anchor and with a large rock in the background. She wears flowing drapery, has bare feet and is gazing with rapt attention at what appears to be an immensely long boa, about three feet of which she is holding up in her right hand, while the rest of it, after passing behind her back, encircles her left arm and then winds gracefully round the anchor and so eventually reaches the ground. The motto below runs, “ God's providence is my inheritance ”

As to how Henry obtained his crest, and as to whether he had the slightest justification for using it, I know not ; but crests seem to have been light-heartedly assumed in the middle of the last century ; and no awkward questions as to origins appear to have been asked, provided the statutory annual tax for usage was paid. (Another reference to the family crests is given on page 17. See also page 161.)

Henry continued to prosper and by 1847 had become a "Receiving Inspector of Taxes." Two years later his health failed and he retired on a substantial pension. He then left Liverpool and came to London, where, for a short time, he resided at Holmes Terrace, Kentish Town. In 1850 this was a pleasant residential district on the fringe of the town, with open country walks to Hampstead and Highgate. The site of his house is now occupied by a mass of railway sidings. When the railway depot was formed, he moved from Kentish Town to Hillmartin Villas, Holloway, then quite a country suburb, and resided there in his own comfortable freehold house until his death. Late in life he married Mrs. Lavell, a widow with two children, but he had no children of his own. After a long illness he died in 1862 from chronic bronchitis, and was buried at Kensal Green in a grave belonging to his wife's family.

Henry Besant was an exceedingly hospitable and

generous man. His nephews William, Walter and Albert constantly visited him, and invariably spoke of him in terms of the highest respect and affection. He was a masterful and peppery man, impatient of opposition, like so many of the Besants, but full of good humour and fond of creature comforts. On Christmas Day 1849 he gave a dinner party, to which were invited his brother James, his sisters Mary (Mrs. Jackson) and Elizabeth, and his nephew William. The latter records in his diary that they had champagne, port and claret, of which both uncles drank too much, so that after dinner they fell asleep in their two arm chairs.

Henry possessed a valuable library, which included a first folio Shakespeare. It was always understood that his books would be left to his nephew William, and indeed this proved to be the case. But, unfortunately for William, the Will contained a provision inviting several of the testator's friends to select a volume from the library as a personal memento. One of these friends chose the folio, and so this treasured and valuable possession passed out of the family ownership.

After Henry came my grandfather, WILLIAM, the youngest of the sons of John and Mary. As full details of his career are given in a later chapter, all that need here be recorded about him is that he was born at Portsea in 1800—the first child of the family

to be born in the Britain Street house—that he was educated at St. George's School; that he lost his father when he was only 20 years of age; that he had a hard struggle in his earlier days to earn a living; and that in 1826 he married Sarah Ediss, the daughter of an architect and builder living at Dibden, near Southampton.

The youngest of my great-grandparents' many children was ELIZABETH. She was born in 1803, and baptised at Kingston Parish Church on April 7th of that year. Of her career and personality very little has come down to us; all that is certain is that, at some time or other—probably while still fairly young—she left Portsea for London and that she lived in London for the remainder of her life. From the outset she must, I fancy, have earned her own living, for at that date there could have been little or no family money available for her support. Elizabeth was reputed to be a typical Besant in one respect, for she is recorded as having said that she would rather go without a meal than go shabby. Indeed she seems to have devoted a good deal of thought to her clothes in those days, for she had a craze for tight-lacing and greatly exasperated her brother-in-law, Thomas Jackson, the corset-maker, by her indulgence in this now-forgotten habit. Tight-lacing was, in fact, said to have been the cause of her death. She was famous in the family for her



ELIZABETH BESANT, CIRCA 1870.

beautiful needlework, and in her old age was regarded by her younger relatives as "a kind old soul." She is reported to have kept house for her brother James and brother Henry in their bachelor days. Be that as it may, the only glimpse we have of her in middle life is her presence, in 1849, at the Christmas Day banquet already recorded, when James and Henry fell asleep after dinner; the two sisters then no doubt discussed their brothers with candour and admonished their young nephew William against such reprehensible conduct. In the later years of her life she lived at 76 Leverton Street, Kentish Town. This is a residential street of the type characteristic of a London suburb: the houses now old and somewhat decayed, but the street itself of greater width than many of those in the immediate neighbourhood; and the fact that she was able to live there seems to indicate that her means were sufficient to provide for her maintenance in reasonable comfort. Until their deaths in the early sixties her two brothers, James and Henry, and her sister, Mary Jackson, who came to London after her husband's death in 1857, had lived in her immediate neighbourhood, and kept in close touch with her. I am told that when she used to visit the Jackson's house a cab was always provided to take her home; but her young nephews and nieces used to take an unholy joy in summoning a hansom, always protesting

that a four-wheeler could not be obtained, and knowing full well how improper it was then regarded for an elderly lady to drive about alone in a hansom. She survived all her London relatives, and during the last few years of her life could not have seen much of any members of the family. She died on June 11th, 1872, at the age of sixty-nine. Owing to the suddenness of her death, an inquest had to be held. The notes of the evidence produced are quite formal : none of her relatives appear to have been summoned, and the certified cause of death reads somewhat quaintly : “ Fainting of the Heart, whilst in a state of fatty degeneration.” She was buried in London, her brother William, with his two sons, Horace and Albert, attending the funeral.

To this scanty history of my great-aunt Elizabeth—her baptism in 1803, her Christmas dinner in 1849, her hansom cab rides, the inquest held upon her in 1872—I am fortunately able to add her portrait, which is reproduced here from a *carte de visite* photograph taken in her old age, and preserved for more than sixty years in a family album.

CHAPTER V

THE EDISS AND WYATT ANCESTORS

I. INTRODUCTORY

REFERENCE was made in the preceding chapter to the marriage of William Besant and Sarah Ediss in 1826, and in due course we shall have to deal in detail with the story of their married life. But before doing so we must turn aside for a while from the Besants and from the direct line of our story and must endeavour to trace out, so far as is now practicable, the history of the surroundings and of the ancestors of Sarah Ediss. Here we have to travel far afield from Portsea. In the Autobiography—as we have already seen—we are given a glimpse of Sarah in her childhood days, as a happy schoolgirl, not overburdened by education but steeped in all the traditions of the New Forest district where she was born and brought up. Her mother was a Wyatt, and belonged to an old Forest race of farmers or yeomen. Her father, James Ediss, was, however, a Lincolnshire man, and was by trade a builder,

contractor and architect. His business seems to have lain chiefly in Southampton and that he made a considerable success of it is shown by the fact that he either built or restored portions of Hurst Castle—the famous old fort which commands the western entrance to the Solent. We have now, therefore, to pick up two family links, one starting in Lincolnshire and one wholly centred in the New Forest district.

II. THE EDISS FAMILY

Despite a considerable amount of research I have been unable to trace out details of the ancestry of James Ediss. The Autobiography merely records that he “was not a New Forest man ; he came from Lincolnshire, his name being Ediss.” This does not take us far, for Lincolnshire is a large county. However, as my father’s notes indicated vaguely that the Ediss family were connected with Boston, I started enquiries there. The results have, in the main, been disappointing, but have disclosed that ten children of Thomas and Elizabeth Ediss were baptised at the Parish Church between 1782 and 1799. From the similarity of the names of some of the children it is clear that this Thomas Ediss was a brother of our James Ediss. But at this point I am baffled. For a careful search of the Boston Parish Church registers indicates that none of

the Ediss family were buried there between 1679 and 1799; nor can record be found of any Ediss marriages. It seems, therefore, reasonable to infer that brother James and brother Thomas were not Boston born: that they belonged to some other part of South Lincolnshire, probably not very distant from Boston; and that by 1780 or thereabouts Thomas had settled down in Boston, while James had migrated to the New Forest or Southampton neighbourhood. Clearly, nothing more can be gained from the Boston Parish Church Registers. I then tried another line of enquiry, my father having recorded that he "had heard in his boyhood" that when his mother's father came to the New Forest from Lincolnshire, he left behind him, at Boston or thereabouts, his brother and his father, the one an attorney, the other a doctor. Here, again, the result has been fruitless. One or two members of the Ediss family of a later generation have come to light, but that is all. I place these facts on record in case they may prove useful to any later investigator, but for my present purpose we must be content to leave the Lincolnshire ancestors of James Ediss out of account.

James Ediss—as we learn from his tombstone—was born in 1759, and from that date until his marriage nothing further is known of his history. On July 16th, 1792, he was married by licence at

Fawley Church to Elizabeth Wyatt. Such details as I have been able to glean as to their children are recorded in a later section of this chapter. Of James himself I can learn nothing. He seems to have lived at Fawley during the whole of his married life ; he became prosperous and in 1820, at the age of sixty-one, he died. He was buried in a vault at Fawley Churchyard.

III. THE WYATT FAMILY

On the western shore of the upper reaches of Southampton Water and nearly opposite to Southampton lies the port of Hythe. Inland and barely a mile away to the north-west is the village of Dibden ; a mile to the south-east lies the hamlet of Hardley. Still working our way south-east, and some two miles beyond Hardley, we reach the picturesque village of Fawley with its ancient church and its tidal quay. The district thus covered forms a narrow strip which stretches along Southampton Water from north to south for about four miles, but extends inland for only a mile or so. On the western side this area is bounded in the centre by Beaulieu Heath ; beyond that the New Forest begins. It is a very beautiful district, but somewhat out of the course followed by the ordinary tourist,

and, consequently, not so well known to the general public as its scenery and its many fine viewpoints deserve.

Here it was that the Wyatt family lived for generations. All of them, as I have already mentioned, were yeomen or farmers—mostly in a small way. They owned or occupied land; they never moved far afield; they married and lived their lives in the village where they were born; there they died and were buried; they cast not the slightest ripple on history, and their very names can now only be rediscovered and brought to light by exhaustive searches in the parish registers of the local churches. In this way I have been able to trace the name back to the reign of Charles II.

The earliest records of the family that I have been able to find are extracted from the Fawley registers. From these we learn that on June 3rd, 1678, Peter Wyatt of that parish married Mary West. A few months later Thomas Wyatt of Fawley married Sarah Hobbord, and less than four years afterwards Thomas Wyatt—presumably the same Thomas—married Elizabeth Strong. A generation later we find in the burial registers that James, son of John Wyatt of Hardley, died on September 25th, 1717, leaving a widow, Elizabeth Wyatt, who died in 1731. Another Elizabeth Wyatt, the daughter of a William Wyatt, was buried at Fawley in 1720, but

as her age at death is not recorded, the approximate date of her father's birth cannot be determined. Clearly Peter and Thomas must have been born about 1650, or soon afterwards ; John must have been born about 1670 at the latest, but probably considerably earlier than that year ; William may have been born, as they say in Hampshire, anywhen. As his daughter Elizabeth, at the date of her death may either have been an infant, or a spinster of mature years, it follows that William's birth could not have been later than 1695, while it may have been far earlier. We have thus four Wyatt ancestors whose birth can be definitely assigned to the second half of the seventeenth century. Peter and Thomas were probably brothers and John may have been their brother or their cousin ; William, I think, must have belonged to a later generation—he was probably son or nephew of one of the earlier three members of the family. Unfortunately, however, at this early date the baptismal registers are not available, and it is therefore impossible to assign any exact degrees of relationship to these earliest recorded Wyatts. But we have established conclusively that, during the closing quarter of the seventeenth century, several members of the Wyatt family were living in or near Fawley ; and from this fact we may, I think, reasonably conclude that these early Wyatt ancestors of ours must have had ancestors of the

same name who were living in the New Forest district much further back than 1650.

It will be remembered that in tracing out the Besant pedigree at Portsea, the investigation followed much the same lines. First comes the record of the name ; then a period during which the name repeatedly occurs, but the relationships are elusive owing to the paucity of data ; then at last comes a point where the direct ancestor is discovered and the chain thereafter can be traced with certainty from generation to generation down to the present day. In the case of the Besants, who were town-dwellers of humble position, and who were singularly negligent as regards baptisms, the earliest record goes back only to 1763, and it is not until we come to John Besant the fifth that we can definitely locate our direct ancestor. The Wyatts on the other hand were owners of land and were thus anchored to one spot : their children were habitually baptised, and from 1735 onwards these records have been incorporated in our story. It has thus been possible, with comparative ease, to trace back the successive links of the Wyatt family tree to a more remote past than in the case of the Besants.

The earliest Wyatts whom we can claim positively as direct ancestors are David Wyatt, senior, and Jane, his wife. This David was born at the latest about 1710. He may have been born somewhat

earlier and he was doubtless a descendant of one or other of the four Wyatts previously mentioned—Peter, Thomas, John or William. Both he and his wife died young : she survived him by a few months and died in confinement in 1743. She and her infant son, John, were buried at Fawley. Their eldest son, David, was baptised at Dibden on April 29th, 1735. There was also another son—James. Both grew up to become persons of some local consequence. They were the principal land-owners at Hardley, a hamlet lying midway between Dibden and Fawley, and the names of both appear in the parish rate-books as contributing the greater part of the church rates. James became Churchwarden of Fawley, and David was a regular attendant at the Easter Vestries. His signature appears a number of times in the old rate-books. In ancient times Hardley seems to have had a curious system of land tenure, according to a record left by a former rector of Fawley. He states :

“ Hardley, Hardley Green and Harley Green (as it is pronounced by the older people) was originally Forest Land. The cottages scattered upon it were, for the most part, encroachments, under the old system by which any person who could erect a building sufficient to afford him shelter, or containing a fireplace at which he could boil a kettle, without being disturbed by the authorities, was allowed to retain possession.” . . .

How well one can imagine the anxiety of a Hardley squatter who had in some way managed, by hook or by crook, to comply with the conditions laid down, as he watched, from the cover afforded by his miserable shelter, the gradual warming of the water in his kettle, and trusted that the smoke rising from his fireplace might not betray his presence to the authorities until boiling point had been reached. Did our Wyatt ancestors, I wonder, acquire their Hardley property by this primitive tenure? One would almost like to hope so, for it has such a pleasant piratical flavour. But it seems far removed from the respectable responsibilities of a churchwarden, and of a payer of church rates.

Be that as it may, David and James Wyatt were in possession of Hardley land in the middle of the eighteenth century. As we are concerned with the fortunes of David, his brother James now drops out of the picture. It may, however, be recorded that James married and had several children. There is a final record in the registers: "James Wyatt, of the Poorhouse at Fawley, buried January 10th, 1774." One can only trust that this entry may refer to another James and not to the land-owning Churchwarden.

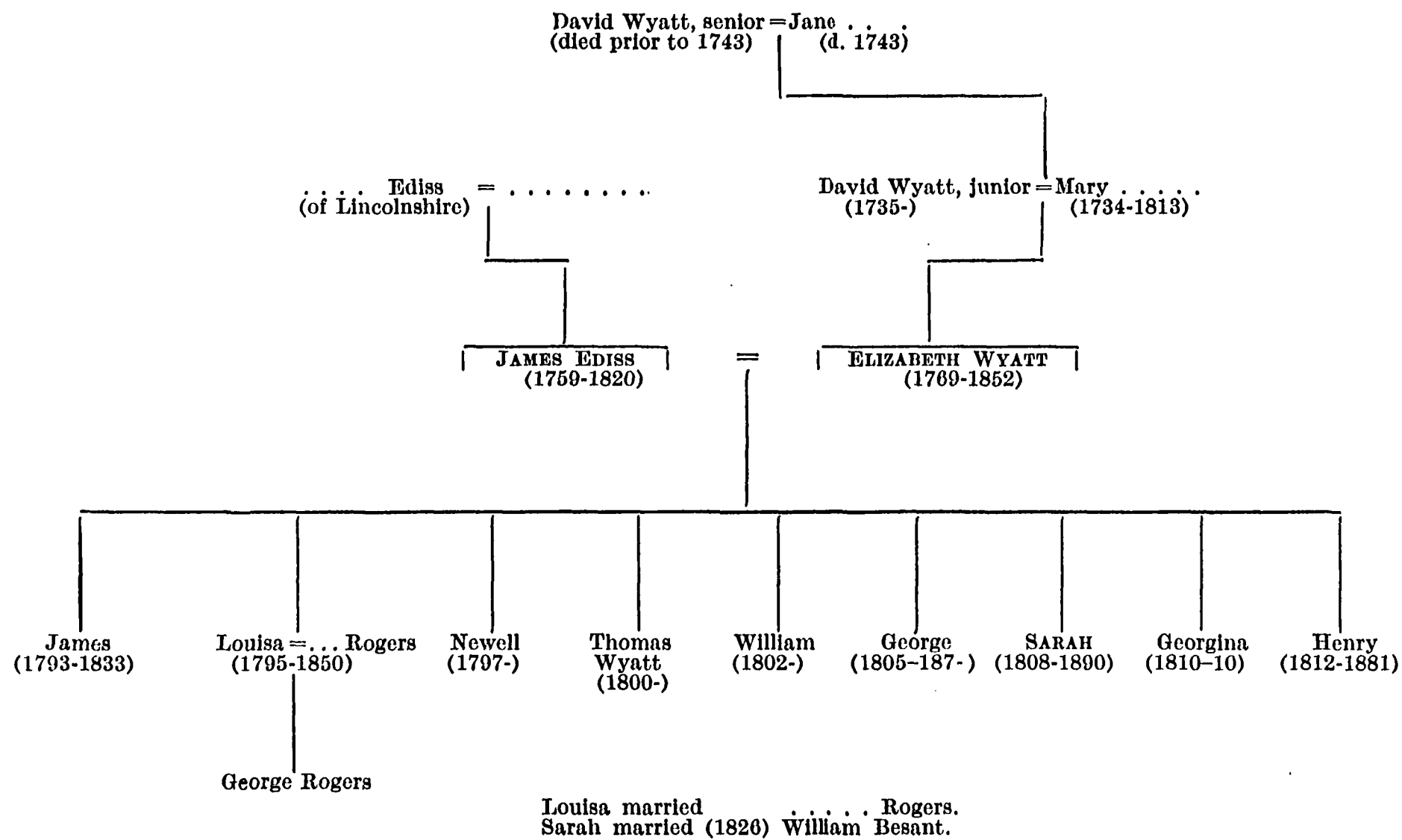
Returning now to our main pedigree, we find that David Junior married about 1760. He and his wife, Mary, had many children, all baptised at Fawley

between 1763 and 1772. The child that interests us is his third daughter, Elizabeth. She was born in 1769—exactly a century before the birth of the writer of these notes. She was privately baptised at Fawley on October 23rd, 1769, and publicly on December 13th, 1769. The Rev. F. N. Harvey, the present Rector of Fawley, tells me that the explanation of the many private baptisms, followed by public ones, that appear in their register, is probably that the then Rector had public services of baptisms held on certain days in the parish church, the previous private baptisms having taken place in the mother's home. The marriage of Elizabeth Wyatt with James Ediss took place, as already recorded, at Fawley Church by licence, on July 16th, 1792. She survived her husband for more than thirty years and died at Hythe in 1852 at the advanced age of eighty-two. She was buried in the vault at Fawley churchyard beside the body of her husband.

IV. THE CHILDREN OF JAMES AND ELIZABETH EDISS

James and Elizabeth Ediss had a large family, the eldest son, James, and the eldest daughter, Louisa, being baptised together at Dibden on September 10th, 1796. Then followed in turn Newell, Thomas

THE EDISS AND WYATT PEDIGREES



Wyatt, William and George. The seventh child was Sarah, who was born in 1808 and who afterwards married William Besant. Then in 1810 came little Georgina, who died in infancy, and lastly in 1812 Henry, who outlived for many years all his brothers and sisters except Sarah. A good many of the family died young and none of them appear to have made any mark in the world. Some of them, I gather, went downhill rapidly. Of one of the sons, my father records caustically in his notes, "a vulgar fellow, much addicted to beer." Louisa, the only sister of Sarah who survived infancy, married a Mr. Rogers and their son, "young George," remained in touch with the Portsea Besants up to my day. So did Mrs. Perks. She was a descendant on the Ediss side, and in my young days had become a confirmed invalid. I hold her in kindly remembrance as having given me, when a small boy, the princely tip of a golden half-sovereign. Another Ediss descendant in the days of my boyhood was a school-master somewhere in the Isle of Wight. He was a man of considerable intellectual attainments.

CHAPTER VI

“ THE GRANDPARENTS ”—WILLIAM AND SARAH BESANT

WILLIAM BESANT and Sarah Ediss were married at Kingston Church, Portsea, on March 29th, 1826, and lived to celebrate their Golden Wedding. The ceremony was conducted by the curate, after publication of Banns, one of the witnesses being Elizabeth Besant, sister of the bridegroom, and the other, Robert Rogers, a relation of the bride. The certificate gives but meagre details of the young couple ; for it states neither their ages, nor their occupation, nor the names of their parents. It does, however, give one valuable piece of information, for it states that both bride and bridegroom were residents in Portsea parish. It would appear therefore that, at some date prior to her marriage, Sarah Ediss must have left her New Forest home and have taken up residence at Portsea. She lived for a time, no doubt, with her Ediss relatives there, and this probably explains how she and her future husband first met. For, in those days of difficult travelling,

a young man who was earning his living at Portsea would hardly have found his way to Dibden, on the far side of Southampton Water, in search of a bride.

The young couple must have had a hard struggle financially in the earlier days; for out of a small income they managed to bring up a family of nine children in reasonable comfort, and contrived to send three sons to Cambridge. Living, of course, was cheap in 1826, when my grandmother, as she has told me, paid threepence per pound for rump steak. Rents, too, were extremely moderate; there were no holiday expenses, and little, if anything, could have been spent on amusements. But other things were dear. Tea of fine quality—granny called it “company tea”—cost twelve shillings per pound. All the spoons and forks that they kept in daily use were of silver and some of these, engraved with an intertwined W.S.B. remain as family possessions to this day. So, too, do the watercolour portraits reproduced on the opposite page. The young couple possessed also some beautiful china and a little fine furniture. Moreover, each of them owned, apparently as from the date of their marriage, a massive gold watch, of such excellent quality that these two watches still remain capable of use a century later. In addition, there was a small, but well-selected library. Here let me quote direct from the Autobiography :



WILLIAM AND SARAH BESANT IN 1826.

“We had a small Library. Very few middle-class people in my childhood had any books to speak of, except a few shelves filled with dreary Divinity or old Greek and Latin Classics. We had an excellent collection of books. . . . Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, Bunyan’s Works, Marryatt’s Works; all of those of Dickens which were then written: all Miss Edgeworth’s books . . . Goldsmith’s Works complete: the Waverley Novels: Byron, Wordsworth and a number of minor poets: whole shelves of plays. . . . I was encouraged to read not only by my father’s example but by my mother’s exhortations and approval. She saw in learning a hope for the future; she had ambitions for her boys, though she kept these ambitions to herself.”

It is amazing how all this could have been done on an income which, I am credibly informed, was at the outset just one hundred and twenty-five pounds a year.

They must indeed have been a remarkable couple when they started their married life at Portsea. Read what Walter Besant writes of his parents in the Autobiography:

. . . “As for my father he tried many things. For some time he was in very low water: then he got up again and settled in a quiet office. He was not a pushing man, nor did he know how to catch at opportunities. Mostly he waited. Meantime he was a studious man, whose chief delight was in reading: he was specially well acquainted with the English drama, from Shakespeare to Sheridan; and he had a good collection of

plays. . . . He was a shy man and very retiring : he never went into any kind of society . . . he would not take part in municipal affairs . . . he asked for nothing more than an occasional visit in the afternoon from a friend, and an evening free from interruption. . .

“ My mother was the cleverest woman I have ever known : the quickest witted ; the surest and safest in her judgments ; the most prophetic for those she loved ; the most far-seeing. Her education had been what you might expect in a village between the years 1808, when she was born, and 1826 when she married. But it sufficed—because it was not book-learning that she wanted for the care and upbringing of her children, for whom she rose early and worked late. . . . Ours was a household in which economy had to be practised, but without privation. The comfort of the house, the well-being of the children, were alike due to my mother’s genius for administration. . . . I go back in memory to the old times when we sat at my mother’s feet in blindman’s holiday, when the sun had gone down, but the lights were not brought in, and she would tell us stories of the New Forest. . . . During her childhood she ran about on the outskirts of the Forest, catching and riding the bare-backed ponies and drinking in the folklore and old-wife wisdom of that sequestered district. . . .”

How vividly one can conjure up this household picture of the distant past. He, studious, artistic, curiously gentle and of a retiring disposition ; she, self-reliant, full of energy, gifted with keen intellectual powers, coupled with much imaginative faculty.

From her side came, undoubtedly, all the driving force ; from her husband those literary and artistic tendencies which produced such varied abilities among their children. In his early days my grandfather painted a good deal, both in water colours and in oils. For his water colour sketches he took the utmost pains in preparing his paints, and he employed, I am told, some process, the secret of which he refused to disclose. These little pictures, painted a century ago, retain their freshness of colour to this day.

I have not succeeded in tracing with any certainty where the young couple lived when they were first married, but it was probably in the Britain Street house, where his father had died in 1820, and where his widowed mother still resided. From 1821 to 1828 William Besant's name appears annually as a ratepayer at that address, but by the end of 1828 he had moved to 21 St. George's Square. Here five of his children were born, and he seems to have lived in this house during the next eight years or so. During this period the family, following the tradition set up by old John Besant, attended St. John's Church, and there the three elder children, William, Sarah and Louisa were baptised. From 1832 to 1836 his name appears in the ratepayers lists as occupying business premises in Butcher Street. In 1838-9 we find him living at Kingston Cross ;

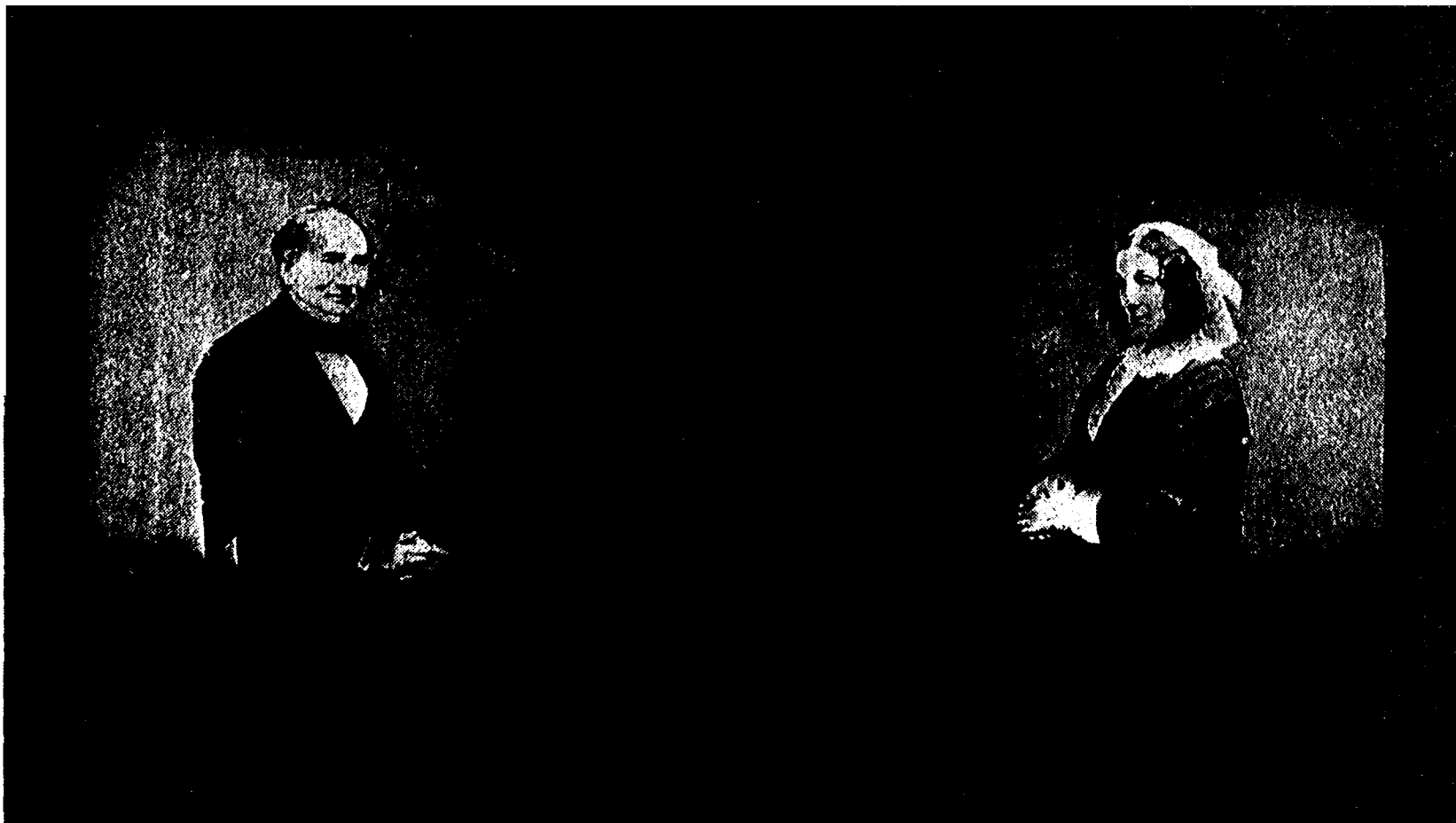
from 1839 to 1842 at Queen Street ; then for three or four years at Prince George Street, which lies north of Queen Street and close to St. John's Church. In the meantime he retained the Queen Street premises for business purposes.

As to the various occupations which he followed during the earlier stages of his career, I can add a few details to the bald statement in the Autobiography that " he tried many things." At one time he was a clerk in the Dockyard ; at another a schoolmaster ; at another a brewer in a small way at Havant. This last was apparently after his marriage when, for a short time, he appears to have forsaken Portsea and taken a house at Bedhampton, some eight miles away. In 1830, 1833 and 1836 he is described in the baptismal certificates of successive children as " Merchant," in 1838 as " Gentleman," in 1840 as " Woolen Draper," in 1842 as " Draper," and in 1844 as " Wine Merchant." I fancy that low water mark must have been reached about 1838, when he went to live at Kingston Cross. At that date he entered the employment of his brother-in-law, Thomas Jackson, and " travelled " in corsets. I am told that for many years his daughter Sarah preserved a collection of beautiful little corset-models, which her father had carried on his rounds in those long-past days ; but that as time went on, any application from relatives to see these models

was resolutely refused, and all trace of them has, of course, long since disappeared. From corsets to wool merchant and draper seems a natural transition, but it is difficult to realise how the struggling draper of 1842 could have become the successful wine merchant of 1844. Indeed, one can hardly imagine how a man of forty-four, without any technical training, with very little capital, and burdened with a large family, could have ventured to embark upon this new and speculative career. But evidently this wine business prospered, for there were no more changes of occupation. In the summer of 1846 he left Prince George Street, and moved to 11 Union Street (later known as No. 12), a substantial and roomy house where his youngest child, Mary Ann, was born, and where the family lived until 1867. In that year he removed his residence to "Spring Lawn," Grove Road, Southsea, and there he and his wife lived until their deaths. But he retained the Union Street house as an office for business purposes until his retirement. It was then taken over by his solicitor son, Albert, who worked there for many years, and the family tenure of the house thus extended over the long period of fifty-five years. My grandfather retired from business in 1876—the year in which he celebrated his Golden Wedding—and I find that my father received from him, as a memento of the occasion, a charming

letter accompanied by a small parcel of choice old port.

A glimpse of the family life in the Union Street days can be gathered from the diary kept in 1848–50 by William, their eldest son. He was then an undergraduate at Cambridge and spent most of his vacations with his parents at Portsea. We find him attending St. John's Church, as his father and grandfather had done before him. The household maintained close associations with their relatives, the Jacksons, the Rogers, the Russells, and we find constant references to their little entertainments and excursions. Members of the Ediss family were still living at Portsmouth and on one occasion William records that he "called on Mr. Ediss and brought Mamma home." He takes Mrs. and Fanny Jackson to an entertainment, or has tea with Aunt Clara (Mrs. Russell), or fetches his sister Louisa back from Aunt Rogers. Her son, George Rogers, constantly played chess with William; in the evenings there was music and sometimes a little dancing. There are references from time to time to Miss L., and William was delighted with her singing. He walked with his father and his sister on the Common and they spent a good deal of their time in sketching. Sometimes they had readings aloud. It must have been a peaceful happy household. One sorrow fell upon them at this period.

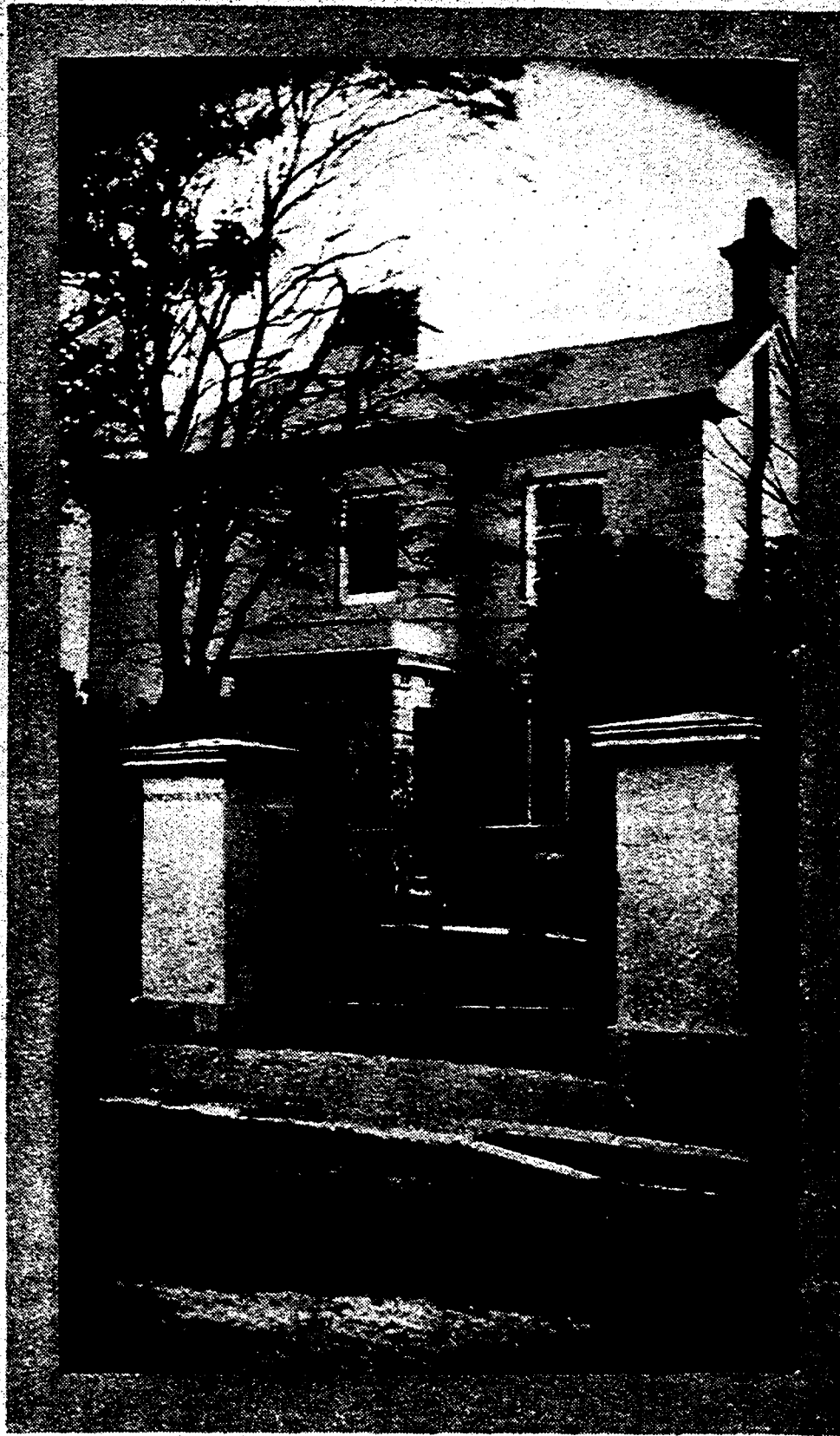


Little Mary Ann, the youngest of the family, was suddenly taken ill and died five days later. William writes feelingly of the grief of his parents and records his own inability to realise that his little sister could be dead. As there were ten children, and this was the first time that death had claimed a member of their happy family circle, one can understand how greatly they were all affected by this unexpected blow. The child was buried at Farlington, near Havant, in the vault where her father's parents lay buried.

“Spring Lawn” was a comfortable and spacious house standing in its own extensive grounds and approached by a carriage drive. My grandfather appears to have purchased the land some time before he built his house upon it, for there is a record that in holiday times the family used to picnic there. At that date it was in open country, with only a single cottage between it and the sea. Palmerston Road had not been built, and Southsea, as it is now known, scarcely existed. Finances must have become more prosperous to permit of such a house being purchased. Possibly Cambridge—in the person of his eldest son William—may have helped. The house itself still exists, but altered out of recognition. The front garden has been converted into shops, most of the rest built over ; only part of the back of the house and a small garden alongside remain unchanged.

Those of the family who are interested can see this remnant of their ancestral home by turning into Merton Road and looking over the low boundary wall. In the garden, near the wall, is a fine walnut tree, beneath which, in the old days, there was a garden seat. In fancy one can still see the old people sitting there in the summer evenings, the elder daughter, Sarah, busily engaged in needlework, her younger sister Winnie sketching or painting; while from time to time one of their many brothers came as a welcome visitor to the family home.

I retain a few scattered memories of the old man, though I was only ten years old at the time of his death in 1879. For the sons never failed to visit their parents at least once every year and my father generally took me with him on these annual pilgrimages to Southsea. The wonderful family affection which interpreted itself in these repeated visits to the old home lasted on until my grandmother's death eleven years later. My grandfather, as I remember him, had grown feeble, but his charm of manner and invariable courtesy remained to the end. He used occasionally to take me for walks in old Portsmouth and I would give much now to recall the history of the town as he poured it forth in our wanderings. All that I can now recollect, vividly, is his taking me once through a winding tunnel passage in one of the old fortified town



SPRING LAWN, SOUTHSEA, CIRCA 1870.

gates—long ago, alas, all swept away—and explaining that the winding arrangement of the pathway was designed to prevent cannon shot from obtaining a clear passage; and defence was thus facilitated. He was full of apt quotations and it was said of him that he knew his Bible and his Shakespeare by heart. Mention any verse of either and he would instantly give you the context. To us children he provided one continuous source of delight. He grew extremely long-sighted in his old age, and to please us he would pin the newspaper on the wall, walk backwards away from it and, without using his spectacles, read it aloud to us from the far side of the room. And he had what, to a schoolboy, is a most pleasing trait in elderly relatives—the habit of enquiring as to the whereabouts of juvenile pockets, and of finding a coin to place in every available receptacle. He died very suddenly from heart failure on a cold March morning in 1879, and was buried in the family vault at Portsea which he had had constructed when his daughter Louisa had died some eleven years previously.

Of my grandmother I can speak more definitely, for I saw much of her during the last ten years of her life. She was then a formidable old lady, brisk in her movements and masterful. Her six sons worshipped her, but she never let them forget that her old authority remained. Even when paralysed and

bedridden she still ruled the household and insisted that her daughter Sarah, who lived with her and who was then approaching sixty years of age, should each evening deposit by her bedside the basket which contained the large bunches of domestic keys. Everything in the house was always kept locked up; the bookcases, the cupboards, the drawers, all had their keys appropriately labelled and all were carried throughout the day in the little basket. At night the basket was carried upstairs, with the large keys of the front and back doors lying on the top. Amongst them was the carefully guarded key of the tap of the beer cask. This key was never allowed to pass out of the hands of her daughter, whose duty it was, twice daily, to draw the household beer: for my grandmother, up to the very close of her life, insisted on having a glass of beer with her dinner and supper. Near the end I fancy that her beer was diluted with water. In these modern days can one imagine any old lady of eighty, paralysed and bed-ridden, being allowed to drink beer? But it must be remembered that in her younger days, everyone, girls and boys alike, drank beer at meals as a matter of course. When the children were all living at home together, the beer was served at table in a noble willow pattern china jug. This mighty jug is now one of my treasured possessions, and it holds a gallon !

Apart from the jealous guard kept over the keys, I recall two other curious pieces of ritual that were practised. Every evening, when the house was shut up, a bell, attached to a spring so that it would ring at the slightest movement, was solemnly fastened to a staple in the centre of the hall door—a precaution designed to give warning of the entry of burglars. Fortunately for the peace of the household the bell was never known to ring. There was, too, the tall iron cylinder, pierced with holes, which had served the family as a night-light holder for generations—you will find the type described in *Pickwick*. In older days a rushlight had been used, but by my time a wax candle had been substituted. Every evening in the winter season my aunt placed this cumbrous cylinder in a hand-basin on the floor of her bedroom. A little water was poured in as protection against fire and the candle was then lighted. The dancing shadows produced a weird and rather terrifying effect in a darkened room.

Granny was not, I think, in any special way, religiously minded, though in her younger days she was keenly anxious that one at least of her sons should take Orders. In this respect alone did her son Walter ever disappoint her ; but her wishes were fulfilled a few years later, when her son Frank was ordained. In her old age she read her Bible day by day—working her way steadily through, from

Genesis to Revelation, and then starting afresh at the beginning.

Coupled with her practical good sense she had some curious old-world superstitions. In a voluminous pocket, which hung round the waist beneath her skirt, she invariably carried a hare's foot as a preventative against rheumatism. She never had, I believe, the slightest twinge of rheumatism ; but she always attributed this immunity to her talisman, and she was highly indignant with anyone who expressed disbelief in its efficiency. In this connection I remember that on one occasion she sent a hare's foot to a clergyman's wife of her acquaintance who was a great sufferer from this complaint. It was my ill-fortune to have to convey this wretched hare's foot and to hand it over to the lady, who at once threw it away in disgust ; gave me a long lecture as to the heathenish belief involved—one totally unworthy of any professing christian—and left me to interpret her view to my dear old grandmother, who, in her turn, was bitterly hurt at this unexpected outcome of her kindly-meant efforts.

The old lady was always very kind to me. She had in the house a never-ending stock of coins and curios, many of them brought from foreign parts by her wandering children, Walter, Edgar and Winnie. These she used to produce at intervals and hand over to me with an injunction that they

were to be carefully kept. But schoolboys, however violently they develop the collecting habit, are not conspicuous for their power of hoarding possessions, and I am afraid that most of her gifts were soon sold or "swopped" at school. However, she understood boys well, for she had brought up six sons of her own, and she never seemed to mind much when I confessed what I had done. After exclaiming impatiently "Drat the boy"—a favourite expression of hers—she always found for me some other curiosity to take its place. The house was a veritable museum in those days, for nothing that entered it was ever destroyed; nothing ever seemed to wear out and nothing ever grew shabby.

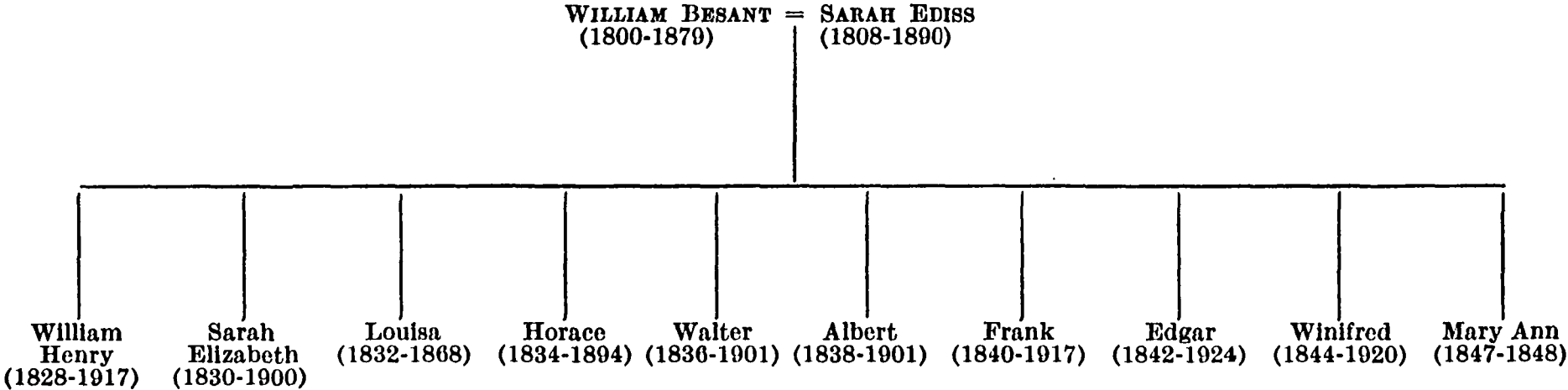
In her later years she became a martyr to bronchitis, and it was no uncommon thing for her sons to be summoned to her death bed. Somehow, she always succeeded in pulling through these attacks and after each recovery she used to refer humorously to these bedside visits. Her son Walter used to say that his mother invariably winked when he said "Good-bye" on these occasions; but that of course may be exaggeration. Paralysis and bronchitis won, however, in the end and she died at "Spring Lawn" on November 6th, 1890, in her eighty-third year. She was buried beside her husband and her daughter Louisa in the Portsea family vault.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHILDREN OF WILLIAM AND SARAH BESANT

IN the preceding chapter I have recorded all that I have been able to learn of the family life of the young Besant children. We have now to deal with the education and the subsequent careers of each. Leaving out of account little Mary Ann who died in infancy, and Louisa who died unmarried in 1868 at the age of thirty-five, we have left six sons—William Henry, Horace, Walter, Albert, Frank and Edgar—and two daughters—Sarah Elizabeth and Winifred. A picture of the six brothers, taken in 1883, is given on page 181. They form a striking group—all bearded as was the fashion in those days. This was the only occasion since their childhood days that the six brothers all met ; for Edgar spent most of his life on foreign service, and it was only because he happened then to be home on leave that an opportunity for arranging this family gathering presented itself. Of the six brothers three—William, Walter and Frank—were Cambridge Wranglers—

CHILDREN OF WILLIAM AND SARAH BESANT



William Henry married (1861) Margaret Willis (died 1911)
Horace married (1864), Elizabeth Marsh (died 1864)
Walter married (1874), Mary Garratt Barham (died 1904).
Albert married first (1862), Fanny Jemima Jolliffe (died 1872), and secondly (1878), Lucy Harvey.
Frank married (1867), Annie Wood.
Edgar married (1881), Margaret Fleming Evans (died 1902).
Winifred married (1870), Frederick Babington Pelle (died 1904).

a distinction in mathematics which has been gained by one other family only. Frank, my father, represented the Church; William, Mathematics; Walter, Literature; Albert, the Law; Edgar, the Civil Service; and Horace, following the footsteps of his father, was a wine merchant. They were a vigorously healthy set of men. William, the eldest, was born in 1828, and it was not until 1894 that the first death occurred amongst the brothers. William himself lived to be eighty-eight, and Edgar was eighty-two when he died. Both retained, to an unusual degree, their physical and mental powers in old age. The family had more than their share of good looks. Edgar, undoubtedly, was the most handsome of the brothers, but William, too, had a fine presence, and, as happens in so many intellectual types, his features improved with age. Indeed, his portrait at eighty, reproduced on page 125, reminds one of a Rembrandt study. Even at that age his hair—thick and bushy and worn somewhat long—retained its colour and all its old glossy lustre; there was no sign of grey anywhere, except for a few streaks in his massive beard. Sarah and her younger sister, Winnie, were both gifted with the family good looks: Winnie being endowed also with exceptional artistic abilities. Several of the family—notably, perhaps, William and Walter—had great personal charm, coupled with an old-



THE CHILDREN OF WILLIAM AND SARAH BESANT, CIRCA 1863-5.

CENTRE—WINIFRED AND WALTER. TOP—READING TO
 RIGHT—WILLIAM, MRS. WILLIAM, HORACE, MRS. HORACE,
 FRANK, MRS. ALBERT & BABY, ALBERT, MRS. ALBERT,
 ALBERT IN UNIFORM. LOUISA. EDGAR AND SARAH.

fashioned courtesy, which they had clearly inherited from their father. A good many of the brothers were shy and reserved—most of them were a little peppery ; they were impulsive and impatient in details—not perhaps altogether easy to get on with in controversial matters ; but they were generous to a fault, splendidly clannish and intensely proud of the family achievements.

CHAPTER VIII

WILLIAM HENRY BESANT (1828–1917)

WILLIAM HENRY BESANT, the eldest of the ten children, was born at St. George's Square, Portsea, on November 1st, 1828, and was baptised at St. John's Church on the 27th. The earliest glimpses we have of him are that as a small boy he remembered seeing William IV. drive through the streets of Portsea; and that as a schoolboy of thirteen he travelled by coach to London—the coach being known as the "Rocket," because it took only seven hours to cover the journey between Portsmouth and London.

His education began at St. George's School, which was held in the vestry hall attached to the church. He afterwards went to St. Paul's School, Southsea, where he became Captain of the school, and secured in 1846 every prize open to him. October of that year saw him entered at St. John's, Cambridge, and thus began a connection with the college which was to remain unbroken for over seventy years. At Cambridge, as at school, William carried all before him. He won prizes and scholar-

ships ; year after year he was first in his college examinations ; he ended by becoming, at the unusually early age of twenty-one, Senior Wrangler and first Smith's Prizeman. When the Tripos result was announced, his first act was to send an "Electric Telegraph message" to his father. Imagine the pride of the parents and of the younger children when this message reached them. The telegram itself was carefully treasured—as it well deserved to be—and when his sister Sarah died in 1900, it fell to me, as her Executor, to return it to the sender after an interval of half a century and to receive from him a characteristically charming acknowledgment. William records, very modestly, his Tripos success in a single line of his diary, adding to the bare announcement an expression of the pleasure that it will now give him to be able to earn money and thus repay to his father the heavy cost which his university education had entailed. Judged by modern standards the total cost must have been fairly small, for William had, throughout his Cambridge career as an undergraduate, successively lightened the burden falling upon his father by gaining scholarship after scholarship. It must, however, be borne in mind that the open scholarships available at Cambridge eighty years ago were strictly limited, and even William, brilliant student as he was, could not contrive at that stage of his career to render himself entirely

self-supporting. Whatever cash was needed was transmitted at intervals from Portsea to Cambridge by means of bank notes—each note being cut into halves—the first half being sent by post in one envelope, and the second, a day later, being remitted in another.

William was a lad of splendid physique and he took his full share in college recreations. His chief outdoor hobby as an undergraduate was cricket, in winter football. He was an inveterate walker and occasionally he rode. He was a keen, good billiard player and for many years hardly a day passed without a game. In his diary he records, with obvious pleasure, his gradual improvement; and how, from receiving a handicap, he first drew level, and then, in turn, gave handicaps himself. He played chess regularly, and sometimes whist, but he never seems to have been much attracted by cards. Nor was he fond of boating, though he rowed a little at intervals. He was an omnivorous reader and acquired a good working knowledge of French and German. Wine parties after Hall were frequent, but as he and his friends all belonged to working sets, these gatherings broke up early. It is notable that none of the men appear to have studied or played any games on Sundays. On that day they breakfasted late—usually in party—went to Chapel and Hall, took long country walks, talked, read,

and went early to bed. When the Volunteer movement, owing to the fear of a French invasion, was revived all over the country about 1859, William joined at once as a rifleman, and for many years continued to take an enthusiastic share in its activities at Cambridge. There used to be at "Spring Lawn" a large framed photograph of him in uniform. With his fine presence he looks every inch a soldier.

Having then, as we have seen, taken his Tripos in this brilliant manner, financial success followed at once. Pupils poured in, and in his first term of coaching he records, with legitimate pride, how the strain of work so involved compelled him to refuse many students who were anxious to come to him. The next year he was elected to a College Fellowship, and two years later, in 1853, to a Mathematical Lecturership. All these things, remember, he achieved by the time he was twenty-four years of age. Small wonder that his brother Walter, speaking of him to me years afterwards, said that the younger members of the family regarded him in those days as a demigod. But, in one small way, William had to pay the price of this tremendous mental activity; for, shortly after taking his degree, he had a stroke of paralysis. This necessitated a long holiday, but the ill-effects gradually passed off, and the only permanent trace left by the trouble was a slight drooping of the eyelid. This brought

about a tendency for tears to form in that eye and induced a pleasing mannerism ; for during the remaining sixty-odd years of his life, he had incessantly to wipe up these tears with his handkerchief. In addition to this paralytic trouble, he met with a severe accident at cricket in early life, when he and another member of the team came into violent collision in attempting to catch a skied ball. Both were knocked unconscious and were carried off the field. Apart from this early stroke of paralysis and the concussion on the cricket field he enjoyed wonderful health throughout his long life.

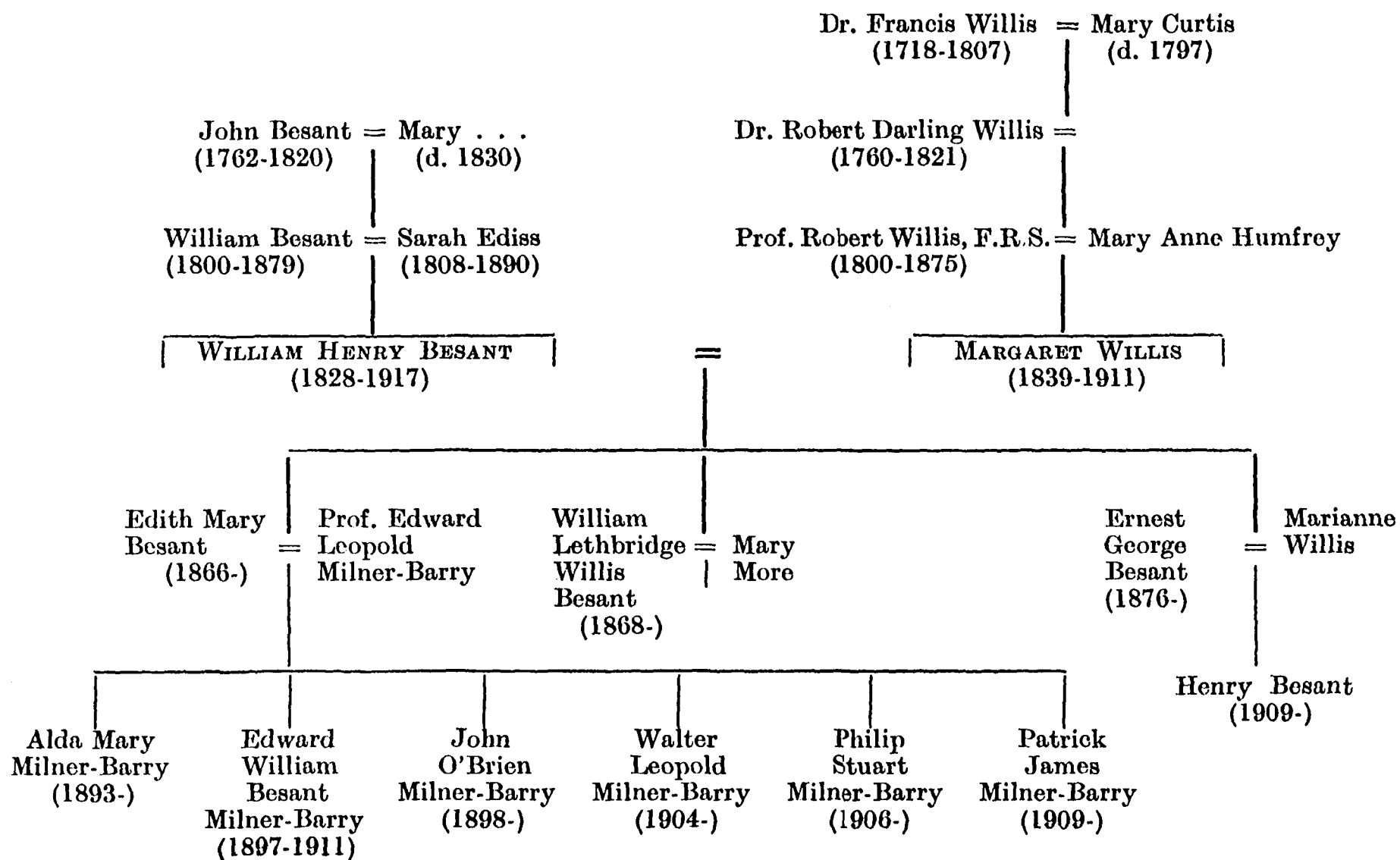
Under the old regulations he had to vacate his Fellowship in 1859, not having taken Orders, but he retained his College Lecturership for more than forty years, and when he retired in 1899 he was re-elected a Fellow of his College, a position which he retained until his death in 1917. For many years—nearly half a century, in fact—he continued to be one of the most successful mathematical coaches at Cambridge : his chief rival being the celebrated Dr. Routh, who was responsible for the training of so many Senior Wranglers. But William had his successes in this line also, and one of them was Prof. A. W. Flux, who was educated at Portsmouth Grammar School in the days when I was a pupil there. We were given a half holiday to celebrate the event.

In 1871 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. Just previously he had written an original and highly technical mathematical treatise entitled “*Roulettes and Glisettes*” ; and he used laughingly to narrate that while his little book had gained him the honour of the F.R.S., its sale had never been sufficient to cover the cost of production. But many of his other books, notably his “*Hydrostatics*” and “*Conic Sections*,” went into many editions and enjoyed a wide and prolonged circulation both in schools and universities. His industry was amazing. In term time he made it his practice for many years to begin his classes or his work with private pupils at 6.30 a.m., and after dinner he resumed his coaching or corrected papers till bed-time. But his time was not wholly devoted to work ; for there was, of course, the customary afternoon break, and after his marriage he seems to have taken his full share in the social life of Cambridge.

One other academic distinction of a special character came to him later in life. In 1881 the University decided to establish a Doctorate in Science, and William was selected as one of the first two scholars upon whom an honorary D.Sc. degree was conferred.

After retiring from his College Lecturership in 1899, he gradually reduced the number of his private pupils, but his literary activities continued for many

BESANT-WILLIS PEDIGREE



years more. Indeed, it was not until his memory failed him in extreme old age that he ceased to work.

In 1861 he married Margaret, the only daughter of Professor Willis, who was reputed in his day to be the cleverest man Cambridge had ever produced. Willis became an F.R.S. at the age of thirty and Jacksonian Professor of Applied Mechanics a few years later on. His classes were thronged and his gifts of lucid exposition remain a tradition to this day. Apart from his own line of Applied Mechanics, where he became famous as an inventor, he was long regarded, in circles far beyond Cambridge, as being the leading authority on Gothic architecture. He was also a distinguished archæologist.

William and his wife just failed to celebrate their golden wedding, she dying in the spring of 1911. They had a large family, most of whom died young. Three children survived. Edith, the eldest, married in 1892 Professor Edward Leopold Milner-Barry. As I recall them in their youth at Cambridge forty years ago, they were a strikingly attractive couple, each of them being tall above the average, and blessed not only with good looks, but with a singular charm of manner. Professor Milner-Barry, a specialist in German literature and a man of high scholastic distinction, gave up his Chair at Bangor University on the outbreak of war and volunteered for service as interpreter. He

was given work in the north and died not long afterwards, in the height of his powers, after a short illness from pneumonia, following on a chill. He left a widow with five surviving children. Coming from such a stock it is natural that the ancestral traditions of scholarship should have shown themselves markedly in these children. Alda, the eldest daughter, gained a triple first in the Cambridge Mediæval and Modern Languages Tripos. In addition she is an M.A. of Birmingham and is now Lecturer in English at that University. Two of the sons went to Cambridge and both did well. Walter went to King's and took a second class in History and Economics : of the Cambridge A.D.C. he was also an active member. Stuart, after gaining a scholarship at Cheltenham, secured another at Trinity. He gained a first class both in the Classical and the Moral Science Tripos. His hobby is chess and on several occasions he has played as a representative of his University. Following the modern tendency, these two sons have now abandoned academic life for commerce, and with their abilities they should go far. Two other sons, John O'Brien—known as Jack—and Patrick have joined the navy. Jack was a young cadet of fifteen when war broke out and was at once transferred from Dartmouth to active service. He is now a Lieutenant-Commander. Patrick, who is ten years younger than Jack, entered

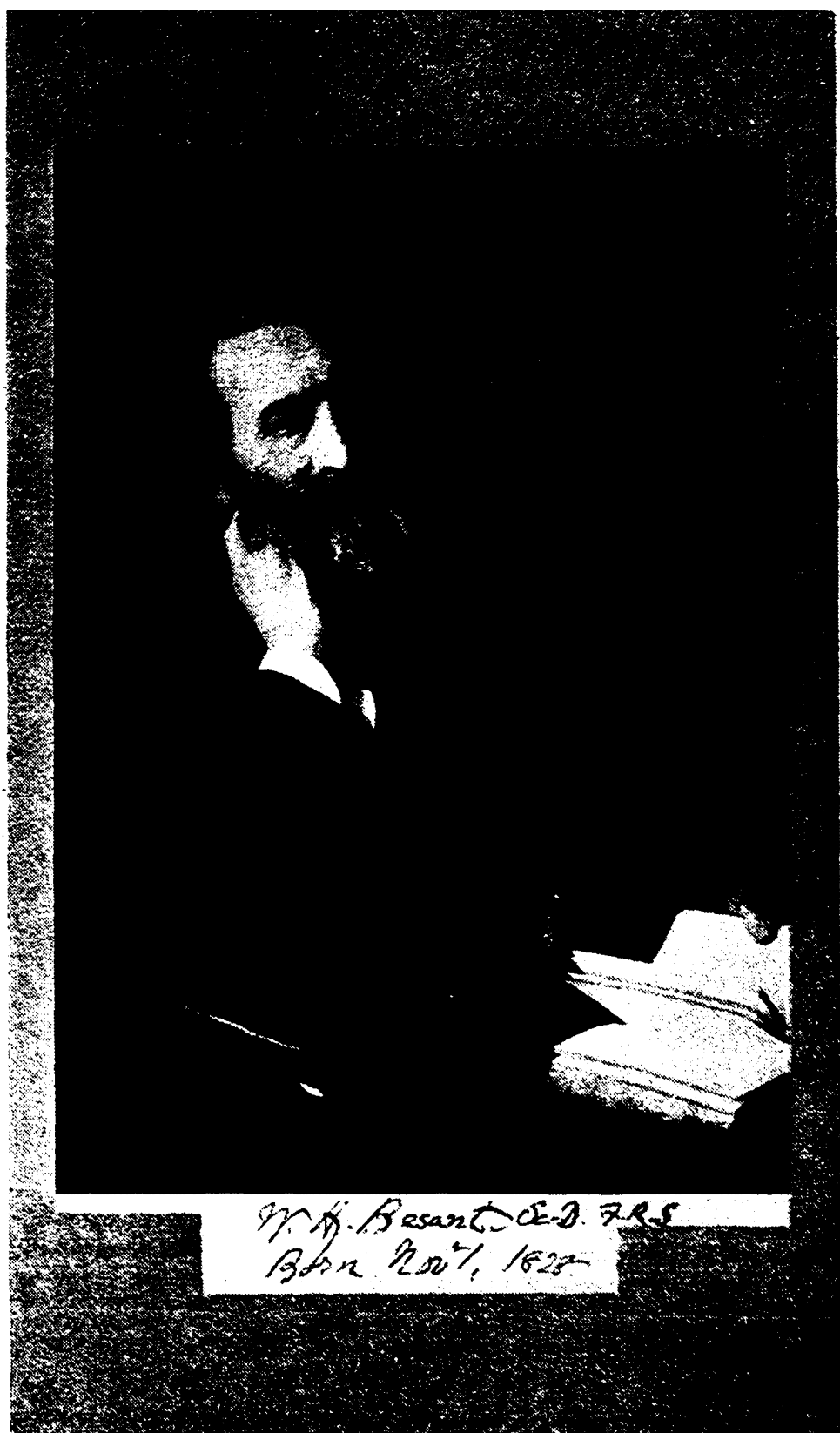
the navy after the war, gained a first class at Dartmouth, and is now a Sub-Lieutenant. There was one other son, Edward William Besant, who died at Shelford, near Cambridge, after a very short illness, at the early age of fourteen, while on a visit to his uncle, Ernest Besant.

Reverting to William's other children, his elder son, William, married Mary More in 1896. Both had strong artistic tendencies and for many years managed, with success, an antique furniture and decoration business—a calling not then so usual as it has since become. They retired in due course and settled down to a country life at Salcombe. They have no children. Ernest, the younger son, qualified as an architect, but does not practise. He married in 1903 his kinswoman, Marianne Willis, and has one son, Henry.

I cannot close this account of my uncle William without recording my gratitude to him for his unceasing kindness to me from the time that I was a lad until the day of his death. I knew him first when I was a schoolboy at Portsmouth ; later, I was often his guest at Cambridge. He was a delightful host. Typical of his punctilious courtesy was the fact that never did he—my senior by forty years—fail to meet me at the station, always attended by what he called a “Fly” to drive us back to his house. Judged by modern standards, the house

itself was not what one would call comfortable. A good table, certainly, was kept ; but in all other ways there was a degree of austerity which struck a Londoner as unexpected. There was no hot water in the bathroom, for he had views as to the danger of explosion ; and refused, when he built his house, to have a hot water system installed. So, to the date of his death, his cold bath was mitigated only by a heavy can of hot water, laboriously dragged upstairs. In the evenings he and his wife generally sat, on either side of the fireplace, in a little sitting room leading out of the hall. They used hard wooden armchairs—known, I believe, as Windsor chairs. Elsewhere in the house there were other armchairs, somewhat less uncomfortable ; the best of them being an old leather chair in his study ; but this he seldom sat in, for he was always at work. The drawing room furniture was formal and doubtless it was costly. It was covered with what I understand is known as “ Rep,”—a hard hairlike texture—and when, after some forty years’ service, these rep covers began to grow shabby, a new rep, identical in make and colour, was secured. But not without difficulty and considerable expense, for the old style had long become obsolete and the material for renewal had, therefore, to be specially woven.

William Henry Besant lived a long, a useful and a busy life. To enjoy seventy years of leadership in



WILLIAM HENRY BESANT AT AGE OF 80.

intellectual activities is not granted to many of us : that was his privilege, and in addition it was his happy fortune to gain the love and respect of everyone with whom he came in contact. The end came gradually and very peacefully. One evening, in his eighty-ninth year, after dining quietly at home, he walked upstairs to his bedroom, and in the morning it was found that he had passed away in his sleep. The funeral service was held in the Chapel of St. John's College, where he had so long attended. It was very impressive and there was a great gathering of his Cambridge friends. The coffin was covered by an ancient velvet pall, used from time immemorial at the funerals of college worthies. He was laid to rest beside his wife on June 6th, 1917, at Huntingdon Road cemetery, just outside Cambridge.

CHAPTER IX

SARAH ELIZABETH BESANT (1830–1900)— “ AUNT SARAH ”

THE second child—and the eldest daughter—was Sarah Elizabeth, who was born at Portsea on November 13th, 1830, and baptised at St. John's Chapel on the 7th of the following month.

In these modern days, when daughters are educated as carefully and expensively as sons ; when careers of every possible type are open to them on equal—or nearly equal—terms with men, it is difficult to convey to a younger generation what prospects lay ahead in the case of a daughter born in 1830. They were, indeed, terribly limited. On the educational side every effort was made at that date to push forward the boys. For them there existed splendid schools and colleges, with their continuous history of scholarships running back for centuries. But for the girls who had the misfortune to be born at that period, educational facilities were negligible, and many years had still to elapse before Miss Beale and Miss Buss, the great pioneers

of higher education for women, were able to lay their sound foundations, and from small beginnings gradually to build up the modern collegiate system of education for girls. It is, I think, fair to say that in 1850 the young woman of twenty had, apart from marriage, no prospects whatever of securing an independent life. True, of course, that teaching—up to the limits that her deficient education imposed—was open to a young woman; for becoming a governess was then regarded as being just permissible in a genteel family. Teaching, as a profession, was, however, miserably paid in the case of a private governess; and at the best, such occupation could never last for long. As for the girls' schools, the current conditions have been placed on record for us for all time by Thackeray in his delineation of Becky Sharp's escape from the bondage of her academy. Above all, we have to bear in mind that, eighty years ago, in households where the family income was sufficient to justify three sons being sent to Cambridge, any suggestion that the unmarried daughters should earn money would be repugnant. What a contrast from the conditions which, as we have just seen, permitted Sarah's great-niece, Alda, two generations later, to carve out for herself, to the joy and admiration of her parents, a university career of marked distinction, and thereby to secure for herself not only a position of distinction in the

scholastic world, but one which, necessarily, has carried with it financial independence.

Of Sarah's education I can learn nothing : probably it was simple and domestic in character. Throughout her long life she played the piano with pleasure to herself, and reasonably well according to the standards then adopted : in her later years she enjoyed listening to the military bands on Southsea Pier ; beyond that I do not think she showed any artistic leanings. She lived all her life at Portsmouth, at first with her parents ; after their deaths, in her own house, alone ; and, apart from occasional visits paid to her brothers she does not appear to have travelled at all. Nor had she any knowledge of languages. She never married, though I believe there was some little romance in her early days which came to nothing. But she was very far from being a colourless person. She was brisk of movement, a splendid needlewoman and a born housewife. She had very decided opinions of her own and she read the *Times* daily from cover to cover. In those days the *Times* cost threepence, while the other important dailies were all sold at a penny. After her mother's death, she found that, despite its high price, she could not possibly give up the paper to which she had been accustomed all her life, and she accordingly arranged to share its daily cost with another lady. If Sarah, at any time,

had had a busy morning of housework, it was distinctly unwise to interrupt her before three o'clock in the afternoon—the hour at which the newsboy attended to take her newspaper away. Needless to say, she had strong views on political questions and Mr. Gladstone found no favour in her eyes.

All her life she worked ungrudgingly for others ; in her youth helping her parents to bring up the younger brothers and sisters ; in her middle life looking after her parents and then nursing her paralysed mother devotedly through seven long years. A new and happy factor came into her life in 1874 when her nephew, little Harry Peile, was sent home by his parents from India and joined the family circle at “Spring Lawn.” The affection between these two was very real and it lasted unbrokenly until her death. My own residence at Portsmouth began in 1881, and in the next few years aunt Sarah did everything possible to brighten my life. I owe her a debt of gratitude for her unceasing kindness and sympathy in those difficult days ; and in her later years, when Harry Peile had begun his Indian career, I was able, to my great joy, to do something to repay all her care and affection. When her mother died in 1890, “Spring Lawn” was sold and Sarah made a new home for herself at a little house in Pelham Road, Southsea. There she

lived happily and very peacefully for the next ten years, visited constantly by her relatives and friends and surrounded by all the old family belongings. Her health began to fail in the early summer of 1900, and shortly afterwards she had to undergo an operation. Here again, the characteristic obstinacy of the family showed itself unmistakably. She postponed the operation as long as possible ; when it turned out to be perfectly simple in character and the doctors assured her that in a few weeks' time she would be quite well again, she refused to believe them and resolutely made up her mind that she did not want to get better. The struggle lasted for a month, and then her will power conquered the skill of her doctors and the loving attentions of her relatives. She died on August 30th, 1900, and was buried beside her parents in the family vault at Portsea.

CHAPTER X

HORACE BESANT (1834–1894)

THE second son was Horace. He was born in the St. George's Square house on December 5th, 1834, and on the 26th of the same month was baptised at Kingston Parish Church, thus breaking the traditional family link with St. John's, where his father and grandfather had so long attended, and where his elder brothers and sisters had been baptised. My father—who was six years younger than Horace—has preserved a few early memories of him. As a small boy he kept rabbits and pigeons, and great was the tribulation when they were all killed by a cat. Like his elder brother William, he began his education at St. George's School, where the Head Master was a good classical scholar, but for reasons which will be given later, was no longer quite the man he had been. After a time Horace was moved to St. Paul's School, Southsea. I cannot find that he made any name for himself as a scholar at either school; though my father records in his

notes that, while he cannot remember Horace as a prize-winner, he retains a vivid memory of him as working at home during the evenings at his Latin exercises. And here, I think, we get a vivid and true picture of young Horace. For, unlike William, Walter and Frank, the outstanding scholars of the family, it is certain that Horace was mediocre, so far as academic learning was concerned. I am sure that he was plodding and industrious—for none of the Besants at that period could have had any future whatever, save that provided by their own industry and ability. Horace, as I see him in his boyhood, belonged rather to his father's than to his mother's side. He was artistic at a period when such characteristics were regarded as being hopelessly impracticable as a means of livelihood—at any rate so far as sons were concerned. As regards the daughters, the family view changed somewhat at a later date; for in the case of Winnie—Horace's younger sister and his junior by ten years—her artistic possibilities were not only recognised at an early stage, but were most sedulously cultivated and brought thereby to their perfection. But poor Horace received no such encouragement from the family circle. As a lad he spent his small savings in payment of violin lessons, and was chaffed and jeered at for his pains. Possibly, however, the family were not much to blame for this: for the violin, in the hands of an

unskilled player, can be terribly trying to the remaining members of a studious household.

Moreover, the lad was handicapped by ill-health. When he was about fourteen years of age, he and his sister Louisa were stricken down together by typhoid fever. Louisa soon recovered from its effects ; but Horace only just pulled through and remained in poor health for many months after. As the result of this attack I believe that, even in his youth, he never enjoyed robust health ; while, throughout his middle age, his career was much handicapped by chronic rheumatism of such severe type as to interfere seriously with his business activities.

At the age of sixteen Horace left school and joined his father in the family wine business. Not long afterwards he left Portsea and took a situation in the office of a wine merchant in London, where it is interesting to record that one of his young colleagues was the Walter Gilbey who, at a later date, was the founder of the famous wine-firm bearing that name. After a period Horace set up in business for himself as a London wine merchant. He took offices, first in the City and later in the Haymarket. It is to his credit that he succeeded in holding his own, and in earning a modest but adequate livelihood. For the conditions which he had to face were not those which had confronted his father in 1844. In the earlier days and in a provincial

town, a family wine business of this character could be established with a reasonable prospect of success. But the competition in London a generation later was far more severe. The wine trade was falling more and more into the hands of the large firms, whose capital resources were abundant. Moreover, the Stores were beginning to sell wine to their clients by the single bottle and the grocers were following suit ; the ordinary citizen had not only long ceased to lay down port, but he was seldom the possessor of even a modest cellar. He was buying his wine, therefore, in small quantities—living from hand to mouth. And, concurrently, the nation, as a whole, was becoming more and more abstemious. So the lot of a private wine merchant, with a most slender command of capital, became continuously more and more precarious. And I fancy that Horace added to his difficulties by his extreme honesty and directness. He had little of the *suaviter in modo* which tells so much in business relations. He sold good wines at the price he fixed : if you did not like them you could go elsewhere. His brother Walter on one occasion did go elsewhere and imported a cask of claret direct from Bordeaux. The wine was cheap, and then came the question of bottling. Walter wrote to Horace about it and asked him if he would send up the men and the materials needed for the purpose. Horace wrote back a short note to the

effect that he would do what was asked and he added as a postscript, "I hope you'll find the stuff damned bad!" But I fancy that Horace never lost a customer, though he might have gained many more had he been more adaptable. For he had an extraordinary *flair* as regards the selection of wines: his judgment was trusted and his knowledge of vintages was almost uncanny. I have heard it said that if he had been appointed as chief wine taster or selector to one of the great firms, he would have made both their fortune and his own. It was his misfortune that for so many years he had to work independently in his own restricted sphere, crippled always by lack of capital, and thus unable to bring his special powers to their full fruition.

But even if Horace had been able at some stage to link his career with that of one of the leading firms, I doubt whether the wine trade could ever have been regarded as his natural province. For his temperament was, above all, that of the artist, and had he been born fifty years later he would inevitably have gravitated into that line of work. He had a wonderful taste for pictures, prints, choice furniture, china, silver—all the things that the art-dealer of these days slowly gathers together and then gradually shepherds into a profitable market. In the course of years Horace built up a small but well-selected library, specialising on books dealing with painting,

and more particularly with the work of the masters of the Dutch school. Throughout his business life, and so far as his means allowed, he steadily collected paintings of this school, gradually improving the quality of his pictures by selling first one and then another ; invariably substituting a finer specimen to replace those from which he had reluctantly parted.

On the domestic side, his life was shadowed by two tragic experiences. As a young man he became engaged, and three days before the date fixed for his marriage his fiancée died. Two years later, in January 1864, he married Elizabeth Marsh, the wedding taking place at Holy Trinity Church, Westminster. His wife's parents in earlier days had been connected with the British army during the period of the occupation of Paris which followed the Waterloo campaign ; and they were witnesses of the famous review of the British and Allied armies, which took place in Paris in 1818. Horace and his bride took a house in Pimlico, where their first and only child, Mary, was born. At first all went well with the mother, then complications set in, and three weeks later she died. She was buried in Norwood Cemetery on November 29th, 1864, less than a year after the date of her marriage. Her husband never remarried. He sold the house and the furniture, and for many years he lived in lodgings, with his pictures and his

art treasures around him. After his daughter grew up, he again took a house, this time in a very quiet terrace overlooking Kennington Park, and there he lived during the last few years of his life. He continued at work, but his health gradually failed, and he died suddenly from a stroke of apoplexy on October 4th, 1894. He was then in his sixtieth year, and his was the first death to take place among the six Besant brothers. He was buried in Norwood cemetery in the same grave as his wife. His daughter survived him, and shortly afterwards trained and qualified as a skilled nurse—a profession which she followed with success for many years.

CHAPTER XI

WALTER BESANT

I OWE so much personally to my uncle Walter Besant, and I have had for him throughout my life such an unbounded affection and admiration, that it is impossible for me to write of him here in any detached spirit. In the days of my youth there were difficulties between my parents of an acute order and there were straitened family means. Uncle Walter realised this and with extraordinary generosity made up his mind to give me my chance in life. From the time that I left school he treated me as one of his own sons : he sent me in my early youth to stay for three months with a French family, so that I might gain colloquial knowledge of that language ; on my return from France he sent me to University Hall, the hostel attached to University College, London, so that—in the absence of a Cambridge career—I might acquire something of the university spirit ; and when, in due course, I secured an opening in a Life Assurance office with the idea of taking up an actuarial career, he supplemented

my meagre pay so that, from the very outset, I should have sufficient means to live in reasonable comfort and be able to pursue my technical studies without embarrassment. Never would he allow me to thank him for this invaluable help. From time to time I tried to do so, but he invariably turned it off as a matter of small moment. The most he would ever say was that he felt sure I would do just the same for his children if the need arose, and with that he dismissed the subject.

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Walter, the third son and the fifth child of his parents, was born at No. 21 St. George's Square, Portsea, on August 14th 1836, and a tablet on the house commemorates the event. Portsea at that period had already produced some famous men. The greatest of them, of course, is Charles Dickens. When Walter was born Dickens was twenty-four years of age and the *Pickwick Papers* were being published in serial form. Brunel, the celebrated engineer, who was a few years older than Dickens, was also a famous Portsea citizen. He was actually born in Britain Street, where John and Mary Besant, the grandparents of Walter, were then living.

Walter was the last member of the family to be born in St. George's Square ; for shortly afterwards, his father, searching for openings in various types of

occupation, found himself forced to move frequently from one house to another and eight anxious years were to elapse before he found anchorage and built up his permanent career as a wine merchant.

Walter, almost from infancy, devoured books. His short-sightedness, coupled with his small physique, debarred him largely from taking his share in such school and home games as were then played. His elder sister Sarah has told me something of his early boyhood. He lived continually in a dream world of his own, seeking nothing but to get away with one of his beloved books and to be left alone. In a crowded houseful of young children this was no easy matter, and it became Walter's habit to take refuge for privacy beneath the dining room table. There he lay at full length, immersed in his reading and completely unconscious of his noisy surroundings. He has himself recorded in the Autobiography how he read everything that came his way, and his great good fortune—for those days—in having a carefully selected home library at his disposal.

This passion for reading he retained all his life. Over and over again his diaries contain the record : "Day wasted, read nothing." With this love of reading he possessed two other priceless assets—a most retentive memory and an infinite capacity for continuous and systematic work. And perhaps even more important, in view of his future career,

than all these wonderful gifts, he was endowed—generously endowed—with the supreme gift of humour. In his early childhood, too, he must have been stimulated by the brilliant school career of his elder brother William who, year after year, won every prize that was available. And, permeating the whole of these youthful days, there was the unceasing influence of his parents, the gentle culture of his father, the ambition and the driving force of his mother.

Such then were the surroundings of the lad in his earlier years. His education, like that of his elder brothers began at St. George's School. There he learnt classics and learnt them thoroughly. But the school was no longer what it had been and the headmaster, through age and infirmity, could no longer conduct it efficiently. Of him my father—who was not given to jesting on such subjects—records :

“He belonged to the port-wine-drinking days and habits : and I know that on one occasion a clerical friend had been dining with him one Sunday and as a result the two went together into the Reading Desk for the second service of the day. They tried to help each other in getting through the Service, but had much ado even to prop each other up.”

After this came a move to St. Paul's School, Southsea. There Walter, of course, carried all

before him. He was then twelve years of age, but on account of his good classics was placed at once in the fifth form, among the boys of sixteen and seventeen. But the school was ill-taught and shortly afterwards was closed. At fifteen he was sent as a boarder to Stockwell Grammar School ; three years later he became Captain of the school “and left it with a barrowful of prizes.” From this period can be traced the beginnings of his life-long love of London ; for he began even at this early age to ramble round the City streets and churches in his free hours, and thus to build up that encyclopædic knowledge of its history which was to produce such a brilliant series of London volumes in the later stages of his literary career. Next followed a year at King’s College, London, during which time he lived with his elder brother Horace at Staple Inn, Holborn. At King’s he carried off the mathematical scholarship, and in 1855 entered upon his Cambridge career at Christ’s College. There he had the great good fortune to meet Calverley, who became one of his best and kindest friends. The origin of the friendship was strange. The college offered, every year, a gold medal for an English essay. Calverley, the most brilliant scholar of his day, was one of the competitors. So, too, was Walter. In the result they were bracketed equal—a wonderful distinction for the younger man. Later on, when Calverley held



8

AN UNCONVENTIONAL PORTRAIT OF WALTER BESANT AT MAURITIUS, CIRCA 1865

his famous examination on the Pickwick Papers, Walter gained the first prize, Professor Skeat being second. Afterwards Calverley took Walter and others for a walking tour in the Tyrol—then almost unknown. What a joyous and brilliant party they must have formed ! In the Mathematical Tripos of 1858 Walter came out eighteenth Wrangler. He was expected to have done better, but he probably damaged his chances of securing a higher place by reading for the Classical Tripos also. Though he did not take classical honours he always held that his true line was classics, rather than mathematics.

On leaving Cambridge he became for a short time mathematical master at Leamington College, and this was followed by six years as mathematical Professor at Mauritius. Here, as his diaries record, he mapped out for himself every year a long course of serious reading, dealing with all types of literary activities. And here, too, he developed his studies in old French, which resulted shortly after his return to England in 1867 in the production of his first published volume, *Early French Poetry*. *The French Humorists* and other similar works followed, and the author soon became recognised as an authority on this subject. Meantime he had begun in Mauritius to write fiction ; but his first effort was rejected by the English publisher to whom he submitted it. Success, however, was soon to follow

in this field—a success which was to last unbroken throughout the remaining thirty years of his life. This little memoir is not the place to follow in detail the various stages of his career as a writer of fiction, and for my purposes I am content merely to indicate in brief outline some of the main aspects of his literary activities. From fiction we pass naturally to a study of his work as historian and antiquary—more especially as concerns the place he ultimately secured for himself as historian of London. Much of his earlier studies in this field are embodied in his eighteenth-century novels ; but in 1892 he published *London*, a series of pen-pictures—instantaneous photographs, he calls them—of London and its citizens from the time of the Romans to the reign of George II. Then came three companion volumes, *Westminster*, *South London*, and *East London*, the whole forming the foundation of the great *Survey of London*, upon which he was still engaged at the time of his death and which has since been published in ten stately volumes.

Three other types of his activities must be recorded. First, he was for many years Secretary of the Palestine Exploration Fund, and as such it fell to him—with the aid of Kitchener, Conder, Wilson, Warren and others—to organise the great archæological survey of Western Palestine which has done so much to extend our knowledge of the Holy Land



WALTER BESANT (CIRCA 1890), FROM AN ETCHING AFTER
THE PORTRAIT BY JOHN PETTIE, R.A.

and of the old Biblical sites. To most of us the name of Kitchener recalls the memory of a great soldier. Few recognise in him the explorer of Galilee.

Secondly, Walter Besant was the founder and first chairman of the Society of Authors. To this cause, to the advocacy of the value of literary property and to the destruction of abuses, he devoted all his powers ungrudgingly year after year.

And thirdly, one must record his work for social service. This was not merely limited to the writing of such books as *All sorts and conditions of men*—the book which created the People's Palace—or as *Children of Gibeon*, which did so much to expose the hideous sweating to which the East End seamstress of 1883 was exposed ; but his zeal for good causes translated itself into active personal aid in helping to improve the conditions under which young people in East London were then living. He founded a settlement in Shoreditch, with gymnasium and games for the lads, and this he placed in charge of a suitable lady superintendent. Most Sunday mornings found him there, his pockets full of oranges and nuts, his cheery counsel available for all. He was equally enthusiastic about the good work done by the Salvation Army in their farm-colony at Hadleigh, Essex.

Shortly after his death, Messrs. Chatto & Windus published a volume of his collected Essays

on social subjects entitled *As we are and as we may be*. I may be permitted to give the following extract from the Foreword :

“ This volume is the exposition of a practical philanthropist’s creed and of his hopes for the progress of his fellow-countrymen. Some of these hopes may never be realised : some he had the great happiness to see bear fruit. And for the realisation of all he spared no pains. The personal service of humanity, that in these pages he urges repeatedly on others, he was himself ever the first to give.”

The truly wonderful thing which has been brought home to me in putting together this short survey of a great man’s record is the enormous breadth of his knowledge. Let me sum up this review of his career by quoting another extract, this time from the Preface of *The Pen and the Book*. The volume was written by him in 1898—three years before his death—for the guidance and benefit of literary aspirants. In establishing his claim to speak on behalf of those “ who are thinking of the Literary Life ” he writes :

“ After the devotion of thirty years to this life, I may, perhaps, be allowed to have acquired some experience. During this long period I have been a writer of leading articles, a reviewer, a writer of literary studies, a writer of history and biography, a novelist and a dramatist. I have read for a publisher. I have edited

one archaeological survey and am engaged in directing another: there are, therefore, very few branches of literature in which I have not been actively engaged. . . . For four years I was Chairman of the Committee of the Society of Authors: and for seven years I have been Editor of their organ, the *Author*."

Let us turn now from his career and try to picture the man himself. I cannot, of course, speak from personal knowledge of his early days, but during the last fifteen years or so of his life I was in close touch with him. At fifty he was in vigorous health, a short, sturdy, thick-set man, deep of chest and wide of shoulder, with a great mass of beard fast turning grey, and with a happy twinkle always showing itself through his spectacles. He was humorously sensitive about his height, which was under five feet six. When I was a growing lad and was already the taller of the two, he turned to me one day in Palmerston Road, Southsea—the most crowded and fashionable street of the town—and, banging his umbrella hard down on the pavement, he stopped suddenly and shouted out: "You know, Digby, I'm *disgracefully* short!" He was throughout his life extremely short-sighted, so much so that he used to say that, when he passed anyone, he had just one yard of vision through which a face emerged from the mist and disappeared into the mist again. Although at Cambridge he rowed and played fives,

his eyesight largely debarred him from games, and throughout his life walking constituted his chief form of exercise. Travel always fascinated him and, despite his defective sight, he managed, wherever he went, to see and to record more than most people.

In movement he was vigorous to a degree which might almost be termed impetuous. In putting on his coat, his arm would shoot out. If it found the arm-hole, well and good ; if not, it was bad for the coat. To see him fighting his way into a dress shirt was a rare pleasure, but the front suffered in the process. In winter time it was his habit to take off overcoat and frock-coat together, flinging them in a confused mass on to the nearest chair, and then from another chair he would pick up the brown velvet coat that he invariably wore indoors.

His generosity in matters great and small was unbounded, and his purse strings were ever open. On one occasion when walking with him in Hampstead we passed a poor man playing the flute most deplorably. My uncle looked at him for a moment and hurriedly gave him half-a-crown. Then, turning to me with a half-guilty twinkle, he said : “ You see I had to do it—I’m a bit of a showman myself.”

He used to say sometimes how difficult he always found it to tell the truth. His reason was that, as a novelist, he could not tell a thing just as it happened,



*The Mayor of Portsmouth
and Committee
request the Honour
of the Rev Frank Besant & Lady's Company
at a Public Banquet to be given to
Mr Walter Besant
by the Inhabitants of Portsmouth,
(HIS NATIVE TOWN)
at The Victoria Hall, Southsea,
on Thursday 19th January 1888,
at 6.30 for 7.*

D. S. U. P.

INVITATION CARD FOR THE MUNICIPAL BANQUET GIVEN AT PORTSMOUTH
TO WALTER BESANT (1888).

but felt obliged to recast the story and tell it as it ought to have happened.

He was extraordinarily modest about his own achievements. For example, there is in the Autobiography no mention of the great banquet to which the Mayor and Corporation of Portsmouth—"his native town"—invited him in January 1888. As soon as the suggestion had been mooted it was taken up spontaneously and carried to instant success. Over four hundred guests were present, these including Dr. Harold Browne, the Bishop of Winchester, the leading naval and military authorities, and practically every important personage of the town and neighbourhood. Five of the six Besant brothers were able to attend, and the proceedings lasted with unbounded enthusiasm from 6.30 p.m. till midnight. Nor can one wonder, for the local papers spoke of "the viands being fit for a Prince"—a description which the Menu printed overleaf fully justifies. (Those curious in these matters may recall the wonderful "Dinner in Honour of Literature, Science and Art," given by Gilead P. Beck at the Langham Hotel in May 1875, and described in full detail in *The Golden Butterfly*.) But I fancy that Gilead P. Beck's dinner could not have been accompanied, as was this Portsmouth banquet, by nine separate printed toasts, followed by a vote of thanks to the Chairman. The dinner itself was prolonged

MENU

SOUP

Turtle

Ox-Tail

FISH

Turbot and Shrimp Sauce

Fillets of Soles

ENTRÉES

Mutton Cutlets à la Soubise

Sauté of Chicken à la Marengo

Calves' Head en Tortue

COLD

Baron of Beef

Boar's Head

York Hams

GAME

Pheasants

Wild Ducks

SWEETS

Christmas Pudding

Mince Pies

Maids of Honour

Meringues à la Creme

Maraschino Jellies

Italian Creams

Ices

Cheese

Dessert

by the inclusion of the Boar's Head, which, raised aloft on a charger, was ceremoniously introduced with fanfare of trumpets, procession and song. The Menu and Toast List handed to each guest was an artistic production, cleverly adorned by many apt quotations from the works of the author-guest. When his turn came to speak he :

“ blithely talked on for an hour, giving personal reminiscences and humorous illustrations in a bright flowing style, and seeming as friendly and chatty with his audience as though he had known them intimately for years.”

The speech was a triumphant success and even when it closed the audience clamoured for more. It was a wonderful evening, which those who were present can never forget.

Again, the Autobiography does not include any reference to the great Queen's Hall meeting which, with Lord Rosebery in the Chair, he addressed on December 7th, 1896, on the subject of *London*. The origin of this meeting is rather amusing. My uncle had grown into the habit of addressing small local meetings of an antiquarian character on various phases of the history of London, and was approached with a request to give another lecture on this subject. He readily agreed and was then informed that the lecture would be in Queen's Hall, with the ex-Prime

Minister in the Chair. It was, I believe, the only occasion in his life when he found himself face to face with a packed audience of thousands, and for him it was a very serious ordeal, which for many days beforehand overshadowed all his ordinary work. But he held his audience spellbound and the meeting was an unqualified success.

Similarly, it is only right to record that the Autobiography is silent respecting the Knighthood which was conferred upon him by Queen Victoria, on the recommendation of Lord Rosebery, in recognition of his services to literature. But while thus ignoring what his own achievements had been, he was generous in the extreme as regards recognition of good work in others and especially in the case of the younger men. His admiration of Kipling, whose work about forty years ago was hardly known beyond India, is a case in point. "That young man will beat the lot of us," I have heard him say. The admiration was mutual.

He was a brilliant conversationalist and a member of the famous coterie which used to gather round the fire on Saturday afternoons at the Savile Club. And he had an endless fund of good stories. On one occasion, at a dinner party given at home, the children were brought in to dessert, and my uncle, amid great applause, had just given one of his best stories. Suddenly a childish treble intervened and



SIR WALTER BESANT'S COAT OF ARMS.

with a warning forefinger little Celia cried out, "Father, last time it didn't happen like that!" It was this same child who, swinging on a field gate and being caught by the angry owner, said to him: "If you talk to me like that, father will put you in a book." Father sent a letter of apology to the Squire and they were soon the best of friends. There was another dinner party at the house at which one of the guests, a rising novelist, told stories, in the most dramatic way, of his own early adventures as a cowboy. As soon as he had left the room my uncle remarked quietly, "That young man is the most conscientious liar I have ever met." They afterwards collaborated in fiction.

I have put together these little episodes in the hope that, by this means, I can best present a vivid picture of a most lovable character. It remains to say something of his happy family life. He married in 1874, Mary Garratt Barham, of Bridgewater, a descendant of the famous Forster family, of Bamborough Castle, Northumberland. Not long after their marriage they visited Bamborough together. His wife had a great reception among the local gentry, but Walter, being only a poor scribbler, counted for little. The marriage was an ideal union. She was sympathetic and widely read, very simple and charming in her tastes, a real help-mate to her husband. His interests were always her first care,

and by her devotion he was shielded from every domestic worry. One can realise what this meant to a man whose creative work had largely to be carried on at home and the sanctity of whose study had to be jealously guarded from every interruption. They lived first at Kensington and after a few years removed to Hampstead. In 1891 my uncle built for himself a roomy and delightful house at Frogna End. They designed it to a large extent themselves, and much to the indignation of the architect insisted on adding window after window. In this they were truly pioneers, for forty years ago the value of sunshine in a house was not realised as it is now. I am privileged to be allowed to insert the following poem which he addressed to his wife when they removed from the old house to the new :

There are vans without the doors,
There are crates upon the floors,
There's the beat of many a heel upon the stairs :
And as near as we can guess,
From the banging and the mess,
They are playing Fives with sofas and with chairs.

In piled up heaps outpoured
The storeroom yields its hoard,
And long forgotten treasures come to view :
Again they see the day,
These old things stored away—
For we're moving from the old house to the new.



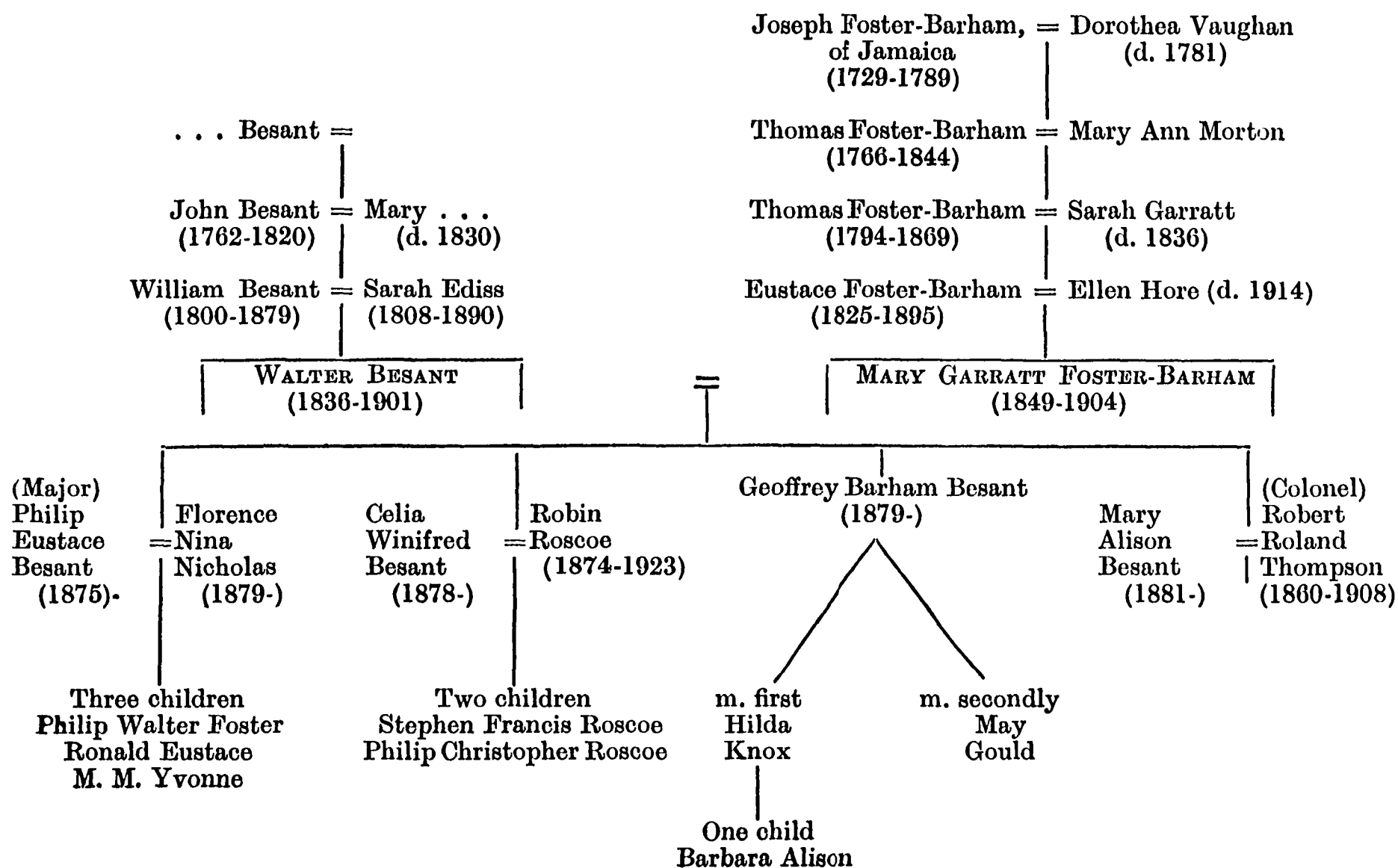
DAME MARY GARRATT BESANT, CIRCA 1895.

Now the vans have got their load
And they're rumbling down the road,
See the rooms forlorn—bare walls and empty shelves :
But the harvest of the years,
The joys, the hopes, the fears,
The treasures, real, these we take ourselves.

Oh ! this wealth that larger grows,
As the shades of winter close,
All other treasures cheat, but these are true :
So, Love, thy hand in mine,
Let us lift this store divine,
And bear it from the old house to the new.

In this new house they and their children lived very happily for the next ten years. The garden was a source of continuous joy, and every now and then a new window was added. It was a peaceful home life and the only shadow was the gradually failing health of the master. I remember on one occasion when he and an old friend had lighted their pipes after dinner, both of them choked and coughed for a time and at last the friend managed to splutter out : “ Well, Walter, my boy, at any rate you and I will die like gentlemen ; we shall both peg out in our arm-chairs.” To asthma there super-vened gout and dental troubles ; later on, other complications ensued, and by the spring of 1901 he knew that he was a doomed man. Even then his courageous outlook on life did not desert him.

THE BESANT-FOSTER-BARHAM PEDIGREE





WALTER BESANT, CIRCA 1900.

On the advice of his physicians he stayed for a time at Bonchurch in the Isle of Wight, so that he might escape the rigours of the Hampstead climate at that bleak season. There he invited me to visit him, sending me a characteristic note to the effect that I should have but a dull time, as nothing more now remained for him "than a condition of chastened cheerfulness." I found him full of work, as usual, interested in everything around him, eager to walk, so far as his limited physical powers allowed, and taking a drive in an open pony trap every afternoon. While at Bonchurch, there came to cheer him the news that his elder son, who was serving in South Africa—it was the period of the Boer War—had obtained his Captaincy at an unusually early age. A few weeks before his death he addressed from Bonchurch this pathetic little poem to his wife :

A SONG OF SPRING

In depths of night the Voice was heard,
It came to one who darkling lay,
" Faint heart " so ran the gracious word,
" Hast thou forgotten Spring and May ? "
 Sunshine and May
 Sunshine and May
They've not forgotten us, Sunshine and May.

“ Lo ! they are near us ” said the Voice,
“ Lift up once more thy drooping eyes ;
See, all things of the earth rejoice,
And wake, oh Sleeper, wake and rise ;
 Awake,” she cries,
 “ Sleeper, arise,
May comes with healing, wake and rise.”

Look forth, the April flowers are late,
And yet they come, they come at last ;
The blackbird sings unto his mate,
Sings to his mate of winter past.
 Winter is past,
 Winter is past,
Oh ! for the Sunshine—Winter is past.

The buds are swelling, brown to grey,
And grey to green, the leaflets pass ;
The whitethorns lift a tender spray
And brighter gleam the points of grass.
 Meadows of grass,
 New-springing grass,
Glory of April, the meadows of grass.

Between its banks the brooklet flows,
Through quickened moss and velvet green,
And sings and prattles as it goes
To primrose and to celandine,
 Oh ! I have seen,
 The face of the Queen,
The footsteps of May and the face of the Queen.

Around the cliffs the seagulls fly,
The slow rooks o'er the tree-tops swing,
And clear against the still-blue sky
Once more the swallows homeward wing.
Swallows and Spring,
Swallows and Spring,
Oh, Mary, my Mary, they come with the Spring.

From Bonchurch he came home to die, and on June 9th,* 1901, passed away very peacefully at Frognal End. Three days later he was buried in the old Hampstead cemetery adjoining the Parish Church. His gravestone, hewn from the blue-grey granite of the Dartmoor that he and his wife loved so well, bears the inscription which he had himself selected thirty years previously as the epitaph of Dick Mortiboy, the hero of his first novel :

“Write me as one who loves his fellow men.”

His wife, whose health had long given cause for anxiety, survived him little more than three years. She died at Manaton, Dartmoor, where she was staying on a visit, and was buried at Hampstead in the same grave as her husband in October 1904.

There were four children of the marriage. Philip, the elder son, was educated at Highgate School, and at an early age joined the militia. From there he passed into the army and shortly afterwards served with his regiment during the South African war.

* The anniversary of the death of Charles Dickens.

After the Declaration of Peace he was seconded on special service in South Africa for some years, and then rejoined his regiment in India. Next came a period of home service which lasted until the war broke out in August 1914. His regiment was one of the first to be sent overseas, and in the Mons retreat he was badly wounded and had to be left in the hands of the enemy. He remained a prisoner of war in Germany through three long years and was then transferred to Switzerland till the armistice set him free to return to England. For a short time he rejoined his regiment, but his age and his wound disability soon compelled his retirement, and since that date he has been living quietly in the country with his family. In 1908 he married Nina Nicholas and there are three children—Walter, Ronald and Yvonne.

Celia, the elder daughter, married Robin Roscoe in 1906. He was an official on the administrative staff of London University and died prematurely in 1923, leaving two sons, Stephen and Christopher.

Then came Geoffrey. After a course at Highgate he began a Cambridge career, but when the Boer war broke out, volunteered for service and proceeded to South Africa. After that, like his grandfather, William Besant, he tried many things for a period, and then turned his attention to publishing. He is now managing director of a family publishing

company and, as such, has been responsible for the production of this volume. Married. One daughter, Barbara.

The youngest child was Alison. Her birth is tersely recorded in her father's diary : " Girl born 3.15 a.m. Alison." She married in December 1905 Col. Robert R. Thompson. After a short period of service at Aldershot, ill-health arising out of the hardships of the South African campaign compelled his retirement. His death followed in the autumn of 1908. Alison, known to all her friends as Ailie, at once took up a course of training in accountancy. From that time onwards she has worked first at Toynbee Hall and later for the London branch of the *New York Times*. She is now secretary and one of the directors of the family publishing business already mentioned.

CHAPTER XII

ALBERT BESANT (1838–1901)

THE next child was Albert. He was just two years younger than Walter and was born on August 17th, 1838, at Kingston Crescent. Early in the following month he was baptised at Kingston Parish Church, his father's occupation being registered as "Gentleman." One can see that the date of Albert's birth must have coincided with the period of financial stringency to which reference has already been made. The family, as we know, left St. George's Square shortly after Walter had been born there, and the move to Kingston Crescent appears to indicate that William Besant had by that date joined up with his brother-in-law, Thomas Jackson, whose corset factory was in that neighbourhood.

Of Albert's childhood I can learn nothing. Judging by what he became afterwards, he must have been a sharp-witted and able lad—not very bookish, I fancy, but undoubtedly popular with his colleagues and well able to hold his own. By the time that he was old enough to go to school his parents had to make

an important decision. St. George's School had faded away, and St. Paul's, Southsea, had been closed. The Grammar School existed, it was true, but the old foundation lay dormant, and there were then only two or three pupils. Fortunately for Albert a new school had recently been established at Lion Terrace, Portsea, by the Winchester Diocesan authorities and placed under the charge of Mr. Jeremiah Andrews. The new venture prospered, and for forty years "Jerry Andrews," as he was affectionately known to all his pupils, conducted this school with conspicuous success. In educational matters he was a pioneer. He was the first local teacher to introduce the blackboard and to make Euclid interesting to his scholars. When he retired in 1883, his old pupils invited him to a farewell dinner at the George Hotel, Portsmouth. The Mayor was in the Chair, and in proposing the health of the guest of the evening, said that before he went to Mr. Andrews' school it was the fashion to learn Euclid by rote: "in fact they all regarded Euclid as the most terrible stuff"—then came along Mr. Andrews with his blackboard and his piece of chalk, and so clearly did he explain the first problem to his pupils that they all looked forward eagerly to the second. Mr. Andrews made all his subjects interesting to his scholars, and it is recorded of him that he not only taught the boys during school hours, but used

to take them for walks on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. Another grateful pupil, speaking of him at this banquet, said :

“ To Mr. Andrews alone was due the honour of commencing a proper method of education in Portsmouth. . . . He did not leave off work when his pupils left school, but was always thinking of his boys . . . and whether a pupil was a quick boy, or a plodding boy, or an idle boy, the same care, assiduity and attention was bestowed on him.”

It may here be recorded that Albert was one of the promoters of the banquet and that he proposed one of the toasts.

Although in describing this farewell banquet I am long anticipating events, yet in no other way can I bring home to my readers any adequate realisation of the influence that Mr. Andrews brought to bear upon his pupils. Albert shared to the fullest extent in this general admiration, and throughout his life retained a high regard for his old schoolmaster. Without being able to describe in detail the course of Albert's education, we may take it as certain that he was the first of the brothers to be educated in a school which had developed along modern methods and that he was a successful product of such methods. The good results of his training under Jerry Andrews showed themselves at once. When he left school

his parents decided that the lad should remain at Portsmouth and should carve out for himself a career there as a solicitor. Never was a choice of a calling better justified. He was articled to Mr. Henry Ford, a leading lawyer of the town and a very popular personage. After working in Lawyer Ford's office for the customary period, Albert moved to London and spent the last year of his articles in the office of Messrs. Sole, Turner & Knight, the London agents of Lawyer Ford. In 1859 we find him living in chambers at Staple Inn, as his brothers, Horace and Walter, had done before him. And, like them, he lunched habitually on Sundays with his hospitable Uncle Henry.

After passing his law examinations, Albert returned to Portsmouth and set up for himself. There he swiftly built up for himself an extensive and a lucrative practice. In addition to his professional work he followed the example of his elder brother, William, and threw himself heart and soul into the activities of the Volunteer movement. Starting as a private, he soon secured a commission, and in due course rose to the rank of Captain. He took the keenest interest in his duties and spared no expense to promote the efficiency of his regiment. Indeed, throughout his life military matters interested him greatly, and he always had a large circle of service friends.

Albert must have been very popular—and deservedly popular—as a young man, for not only had he ample means, but he was of the most generous and hospitable disposition. In him the genial qualities of the Besants showed themselves at their best. As a passing illustration of this quality, let me mention that when Walter returned in 1867 from Mauritius he was met on arrival at the home port by three of his brothers. Walter records in his diary : “ Reached Southampton. Borrowed £5 from Albert.” It is only fair to the memory of both brothers to add that a few days later Walter records the repayment of this loan—a feature by no means characteristic, I fancy, of the many advances which the generous Albert made to innumerable friends and acquaintances throughout his prosperous days.

For the purposes of these memoirs there is no need to trace the developments of Albert’s professional success. That they were considerable is shown by the fact that at the early age of twenty-three he married ; and that three years later he was able to purchase the large house known as “ Toronto Villa,” Villiers Road, Southsea, where he resided for the next quarter of a century. It will be seen, therefore, that on the monetary side, the early careers of William and Albert had much in common. Both secured, at an unusually early age, a comfortable competency. On the other hand



THE SIX BESANT BROTHERS IN 1883.

FRONT ROW—SITTING—FROM LEFT TO RIGHT :—HORACE, WILLIAM.

BACK ROW—STANDING—FROM LEFT TO RIGHT :—FRANK, WALTER, ALBERT, EDGAR.

Walter who, both in disposition and in many characteristics, had so much in common with Albert, had to face a long struggle before he secured public recognition. Between Walter and Albert there existed throughout their lives a strong affection, and even in death they were not long divided ; for two months after Albert had passed away, Walter followed him to the grave.

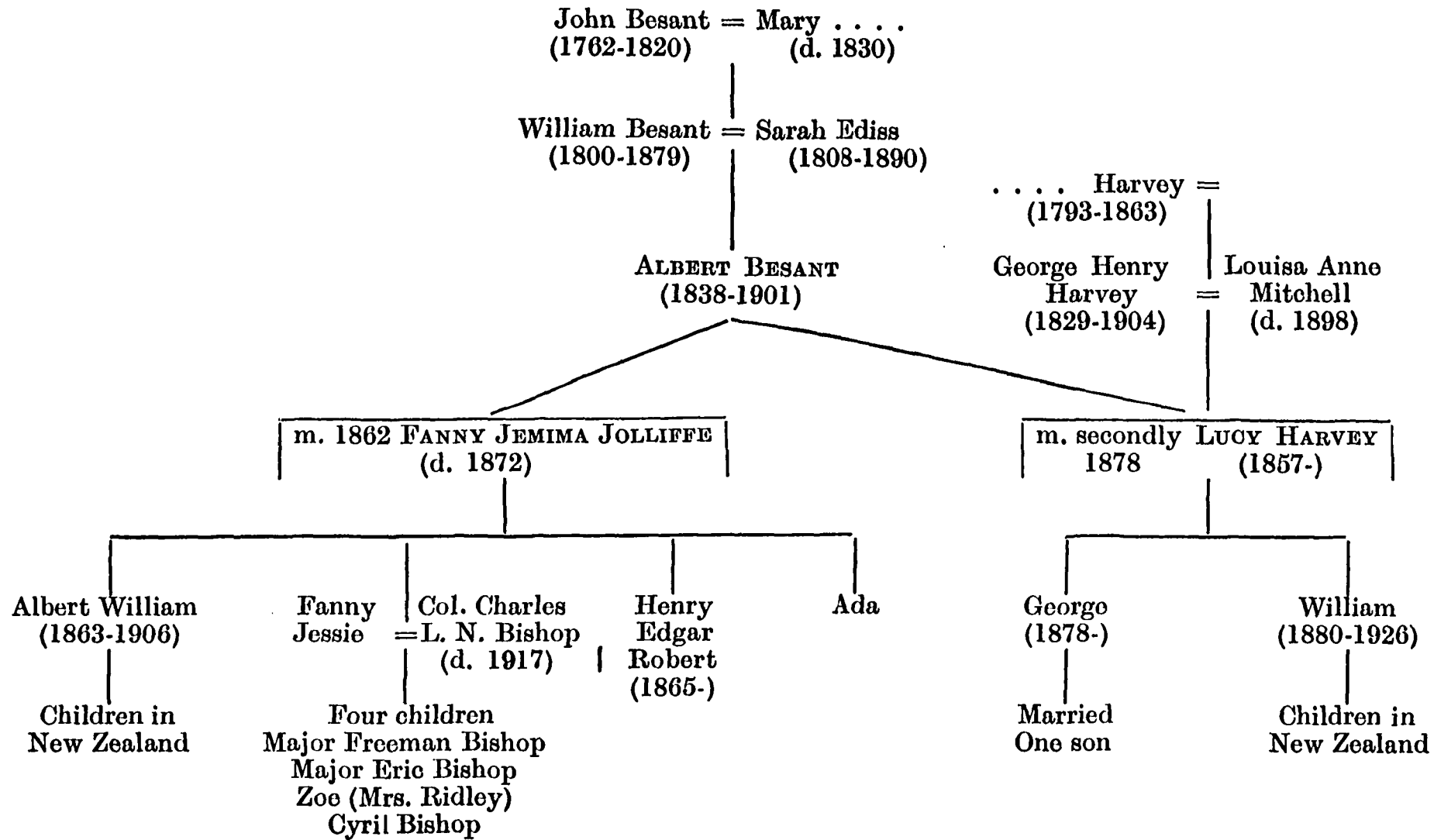
Early in 1862 Albert married Fanny Jemima Jolliffe. They had five children, one of whom died in infancy. The eldest child was Albert William, always known in the family as Bertie. He started on a medical career, but did not complete the course. Eventually he settled in New Zealand. There he died in 1906 leaving a widow and two children. Next came Jessie. On the occasion of her marriage in 1883 to Lieutenant Charles Bishop all the six Besant brothers attended and the interesting photograph of them which was then taken is here reproduced. Colonel Bishop, as he ultimately became, was a man of brilliant intellectual attainments. He joined the Royal Marine Artillery in 1876, served through the Egyptian War of 1882 and was decorated with the Medal and the Khedive Star. After serving in various capacities he retired and a few years later, in 1917, he died at Southsea. The Bishops had four children : Major Freeman, who won the Sword of Honour at Greenwich, and who,

after being selected for special technical duties in the War, is now in the War Office ; Major Eric, of the Royal Marine Artillery, who married, in 1919, Gertrude V. F. Brodie (two children) ; Zoe, who married in 1911 Lieutenant Commander John J. C. Ridley, R.N. ; and Cyril, who has taken up a civilian career. Both Major Eric and Commander Ridley, D.S.O., took part in the Battle of Jutland. Albert's third child was Harry. He inherited the family flair for artistic tendencies and became a skilled craftsman. For a time he conducted an old furniture business. The next child was Ada. She and her brother Harry are unmarried.

Ten years after his marriage Albert lost his wife. She died, after a long illness, in 1872, and was buried in a family vault in Portsea cemetery. In February 1878 Albert married Lucy Harvey, whose father then occupied an important administrative post in Portsmouth Dockyard. They had two children. George, the elder son, was born in December 1878, and after a period of Bank service settled down in Canada. He served in the War and afterwards returned to Canada where he still lives. Married, one son. Willie, the younger boy, was born in 1880, went out to New Zealand at an early age and died there in 1926. Married, two children.

Albert was at the height of his professional success when he married Lucy Harvey. I recall him

THE BESANT-JOLLIFFE AND BESANT-HARVEY PEDIGREES



vividly as he was a few years later. He was then a short, thick-set man, with moustache and side whiskers—he had not then grown a beard—very good looking, quick and vigorous in his movements, distinctly masterful, abounding in energy and in enjoyment of a huge practice. Lawyer Besant was a conspicuous figure in Portsmouth circles. It was a source of constant wonder and admiration to me as a young schoolboy to see him dashing in a hansom from one appointment to another, for it seemed such a regal mode of transit. He got through an enormous amount of work and made his decisions swiftly. As a typical Besant he was inclined to be peppery and somewhat hasty in his judgments.

When the second family came along he enlarged his house by the addition of a new wing and of a very beautiful oak-panelled library. He also bought a charming little estate on the far side of Portsdown Hill, where, for some years, he grew the choicest fruit and took the utmost pride in the produce of his greenhouses. But, alas, trouble was looming ahead. For many years a considerable section of Albert's lucrative practice had been derived from his emoluments as solicitor to the Portsea Island Building Society. There came a day when, owing to fraudulent practices on the part of certain officials, the Society collapsed. The disaster caused heavy loss to thousands of thrifty people, and criminal pro-

ceedings followed. While Albert was not involved in these, his connection with the Building Society was fatal to his practice and in the general crash he came to the ground. During the remaining years of his life he struggled on gamely, but at his age it was impossible to retrieve much out of the wreck. He took a small house at Havant and a few old clients stuck to him. His practice, however, had passed to the younger men and his office in Union Street was deserted. Though he continued to attend there until his death, his thoughts, as he sat alone, must have dwelt continuously on what had been. In that room he had lived as a child—it had been the family dining-room throughout his boyhood—afterwards it had been his father's office; from 1876 onwards, his own office. The very doorsteps had been worn away by the multiplicity of clients . . . and now the place was empty: there were no clerks and no clients: the few papers on the table were covered with dust . . . and there Albert sat day after day surrounded by the ghosts of the past, bravely facing his position and striving still, despite all his troubles, to earn a meagre livelihood. In this long uphill struggle he was supported throughout by his devoted wife. But long before this his health had deteriorated. He had for many years been a sufferer from rheumatic gout, and as age advanced these troubles increased. The end came suddenly. On

April 9th, 1901, at the age of 62, he died from a stroke of apoplexy, and a few days later was buried in the vault in Portsea Cemetery, which he had had constructed when his first wife had died some thirty years previously.

CHAPTER XIII

FRANK BESANT (1840–1917)

THE next son was Frank, and he became, in due course, the third outstanding scholar of that generation of our family. Frank was born on August 3rd, 1840, and was baptised on the 21st of the same month at Kingston Parish Church. His father was then living in Queen Street, Portsea, and according to the baptismal certificate was following the occupation of a "Woolen Draper."

In recording his history, I write under some degree of restraint, for no one can deal with the life of his own father quite so freely or dispassionately as can be done in the case of uncles and aunts. Moreover, there were domestic troubles, which make my task the harder. Be these things as they may, Frank occupies quite an important niche in the family story and in this chapter I set forth his history to the best of my ability.

At an early age he joined his brother Albert at "Jerry" Andrews' school, and there, by his industry and ability, he soon made his mark. Mr.

Andrews, whom I knew fairly well in his old age, often told me that Frank was one of the best pupils he ever had. Unfortunately the school records of those days have not been preserved, so I cannot learn any details of his education ; but I feel sure that mathematics must have been always his strongest point ; and that at an early stage he became well acquainted with Mr. Andrews' black-board and with its accompanying piece of chalk—reference to which has already been made. That he was also good at classics is indicated by his later developments, which prove him to have been a thoroughly sound all-round scholar.

When he was fourteen years of age he left Mr. Andrews' school and, following the example set by Walter his elder brother, became in March 1855 a boarder at Stockwell Grammar School. There, two years later, the prizes that he won show that he had become head of Form V. The next year he took the first prize in Form VI, and—like Walter before him—became head of the school. He gained, too—as Walter had done—a mathematical scholarship at King's College, London ; and, after a year's work there, an open mathematical scholarship at Cambridge, where he entered Emmanuel College in October 1860. In the mathematical tripos of 1863 he came out twenty-eighth Wrangler. Only one other family has, I believe, achieved the distinction of

Stockwell Proprietary Grammar School.



IN UNION WITH KING'S COLLEGE.

This is to certify

that The Reverend Frank Besant, M.A. was
 a pupil in this School from Lady Day 1855 to
 Midsummer 1858, when he was Head Boy, and also gained
 the Mathematical Scholarship of £30 a year for three years;
 that he then proceeded to King's College London, where he
 obtained a Mathematical Scholarship in July 1859; that
 he graduated at Emmanuel College Cambridge as Twenty-
 eighth Wrangler in January 1863; that he was elected,
 from twenty six Candidates, to the Mathematical Mastership
 of this School in June 1863; and that he fulfilled the
 duties of that Office with great credit to himself, and to
 our entire satisfaction, until Christmas 1867, when he resigned
 in order to accept an Appointment at Christchurch College.

For the School

William Gwynne

Master

Members
 of the
 Committee.

Entered

Henry Frey

Secretary

John Lily Watson, M.A. Head Master.

STOCKWELL GRAMMAR SCHOOL CERTIFICATE.

including three brothers in the Wrangler class. That family, however, succeeded later in beating the Besant record; for, in the succeeding generation, one of their sons secured another Wranglership.

On leaving Cambridge in the summer of 1863 Frank returned to Stockwell Grammar School as mathematical master—being selected for the post out of twenty-six candidates. In December 1865 he was admitted to Deacons' Orders by the aged Bishop of Winchester, Dr. Charles Richard Sumner. The Bishop took extraordinary personal pains in these matters. Every letter making an appointment to see the candidate was written throughout in his own hand, and he even went out of his way on one occasion to write a special letter to say that he had engaged lodgings for my father near Farnham Castle, where the Ordination was to take place. The correspondence throughout is of the most formal character. The Bishop in each of his letters to the budding deacon addresses him as "Sir" and closes "Your very faithful servant"; and the young man replies "My Lord Bishop" and ends "I am, my Lord Bishop, Your Lordship's most obedient humble servant." After ordination, however, the Bishop's letters begin "Dear Sir." In these less stately days I imagine that Bishops can no longer deal with their business correspondence by means of

letters written in their own hand ; and that dictated letters, taken down in shorthand and typed for signature, must long ago have been substituted—a change inevitable, no doubt, but carrying with it something of loss and of regret.

The young clergyman threw himself into his new duties with energy. With his customary precision he records every service in which he took part—a practice which he continued throughout the fifty years of his ministry. Indeed, I think there can never have been any member of the cloth with a more orderly, methodical and statistical mind. He recorded and numbered everything, including his sermons, which ranged from No. 1 which he preached at an afternoon service at St. Barnabas, South Kennington on February 11th, 1866, to No. 3,110, preached in Sibsey Church on March 18th, 1917, shortly before his death. The numbers and dates indicate that he did not hesitate to use a sermon more than once, and at a later stage, I can often remember him on a Sunday afternoon searching in the “sermon cupboard” for a discourse suitable for the evening service. He prepared his sermons with great care, writing them out in full on one side of the page only. The other page he reserved for revisions, which he inserted as he re-read his original draft. As he grew more experienced, he often ignored his manuscript when he reached the pulpit

and thus was able to deal with his subject with greater ease and fluency.

To return to Stockwell and to 1865. The Bishop had made it a condition that my father should remain at the school for at least two years after ordination, and this pledge was duly carried out. He was an excellent teacher, for he possessed the power of developing the best qualities of every type of boy, whether brilliant or backward. He never, I think, went in much for games and he could at no time have been a popular master in the ordinary sense. For he was austere and he was very shy. But he was conscientious to a degree. Indeed, had he been less conscientious and had he been able, even to a small extent, to accommodate himself to the views of others, where such views differed from his own, he would have been a happier man. But compromise was not in his nature. He regarded compromise as being, in its essence, a tampering with truth; and that being so he would have nothing to do with it. Once he had decided as to his course of action, he was adamant. Fifty years after the Stockwell days and when within a few months of his death, he wrote to me in reply to certain suggestions which I had put forward, and which seemed to me to be perfectly innocuous: "I make no compromise with what I regard to be wrong; I entertain no ill-will towards yourself." In this case, happily, his bark

was worse than his bite—perhaps he had softened with age. For a day or two later he fell in with my suggestions and ended his letter, “I am willing to subscribe myself, Your affectionate father, F. Besant.” Thirty years had elapsed since he had last written such words.

In this endeavour to give a character sketch of the man, I have had to anticipate events, but what he was in later life, so he was in youth at Stockwell. He was thoroughly efficient in everything that he did : he was industrious and he was methodical. The school occupied his week-days ; on Sundays he had his clerical duties. These began, as seemed fitting, at Stockwell Chapel, later known as St. Andrew’s Church. There, on December 31st, 1865, he records in matter-of-fact words the first service in which he took part as Deacon. “Evening Prayer. Assisted at the Holy Communion after Evening Service.” Later on he took up duties at various local churches, mainly at St. Barnabas, South Kennington, and at Clapham Parish Church and Mission Hall. During the school holidays he secured, through advertisements in the *Guardian*, or through private introductions, a succession of temporary appointments for parochial work. In every case he sets down minutely the fees he received—gross and net. Often there were no fees at all ; at the best these were trivial, but he usually had the use of the Vicarage free of cost.

On one occasion, however, when he received six guineas for his services, he records that he was out of pocket, for he had had to reside in the village in lodgings and had spent more than this sum. On another occasion he failed to secure the promised fee. The curate in charge made various excuses for postponing payment and ultimately ceased to reply to letters.

The Easter Festival of 1866 brought together Frank Besant and Annie Wood, his future wife. He was then, as we have seen, acting as curate at Clapham Parish Church, where his duties included attendance at a little Mission Church attached. She had come up to London on a visit to her grandfather who had a house in the neighbourhood. Both of them took part in the decorations of the church, and the engagement followed when the summer holidays took place a few months later. Their knowledge of each other as my mother records in her Autobiography was "an almost negligible quantity." They had been thrown together for a week, there were no other young people in the party and they drifted into an engagement. She was fascinated by the idea of marrying a clergyman. For even at that young age, my mother's ideal was a life of service, and she felt that, as a clergyman's wife, she would have more opportunities for helping others than in any other form of work or devotion. They were

married at St. Leonards in December 1867, and after a short honeymoon spent in Paris and Southsea, settled down in lodgings at Cheltenham, where my father had just been appointed an assistant master at the College. Even from the start there were clashes of temperament, as we can see from my mother's Autobiography :

“ We were an ill-matched pair, my husband and I, from the very outset ; he, with very high ideas of a husband's authority and a wife's submission, holding strongly to the master-in-my-own-house theory, thinking much of the details of house arrangements, precise, methodical, easily angered and with difficulty appeased. I, accustomed to freedom, indifferent to house details, impulsive, very hot tempered, and proud as Lucifer . . . though eager to perform my new duties creditably, unwilling to potter over little things and liking to do swiftly what I had to do and then turn to my beloved books. I must have been a very unsatisfactory wife from the beginning . . . inexpressibly tiring to the Revd. Frank Besant, and in truth I ought never to have married : for under the soft, loving, pliable girl there lay hidden, as much unknown to herself as to her surroundings, a woman of strong, dominant will, strength that panted for expression and rebelled against restraint, fiery and passionate emotions that were seething under compression—a most undesirable partner to sit in the lady's arm chair on the domestic rug before the fire.”

My mother's literary activities began before marriage. In 1866 she wrote her first pamphlet,



ANNIE BESANT AND HER INFANT,
DIGBY (1869).

ANNIE BESANT AND HER MOTHER, MRS.
EMILY WOOD, CIRCA 1867.

entitled "A paper on the Duty of Fasting," and a copy of her manuscript made by my father in that year and annotated in her own handwriting is in my possession. It was published in 1870. In 1866 she wrote a supplementary paper on "Fasting Communion." This pamphlet also was copied from her manuscript by my father and at his death came into my hands. Apparently it was never published, for on the outside my father has written : "I would not publish this, thinking that she ought to be satisfied with publication of preceding pamphlet." Satisfied indeed ! As if any author of genius could feel satisfied with the publication of his first immature production, when in his heart of hearts he knows well how feeble at the moment is his expression of the music that he believes to be within him ; needing only practice and experience to evolve it gradually into coherent form. This early check to my mother's excursions into authorship was not, however, of long duration. Not many years were to elapse before she began to publish on her own account ; and to-day, sixty-four years after her first pamphlet was written, her pen remains as busy as ever, and her output, as journalist and writer of books, has continued in unbroken sequence throughout this extended period.

In the early Cheltenham days she continued her studies and took up two very different lines of

composition. She wrote *The Lives of the Black Letter Saints* and submitted it to Macmillans, without success. Then it reached the hands of a Church Brotherhood who offered to publish it if she would "give it to their Order as an Act of piety." This she refused, and she records years later that the ultimate fate of the book was to her unknown. But she also wrote a series of short stories for the *Family Herald*, and these found ready acceptance. The first story brought a cheque for thirty shillings. "It was the first money," she writes, "that I had ever earned, and the pride of the earning was added to the pride of authorship."

In January 1869 my birth checked for a time her literary career but brought a new source of interest into her life. My father, precise and methodical as ever, records in his diary on January 16th: "2 a.m. went for Doctor W. 9.10 a.m. Child born. 10 a.m. Doctor W. left." In his "Register of Services," under date of February 28th, 1869, he writes: "St. Philip and St. James, Cheltenham. During afternoon service Baptism of Arthur Digby Besant and two other infants. No fee." In August 1870 my sister Mabel was born. She was a delicate child and the two of us must have imposed a heavy strain on our mother, who had herself long been in ill-health. But, somehow, matters drifted on for a time, until a crisis arose in the spring of 1871, when



ARTHUR DIGBY AND MABEL EMILY BESANT (1874).

both of us children were attacked by whooping cough. I escaped lightly and soon recovered ; but Mabel had a desperate struggle for life and only pulled through owing to the unceasing devotion of her mother. The strain, however, which this torturing illness of her helpless infant imposed upon my mother changed the whole undercurrent of her theological thoughts. "Can God be good and let the innocent babe so suffer," was the challenge that with increasing force raised itself in her mind and to which she found no answer. Of those dark days she wrote later :

"No one who has not felt it knows the fearful agony caused by doubt to the earnestly religious mind. There is in life no other pain as horrible. The doubt seems to shipwreck everything, to destroy the one steady gleam of happiness 'on the other side' that no earthly storm could obscure . . . to make all life gloomy with a horror of despair, a darkness that may verily be felt."

In the autumn of 1871 Lord Chancellor Hatherley, who belonged to the Wood family, and who was thus a relative of my mother, offered my father the choice of two Crown livings. They decided to accept that of Sibsey, a village in South Lincolnshire and there they removed early in 1872. The Vicarage was a delightful house with large and very beautiful gardens, a paddock and outlying fields. Though the village was large and scattered, the work in those days

was not heavy, for week-day services were practically unknown and parochial activities were very limited. The churches of the Fen Country are famous, and among them that of Sibsey deservedly holds high rank. It is reputed to have been built in 1087. The columns and arches of the nave, the main windows in the tower, a small door leading out of the north aisle and the very ancient font are Norman work. Various additions were made at a later date, mainly in the perpendicular style, and the church, regarded as a whole, is to-day both beautiful and harmonious. It possesses a splendid peal of bells, and fifty years ago the ringers of Sibsey were as famous locally as were their bells. To me Sibsey Church, with its friendly village worshippers, its massive tower with its dark spiral staircase, its bells amongst which we used to climb, its ringing chamber with its record of past "Peals," its ancient registers, its old churchwardens' accounts, is the centre of all the happiest memories of my childhood. The church has only one rival in my affections. Alongside it lies the Vicarage garden—surely one of the most delightful gardens that one could hope to see. In those days it was full of trees and flowering shrubs. The main sitting-rooms of the house face south, and the French windows open upon a broad stone terrace. Beyond lies a narrow flower bed—always brilliant with colour. Then comes the stately

lawn, fringed on either side with trees and clumps of bushes and flowers. At two corners of the lawn there were then ivy shelters, which were the delight of our early childhood and our refuges when it rained. Beyond the lawn were more flower beds, laid out in formal fashion with box edges and narrow winding paths. And beyond that again, a wide plantation which fringed the garden on the south and west, and which in spring time is a mass of primroses and violets. To the east lies the fruit garden, half an acre or more of it. Were ever strawberries so delicious as those which we children picked in that fairy garden and carried on a cabbage leaf to be eaten in some shady corner of the lawn. And how we loved to wander among the fruit bushes, plucking raspberries or gooseberries, or currants, how and where we pleased. There was one specially sheltered bed in which the earliest new potatoes grew ; and on the walls around it nectarines, apricots and peaches came to maturity—mainly, as we children found, for the benefit of the wasps. Beyond the wall came the stables and carriage house, with a loft above used for the storage of pears and apples ; then the chicken-run, the pigsties, and, at the north end, the large open woodshed, which formed our playground in stormy weather. But in those days, apparently, even this huge garden was not deemed sufficient for a Vicar of Sibsey, as there lay, a

hundred yards further up the Vicarage Lane, an acre of kitchen garden, devoted mainly to the cultivation of potatoes, but containing also extensive asparagus beds and every type of vegetable produce. Of course it never occurred to us children that the cost of maintaining this vast pleasure garden in tolerably good condition must have been a constant nightmare to any Vicar of Sibsey, even though he may have been able to recoup a portion of his outlay from the sale of the produce of the kitchen garden. For the stipend of the Vicar is derived mainly from the rent of the glebe farm, and this, even in 1871 when agricultural rents were nearly at their highest, was of modest amount. In bad seasons the income of the benefice was subject to periodical—almost habitual—abatements, and during the eighties and the nineties of the last century the fall in agricultural rents placed an almost intolerable burden upon the country clergy all over England, those of Southern Lincolnshire being unhappily numbered among the chief sufferers. Much of this, however, belongs to a later stage of our chronicle, and we must revert to the opening days at Sibsey.

The Vicar-designate, after his appointment by the Lord Chancellor, began his parochial duties at Sibsey in October 1871, and in his Service Register he then describes himself as “Firman.” It was not until the end of December that his appointment as

Vicar was fully ratified. For the induction of the new Vicar involved many formalities. He had first to appear before the Bishop and to make various solemn declarations; then by the Bishop he was "duly and Canonically instituted" to the Vicarage of Sibsey "and invested with all and singular the rights, members and appurtenances thereunto belonging"; then by virtue of the Letters Mandatory issued by the Bishop he was, at the hands of a neighbouring clergyman and in the presence of the two Sibsey churchwardens, "inducted into the real and actual Possession of the Vicarage." On December 31st, being Sunday, he "Read himself in" at the morning service by reciting the Articles of Religion, and afterwards he "Rang himself in" by tolling the church bell. He went into residence at the Vicarage early in January, returned to Cheltenham for a couple of months, and finally settled down at Sibsey at the end of March 1872. His statistical record of his first year's work there is illuminating: "*Services*: 28 Funerals; 29 Baptisms; 22 Churchings; 10 Marriages; 83 Sermons; 100 Reading Prayers and 10 Holy Communions."

During 1873 the theological troubles so long simmering between my parents came to a head, and finally breaking-point was reached. A separation was arranged and in September my mother left Sibsey for ever, she taking Mabel while I remained

with my father. A year later I was sent as a boarder to a small school at Boston, kept by Miss Everitt and there I remained for two years. Early in January 1876 I was placed in charge of the Rev. W. L. Childs, an old friend of my father and Vicar of Alvingham, North Lincolnshire. Mr. Childs was a fine classical scholar, had a young son of my own age and was then engaged in forming a small boarding school. His wife was the gentlest and kindest of women, treating me always as if I had been her own son, and providing for me, in her family circle, a real home which lasted until I finally left school. I hold her memory in warmest regard. Many years later she told me of our first meeting. I had been sent off from Sibsey in charge of the Railway Guard, and he had firm orders to deposit me and my school-box on the platform of Louth station, well out of the way of the traffic. And there Mrs. Childs eventually found me, sitting on my box in a remote corner, looking woe-begone and forlorn. The next day lessons began, and just before my seventh birthday I was introduced to the Latin Primer. Scripture, geography and history, as well as reading and writing and poetry, came into these early studies. So, too, did arithmetic and, at a later stage, the elements of Euclid; but Mr. Childs really knew nothing of mathematics. His daughter, Miss Mary Childs, was our instructress in music; but to me these piano

lessons and, still more, the weary practice of exercises and scales was a nightmare. Quite unknowingly, however, I got my own back, by asking her innumerable questions on every subject ; and my theological enquiries, I know, caused her much bewilderment and anxiety. My questions on the doctrine of original sin puzzled her, I am sure, as much as her answers puzzled me. Those were calvinistic days and to me, a delicate, nervous and imaginative child, the fear of Hell fire was ever present. Many a night have I crept trembling out of my bed at Sibsey and pulled aside the window blind in dread lest I should find the horizon in flames and the Day of Judgment arrived. Absurd, of course, in the retrospect ; but, alas, the terrors of childhood are very real, and all the more so as they have generally to be kept secret by the little sufferer through fear of ridicule.

In the holidays I used to visit my mother in London, and Mabel came to Sibsey. This went on for a time and then the miserable litigation ended in 1878 by Mabel being placed, during her minority, in her father's charge on account of her mother's heretical opinions. Soon afterwards Mabel joined me at Mr. Childs' school, and there we remained until the summer of 1879. Mr. Childs then left Alvingham and went to St. George's, Portsea, so we had to seek new schools. Mabel went as a boarder to Miss Adams' school in Boston, where she lived in the

house formerly occupied by Jean Ingelow. I went to Boston Grammar School. The Rev. Dr. Patten-den was headmaster, and under his leadership the school had a great reputation for turning out fine scholars. Incidentally he was an enthusiastic supporter of swimming and gave a prize of five shillings and a half-holiday to any boarder who succeeded in swimming from the spring-board to the side of the bath. So we unhappy new boys were lined up by our older schoolfellows, pushed into the water, and between a double line of these young torturers had to struggle towards the shore. We were not quite allowed to drown, but they were not too ready with their help, and it is astonishing in how short a time every new boarder learnt to swim. Custom demanded that the five shillings should be spent in entertainment, and the rule was that every occupant of the swimmer's dormitory should be provided with three mutton pies. After we had gone to bed these tepid meat pies were surreptitiously conveyed to us upstairs by the boy who posted the school letters, and there we ate them, either in the dark or by the light of a shrouded candle. To me at least it was a melancholy form of daring pleasure. There were no teetotallers amongst the boarders at Boston Grammar School in 1879. At the mid-day dinner the school messenger came round with a large can of beer and poured out a glass for every boy. If any

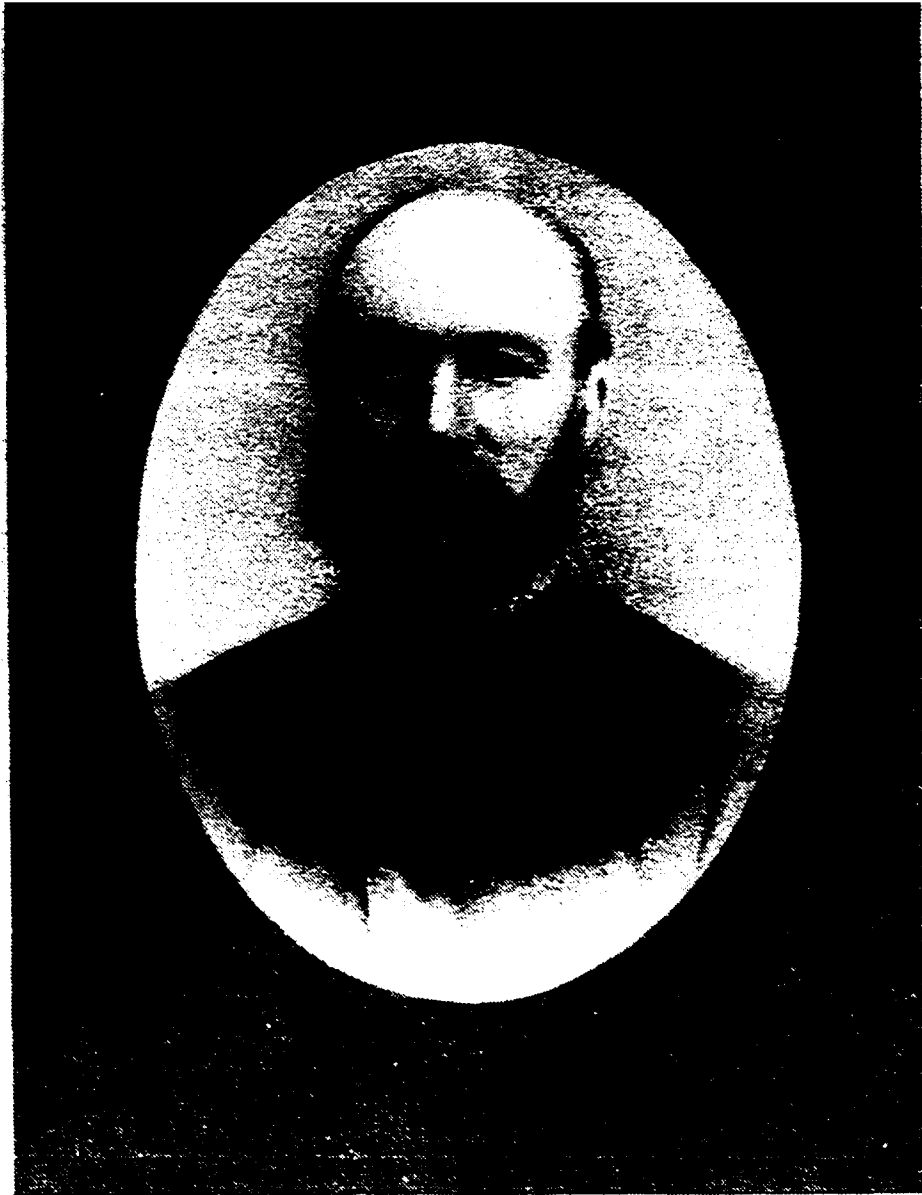
boarder wanted more, it was to be had for the asking. Water was not served at meals, and the beer was known as Swipes. It was very thin and very flat—really horrible stuff. On Sundays we walked in procession to church, all wearing mortar-boards ;—an object of derision to the town boys. When I had been at the school for about a year diphtheria broke out. One boarder died and many of us had badly inflamed throats. Our treatment was simple. We were drawn up in line and one after another had our throats painted with iodine by the headmaster's daughter, who used the same brush for all of us. This illness left me for months in an enfeebled state of health and to avoid the cold of Lincolnshire in winter, I was sent down to Portsmouth and placed again under the kindly charge of Mr. and Mrs. Childs. Six happy and uneventful years at Portsmouth Grammar School followed. In mathematics I managed to get my move every term until, at an early age, I reached the sixth form. In classics also I reached the sixth form, but never became head boy of the school. We had to work very hard, for the headmaster's standard was high and Mr. Jerrard expected us to pass the Oxford Local Senior at an age when we were still qualified to pass the Junior Examination. Under his tuition I succeeded in passing the London Intermediate B.A. examination while still at school.

The holidays I spent at Sibsey. From 1874 onwards the Vicar had begun to take resident pupils and there followed a long succession of lads who, by the aid of his intelligent cramming, managed to scrape through their examinations. Later on he gave up resident pupils and took up examination work; first for the Cambridge University Local Examinations, and afterwards for the College of Preceptors. He also examined for innumerable private schools. The Cambridge Local work was extremely heavy. Thousands of papers were delivered in crates, and day by day the Vicar marked the candidates' answers, working resolutely to the time-table that he had drawn up. The money he so earned was set aside, so far as his means allowed, towards the purchase of annuities and he thus gradually built up a fund which would be available for his support in old age, should his health render it necessary for him to resign his benefice. We children were thus left a good deal to ourselves. We had the garden and we had our friends in the village, so far as the Vicar would permit. I think he was a little jealous of their influence upon us, for from time to time he refused to allow us to visit them. Our chief friends were the Waites and the Slaters. Mr. Waite was Vicar's churchwarden. He was a great naturalist and possessed a collection of stuffed birds known all over the county. He was also a man

of extreme gentleness and of infinite patience. On one occasion the horse on which he was riding refused to take the turning which led home, and, despite all Mr. Waite's coaxing, stood immovable. Mr. Waite sat there, equally immovable, for three hours ; and at the end of that time the horse quietly trotted home. His daughters were my sister's greatest friends. Girls had pig-tails in those days and it used to be my joy, when they were sitting together, to get behind them with a piece of string and, with the help of a slip-knot, fasten their pig-tails together. Mr. Slator was also a churchwarden from time to time, but he and the Vicar were both too independent in mind to hit things off. Mrs. Slator was universally loved. She was always known as Aunt Sally and everyone brought their troubles to her. At home we had Mrs. Baines as housekeeper and cook, and her husband Charles Baines as gardener. They were a delightful couple and remained with the Vicar for over thirty years. To us, as children, Baines and his wife made Sibsey a real home, for they were as devoted to us as we were to them. Mrs. Baines and her daughter did their best to keep the house clean and succeeded well, except in the case of the Vicar's study. For he would never allow his papers to be moved or his table to be dusted. When Mrs. Baines thought the accumulated dirt had become too bad to be borne, she used to have what she called

a "clean-up." She was invariably found out and a great storm ensued which reduced her to tears. But she had the consolation that the room looked "decent for visitors," as she expressed it. Baines, by extreme industry, managed to keep the whole garden in order, but the Vicar—proud as he was of the appearance of his garden—half-grudged the time which had to be devoted to the lawn and to the flower beds; so that as time went on and Baines grew older, parts of the flower garden were gradually converted to fruit and vegetable produce. The Vicar's natural impatience was heightened by old Baines's delightful stutter. The more nervous he got, the worse the stammer became, so that interviews often ended abruptly and stormily, to the secret joy of us children. As I grew older Baines always addressed me as Mister Digby for the first day or two of the holidays. Then it became Master Digby: then Digby: long before the time came for me to return to school, it was "I say, Dig." Though many a long year has now passed since anyone has called me "Dig," the old scenes come vividly back into my memory: and I see myself once again a schoolboy in that lovely garden, chatting with the old man as he worked on steadily, and picking up a few wrinkles from his fine knowledge of plants and seeds.

In the summer of 1887 my Portsmouth days came



THE REV. FRANK BESANT, CIRCA 1895.

to an end, and by the kindness of my uncle Walter I was sent for three months to live with a French family, so as to gain colloquial knowledge of the language. After that came two years at University College, London. There was a hostel attached to the college under the charge of Professor Henry Morley, and there I took up residence in October 1887. Professor Morley was worshipped by his students. The story was told of him in those days that when he took over University Hall his predecessor handed him a manuscript book containing one hundred and eighty-seven different rules. "These rules," said the out-going professor, "are the work of my lifetime. No student can evade them, they are complete, and I hand them on to you for your protection and use." Morley called together his students: told them that on his side he proposed to trust them, that on their side he expected them to behave as gentlemen and that he was not going to set up any code of rules. He then walked to the fireplace and threw the manuscript regulations on the flames. Morley knew young men, and the students, of course, responded to his trust: he set up a House Committee and the Hall was admirably governed. It was an interesting place in many ways for a lad just leaving school. There were over fifty residents: some of them divinity students, preparing for the Unitarian Ministry: some studying

medicine at the hospital : others engineering, or chemistry, or art or law at the college : nearly all of them hard workers. We were of many nationalities : there were amongst us two or three Parsees, a Japanese, a Hungarian, and two negroes. Everyone, under Morley's genial leadership, managed to get on well together ; many firm friendships were formed, and I look upon these two years as amongst the most useful and pleasant of my life. Thanks to the teaching at the college I succeeded in passing my London B.A. when twenty years of age. By this time the question of a career was becoming urgent, and as an old pupil of uncle William at Cambridge was an Actuary, it was suggested that I should see him. So with a letter of introduction to Mr. George Humphreys I called upon him and was encouraged to begin my studies of actuarial science. Dr. T. B. Sprague, another friend of uncle William, kindly nominated me for the Institute and gave me much good advice, though his phonetically-spelt letters at that time caused me some bewilderment. I passed the introductory examination without trouble, but it was difficult to secure an entry into a Life Assurance office, and I had been warned that the openings for a Consulting Actuary were very limited. Then one happy day came a letter from Mr. Humphreys saying that some temporary work was available at the Clerical, Medical and

General Life Office and that if I would care to apply for it he would take me round to see Mr. Benjamin Newbatt. I was with Mr. Humphreys within an hour after receiving his letter, had my interview with Mr. Newbatt, and was given a temporary appointment at a salary of £1 per week. Mr. Newbatt asked me when I could begin and unbent a little when I said that I could stay and begin at once. He arranged that I should enter on my duties the next morning and thus it was that on the 20th November 1889 I joined the service of the Society. That temporary engagement has now extended over more than forty years and has brought me both professional success and happiness ; but there have been few more joyous moments than that which came to me on the ensuing Saturday morning when the cashier handed me the sum of thirteen shillings and four pence, the proceeds of my first four days' work.

I had long made up my mind that as soon as I came of age I should go and see my mother and judge matters for myself. Accordingly I wrote to my father, telling him of my intention. He replied in a long letter, warning me against my proposed action and refusing to receive any further communication from me. He also sent me all my personal belongings from Sibsey and as Mabel took the same line as I did, he severed relations with her equally as with myself. Looking back, it seems

inconceivable to me why he should have acted so drastically. Children are not involved in the disagreements of their parents, and our desire—a perfectly natural and reasonable desire—to see our mother was assuredly not designed in any spirit of antagonism towards himself. This he must have known, but he did not see our feelings in this light. To him it was a matter of conscience. We had taken a path of which he disapproved—on our heads be the consequences. I suppose that no form of training can induce more autocratic tendencies in any man than the triplex combination of scholarship, schoolmastership and control of a country parish. In each sphere he takes his natural position as unchallenged leader. Had the Vicar stayed on at Cambridge in the companionship of his intellectual equals or superiors, events as between him and his children might have worked out very differently. But even as things turned out, some underlying grain of sentiment towards me must have swayed him ; for many years before his death and without telling me anything about it, he had appointed me as his executor, jointly with his old friend, Mr. H. C. Newmarch. Between the Vicar and the Newmarch family a life-long friendship existed. The Rev. C. F. Newmarch was the Rector of Leverton, a parish about four miles from Sibsey, and after his death in 1878 the Vicar's friendship with the family

remained unbroken until his own death nearly forty years later. Mr. H. C. Newmarch died a few years ago, but Miss Emily Mary Newmarch is happily still living, in vigorous old age, and she continues to keep in close touch with the small remnant of our old Lincolnshire friends that still survive.

The Vicar did not make friends readily. He was too austere and his tongue was too sharp. Nor did he suffer fools gladly. He was fully aware—and he did not attempt to hide the fact—that intellectually he was head and shoulders above nearly all the people with whom he came in touch. A proud, shy man, he resented advice, though it is only fair to add that few ever offered it to him and, certainly, no one ever did so twice. But, as might be expected, he was particularly fond of advising others. What few friends he made he kept. Of these, I recall Dr. Pilcher of Boston as the most learned and charming. Amongst his brother clergy, Canon Staffurth and the Rev. H. J. Cheales ranked high, but the Rev. G. H. Hales came first. Hales was an immense man and champion hammer-thrower of Cambridge. There was very little of the parson about him and he was very popular. We children loved him. He treated the Vicar as an equal and a friend and the two men understood each other, for Hales was far too wise to interfere or offer advice.

Austere to others, the Vicar was equally austere towards himself. His food was of the simplest, though he liked it well cooked. Meals at the Vicarage were monotonous in the extreme. For mid-day dinner there was meat and pudding. Meat meant a joint once a week, hot on Saturday, cold on Sunday, mince on Monday. The rest of the week there was home produce—chicken or rabbit, or pigeon. Pudding was invariably fruit tart. My sister tells me that, to this day, she loathes apple tart, as she once had it at home every day for three months on end. Tea at 6 o'clock was a plain meal; buttered bread for the Vicar; cake or jam added for us children. We were never allowed both: and if we chose jam, butter was not permitted. Supper at 9 o'clock was cold meat and cheese. On Sundays in the winter time the cold dinner was mitigated by soup: and there was a hot supper. He smoked in strict moderation and he enjoyed an occasional glass of wine, especially of old port. He spoke to me once, half in horror and half in pleasant retrospect, of the port served by his old neighbour, Canon Coltman. The Canon was a Squarson of the old type and his port glasses ran FOUR to the bottle.

I cannot close this picture of the Vicar without bearing witness to many fine points in his character. Hard he was, and unbending when crossed. But he was very generous and whatever call to duty came he

fulfilled to the utmost. Parish visiting, in the modern sense, he did not pursue ; but if parishioners were ill he was always at their service. He even joined the doctor in nursing duties, when nurses were unavailable. I recall a case in the days of my boyhood, when, for weeks on end, the Vicar twice or three times a day accompanied our village doctor to the bedside of a parishioner who was dying of cancer. The conditions were dreadful, and as no other skilled help could be obtained the Vicar volunteered to help Dr. Smith to carry through the necessary duties ; on his return home he would not enter the house, or allow his children to approach him until he had thoroughly fumigated his clothes and made sure that no possibility of infection could persist. For a man as sensitive and as ignorant of medical processes as was the Vicar, such action was heroic. And forty years later I find that, as a dying man, his diary record shows that he paid daily visits to a sick parishioner, whom he survived only by a week or two. He took the Church services to the very end, though on the last Sunday of his life he was so feeble that, after the close of the afternoon service, he had to be helped out of the Reading Desk. All through that week he struggled on, carrying out various parochial details and writing many letters. On Saturday evening, after his supper, he prepared his notes for the services of the following day and then apparently

settled down in his arm chair to read an English translation of the Comedies of Plautus. There, studious to the very end, and with the book fallen from his hand, he was found dead the next morning. He died as he, I think, would have wished, in the study where he had worked so strenuously for more than forty-five years and with his fine intellect undimmed. He was seventy-six years of age when his death took place on April 21st, 1917. The funeral service was conducted by his old friend, the Rev. G. H. Hales, and the church was crowded with parishioners anxious to pay the last tribute of respect to their old Vicar. We strewed violets on his coffin as it was lowered into the grave which had been dug for him close beside the tower of the ancient church where he had worshipped and officiated so long.

It is not necessary for me in these memoirs to pursue the course of my mother's public life. That will be found recorded both in her own Autobiography, published in 1893, and in the luminous study of her personality and work recently published by Mr. Geoffrey West. All that I need put on record here is an expression of my love and reverence for her which have never changed throughout the forty years that I have remained in close touch with her. At the age of eighty-two her powers of work are undiminished and her enthusiasm as great as ever.



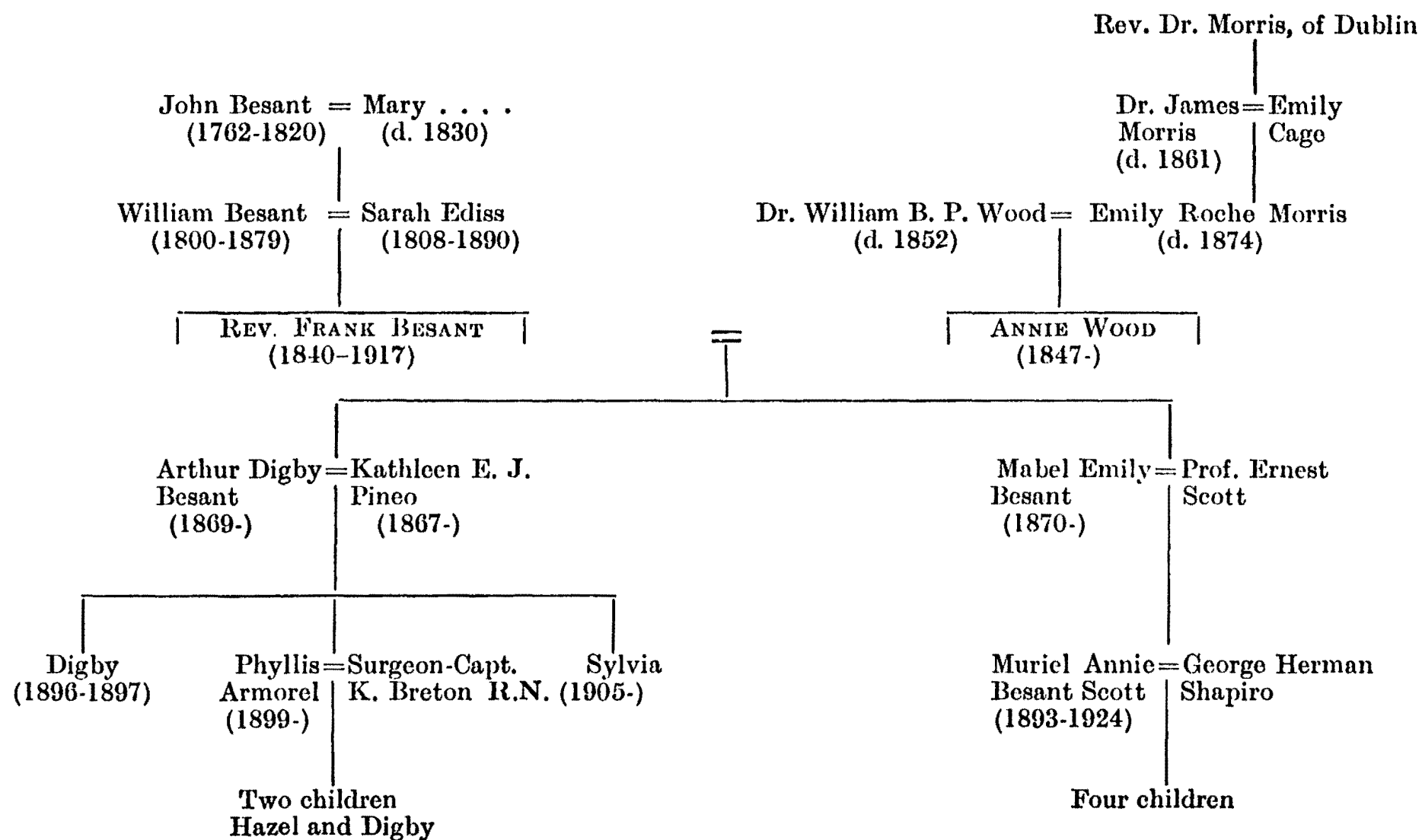
DR. ANNIE BESANT AT THE AGE OF 80.

So, too, is the attraction she exercises over all who come in contact with her. To my great regret it has not proved practicable for me to visit her in her Adyar home. Mabel has been more fortunate in that respect and perhaps, even yet, the opportunity may come to me.

In 1892 Mabel married Professor Ernest Scott and went out with him at once to Melbourne, Australia. There they remained for many years, she paying occasional visits home with her daughter, Muriel. Eventually they came home for good and in 1915 Muriel married George Herman Shapiro, who, prior to the war, was well known in the musical world of London. She died prematurely in 1924 leaving four little children. Mabel lives on in London busily occupied in many lines of work and study.

My own adult career can be summed up in small space. From first to last it has been "Clerical and Medical." Like my scholarly parents and uncles, I have always been a hard worker, and progress at the office was rapid. In 1895, helped by that brilliant coach and delightful man, the late Sir George Hardy, I passed the final examination of the Institute of Actuaries and became entitled to write F.I.A. after my name. Three years later the Directors appointed me Assistant Actuary and second officer of the Society. In 1905 I became Secretary, and the next year my old chief, Mr. W. J. H. Whittall,

BESANT-WOOD PEDIGREE





Arthur Digby Besant.
1921.

ARTHUR DIGBY BESANT (1921).

in the prime of his intellectual powers, was compelled through ill-health to retire. I was appointed his successor and have now held the position of chief officer of the Society for nearly twenty-four years. During the latter portion of this period the post has been coupled with directorships of the associated companies.

In 1924 came our Centenary Year, and I was entrusted with the task of writing the Society's history. Anyone with antiquarian tastes will appreciate the delight which I felt in delving among these ancient Minute Books and manuscripts, and in placing their essential features upon permanent record. This same year I was honoured by my professional colleagues by being chosen as President of the Institute of Actuaries. This appointment, in its turn, caused me to be selected as a member of the Royal Commission which was appointed in 1924 to examine into the working of the National Health Insurance System. About the same period I was also made Chairman of the Life Offices' Association—the body which deals with Life Assurance matters on their business side. In 1918, to my great joy, my old college honoured me by offering me a seat on their governing body ; this was followed in 1924 by appointment as Joint Treasurer and by election as a Fellow of the College. In 1929 I was elected a member of the Athenæum Club.

Turning now to more domestic affairs, I was married in 1894 to Kathleen Pineo, daughter of Mr. Francis Pineo, a retired official of Portsmouth Dockyard. The two families had been friends of long standing in the early Southsea days, and there we young people met each other frequently. Our son, Baby Digby, was born in November 1896, and died very suddenly eight months later.

“He seemed an angel who had lost his way and wandered hither ; and so his stay with us was short.”

Two years after his death Armorel was born and seven years later came her sister, Sylvia. Both girls were educated at Cheltenham College. When war broke out Armorel volunteered at once for nursing duties and became a V.A.D. Shortly afterwards she married Surgeon-Commander Breton, R.N. There are two children, Hazel and Digby ; but the new Baby Digby—jolly little fellow as he is—cannot, to my very natural regret, perpetuate the Besant family name.

A word on hobbies may fittingly be added. *Who's Who* states mine as being “Mountain walking, philately, billiards.” To these I plead guilty, adding only that my skill at billiards is unfortunately in inverse proportion to my fondness for the game. I was never much good at field games, for at cricket I could never see the ball coming until it had hit me

somewhere. So in batting I was generally sent in last and, more often than not, got out for a duck. Our Saturdays at Portsmouth were generally spent in long country tramps and we explored all the districts that fell within our walking range. The Isle of Wight was our favourite, but that was costly : more often we walked over Portsdown Hill to the little villages on the north side ; or we started from Gosport and made our way round the Harbour ; or we climbed about the walls of Porchester Castle—a thing not really permitted, but very exciting and fascinating. In this way my lifelong love of historical churches and antiquarian knowledge was stimulated—it is, of course, implanted deeply in the heart of every Besant. Years later I took Armored to Dijon and the poor child was dragged wearily through one after another of its splendid churches. After lunch she struck and tearfully asked : “ Daddy, need I see any more churches ? ” In 1898 came the first visit to Switzerland and my introduction to the snow mountains. Upon my two girls and myself the fascination that snow mountains exert is overwhelming : it cannot be explained, it can only be felt. Our favourite haunt is Saas Fee. Even in these days of multitudinous tourists, its old-world charms remain almost unspoilt. For it lies fourteen miles from a station, can only be reached by mule-path, and the day-tripper, or the

conducted party knows it not. It is a table land ringed in by snow ranges, with a glacier barely a mile away and an endless choice of walks through the pine woods, or along the mountain paths which lead upwards to the climbers' paradise beyond. And to a tired town-dweller like myself, its air brings health and a reserve of strength that helps to carry one successfully through the ensuing winter months. Last year Saas Fee—as it often does—treated us unkindly in the way of weather, but I am sure my girls will have little difficulty in persuading me to take them there again next summer. And now, as we have reached the year 1930, this long domestic chapter must come to a close.

CHAPTER XIV

EDGAR BESANT (1842-1924)

EDGAR, the youngest of the six brothers whose portraits are reproduced on page 181, was born on March 31st, 1842, some eighteen months after his predecessor Frank, but more than thirteen years later than his eldest brother William. He was baptised at All Saints' Church, Portsea, the registration certificate giving his parents' residence as Queen Street, Portsea, and his father's occupation as "Draper." Thus for the second time his parents changed the church where their successive infants were baptised. First it had been St. John's Chapel-of-Ease : then Kingston Parish Church : and now, for Edgar, All Saints' was selected. The explanation is interesting. The readers of Sir Walter Besant's Portsmouth novel, *By Celia's Arbour*, will remember the hen-pecked cleric, the Rev. John Pontifex, who befriended the boys and who, searching in the kitchen cupboard for food to give them, came across a jam-laden portion cut from the centre of a roly-poly pudding. "That's not for me, Jane," he exclaims

plaintively to the cook. The Rev. George Qualmly, who was Vicar of All Saints at this period, was said to be the original of the novelist's portrait and was undoubtedly a family friend. As Kingston Parish Church was then in the builders' hands, we can thus readily account for the baptism of Edgar at All Saints'.

Four years after Edgar's birth the family removed to Union Street and there he spent his childhood. In due course he joined his brothers Albert and Frank at Mr. Andrews' school and there, so far as I can ascertain, he completed his education. Of his school days I can learn little. He had good brains undoubtedly, as his subsequent history proved; and he was a hard worker; but apparently he had not the outstanding scholarship that distinguished his brothers William and Walter and Frank. He was a fine chess-player and even late in life was recognised as a formidable opponent. He had great personal charm and was deservedly popular throughout his long life, as his genial ways made for him a host of friends. He was the only member of his generation of the family who succumbed to the fascinations of golf. The short-sighted brother Walter, as an on-looker, was facetious about the game.

“ Pile up the heap of sand, strut about, swing the club in perfect rhythm, approach the ball, call for sand, then for more sand, swing the club again, then again,

settle the feet finally and firmly : then SMITE. If the ball goes off wildly to right or left, or if it just dribbles from the sand mountain and comes to rest a foot or two away, explain to everyone exactly why this has occurred and then with expanded chest, bully the caddie to hand you the proper club for the next shot."

Obviously Walter was no golfer : but Edgar played the game soundly and enjoyed his daily round with unabated keenness until he was nearer eighty than seventy years of age.

In his youth, like his brothers William and Albert, he was a keen volunteer. He was also an enthusiastic Mason, and at one time was Master of the Portsmouth Lodge. At Malta he became very fond of riding and kept his own horses there. All through his life he was a great reader, with something of his brother Walter's love of history and literature. And, like Walter, he possessed a wonderful memory which enabled him to talk long and interestedly on the navy and naval matters. His early Portsea memories of eighty years ago took him back to the days of the wooden sailing ships and the three-decker men-of-war : he lived to see the modern navy created, and, with the keenest attention, he followed its progress throughout the long drawn-out and critical war period of 1914-18.

When he was seventeen he left school and secured temporary work at Portsmouth Dockyard, being

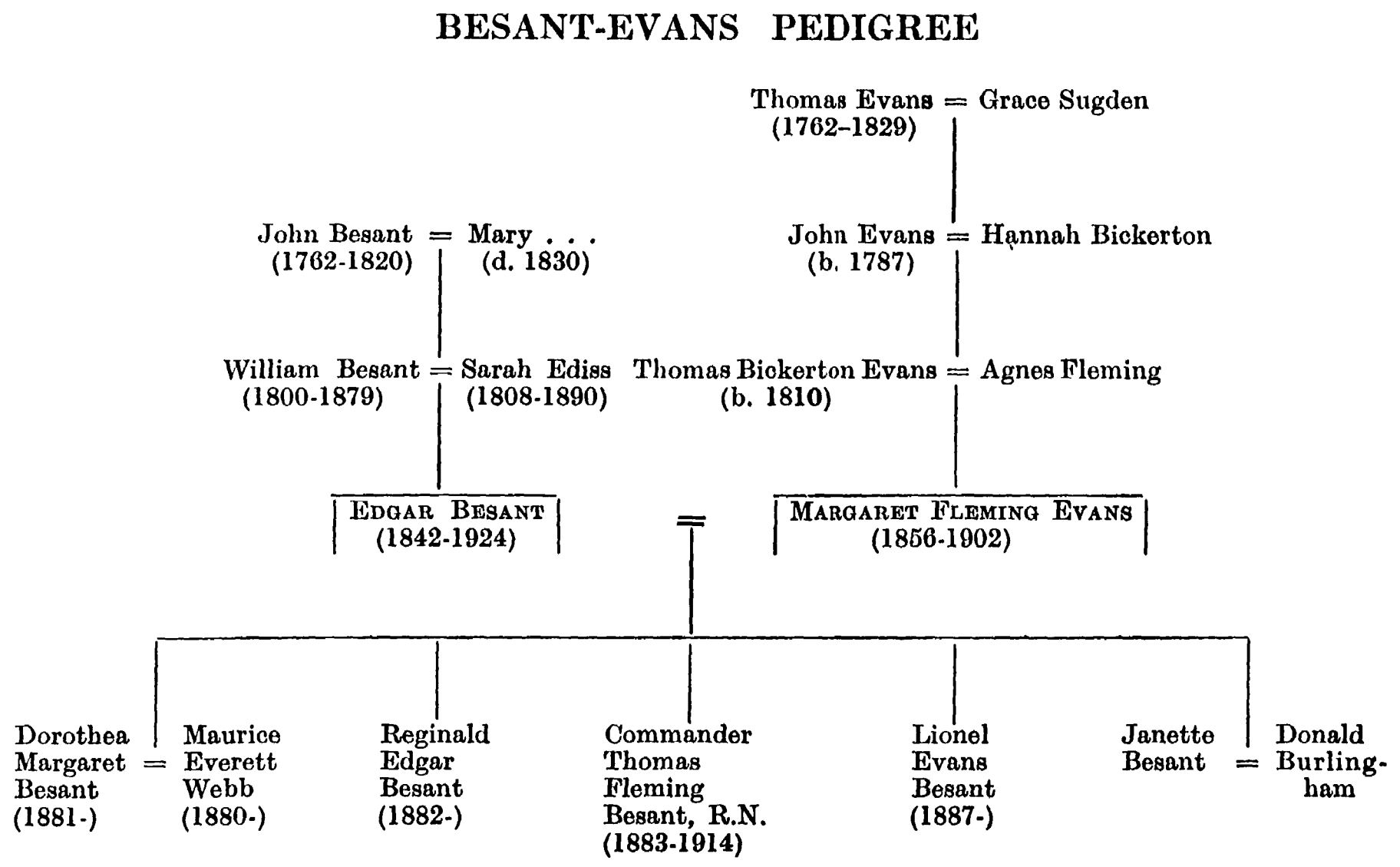
made a member of the permanent civil service staff a year later. At Portsmouth for ten years he worked his way steadily upwards, and in 1870 was selected, out of a host of competitors, to fill an important departmental post as senior clerk in the store-keeping department at Hong-Kong. His appointment there lasted for six years, and when it ended he crossed the Pacific and returned to England by the eastern route. In California he was shown a lump of quartz, streaked with lines of gold, which presented the exact appearance of a butterfly with extended wings. On his return he told his brother Walter of this freak of nature and, as was to be expected, the incident soon after formed the basis of a book—*The Golden Butterfly*—the novel which is regarded generally as being the finest of the Besant and Rice series.

The Hong Kong appointment was followed by a short spell of home service. In 1877 he was transferred to Malta and his duties as storekeeper were very onerous. For it was the period of the Russo-Turkish war and the British fleet was concentrated at Malta, in view of the danger which threatened Constantinople. He used to give graphic descriptions of how the warships came in at all hours of the day and night, how stores had to be shipped at express speed and how, one by one, the ships disappeared under sealed orders. Apart from this

period of strain, life at Malta must have been very pleasant. He had a large official house and an ancient sub-tropical garden. With the customary Besant generosity, he sent home every year, to his various brothers and their children, large cases of oranges—the Malta orange is unrivalled for flavour and sweetness. After Malta came a final spell of home service ; first two years at Chatham as secretary to the Admiral Superintendent, and then twelve years at Devonport as naval store officer. After forty-two years of varied work, he retired from the civil service in 1900.

In 1881, during the period he held his official post at Malta Dockyard, Edgar married Margaret Fleming Evans. On retirement from Devonport Dockyard, the family resided for a time in Switzerland and then settled down in a comfortable house at the top of Ladbroke Grove, London. In 1902, to the great grief of many relatives and friends, his wife died prematurely ; he stayed on for a time in the London house, but after his daughters had married he gave it up and the final years of his life were passed at St. Leonards, where his sister-in-law, Miss Evans, had long resided. There, vigorous and alert to the end, he died in 1924, at the age of 82, and his remains were cremated—a new and a very sensible departure from family precedent.

There were five children. Dorothea married in



1909 Maurice Aston Webb, only son of Sir Aston Webb, the distinguished architect and the ex-President of the Royal Academy. Then came Reginald. He, being blessed with more than the family share of good looks and with a fine baritone voice, went on the stage and did well in that exacting profession until the outbreak of war. In an eighteenth century costume, and as leader of a rousing chorus, Reginald was magnificent. In August 1914 he volunteered at once for service and after a period of training at home, served in the front line trenches both on Vimy Ridge in 1916 and during the retreat from Amiens in those dark days of April 1918. He rose to the rank of Major, was mentioned three times in despatches and gained the Military O.B.E. At the outbreak of the War I am told that, in a sportive mood, he advertised in the *Era* that he would be free to take up theatrical engagements at the close of hostilities. I believe, however, that he has not resumed a stage career, but has devoted his energies to the teaching of elocution, both to stage aspirants and to budding public speakers. He is also a writer of plays, a field which is admittedly most difficult, but which, in view of his practical stage training, appears in his case to offer great possibilities.

Next came Fleming. He joined the Navy at the early age of 15, that being the practice of those days; and less than two years later, as a young

midshipman, he saw active service in China during the Boxer rising. On his return home he began by specialising in gunnery and torpedo courses; but shortly afterwards he decided to devote all his energies and brains to a study of the new field which submarines and hydro-aeroplanes were then opening up to the keenest type of the young school of intellectual naval officers. He quickly became recognised as an expert in submarine matters, and early in 1914 was selected to command A.E.1., the first submarine constructed here for service in Australian waters. His vessel, travelling under its own power, reached Sydney in May, and was the first submarine to stand the test of a long ocean voyage. The next few months were occupied in cruises and naval manœuvres. There his submarine A.E.1. mysteriously disappeared and no trace of her has ever been found. War broke out in August and the movements of the vessel in the preceding weeks had not been kept secret. Of her fate nothing can be learnt: we can only surmise what happened. Fleming, at any rate, with all his gallant crew, went down with his ship.

There were two other children. Lionel, educated at Devonport and at Freiburg, went to Canada and took up a ranch there for horsebreeding. Despite a damaged leg, due to an accident, he came back to England at the outbreak of war and served in France

until demobilised in 1918. After that he returned to Canada, resumed his farming, and still remains there.

Janette, the younger daughter, followed her father's example and in 1920 went out to Hong Kong, where in the following July, she married Donald Burlingham, an official of the Police Force. Hong Kong has been her permanent home ever since.

CHAPTER XV

WINIFRED BESANT (MRS. PEILE) (1844–1920)

FOLLOWING these five successive boys came a girl. This was Winifred—always known as Winnie—and she was born on November 19th, 1844, at Queen Street, Portsea. Like Edgar, she was baptised at All Saints' Church and the baptismal certificate shows that her father had by then become a wine merchant. So more prosperous days had dawned, and while Winnie was still in the nursery, the move to the roomy Union Street house took place. Nothing has come down to us as to the little girl's education, but we know that her artistic side developed early, and that no pains or expense were spared by her parents to cultivate it and bring it to perfection. Painting in oils was her strong point, and a photograph of her in early youth, taken in the FitzWilliam Museum, Cambridge, shows her copying there one of Sidney Cooper's large cattle pictures. She painted in water colour also and made delightful sketches. Apart from her painting she developed considerable skill as an amateur actress and mimic,

where her vivacious ways and her extreme prettiness more than compensated for her lack of inches. She was petite and chic, if one may use a hackneyed expression which fits her exactly. In addition to her artistic powers she was, like her mother and elder sister, a skilled needlewoman.

In 1870 she was married at St. Jude's Church, Southsea, to Lieut. Frederick Babington Peile, of the Indian Native Army. The Peiles were of distinguished stock and came originally from Cocker-mouth, Cumberland, where they claimed connection with John Peel of hunting fame. As a family they had traditions, both with Guy's Hospital and with Indian Army service. These began with the famous Dr. William Babington, F.R.S., whose statue is in St. Paul's Cathedral and whose bust is at Guy's. Of him it is quaintly recorded :

“ He formed the connecting link between the departed and living philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries : for from Priestley down to Wollaston and Davy, he was the personal friend, associate and collaborateur of the most distinguished men of England.”

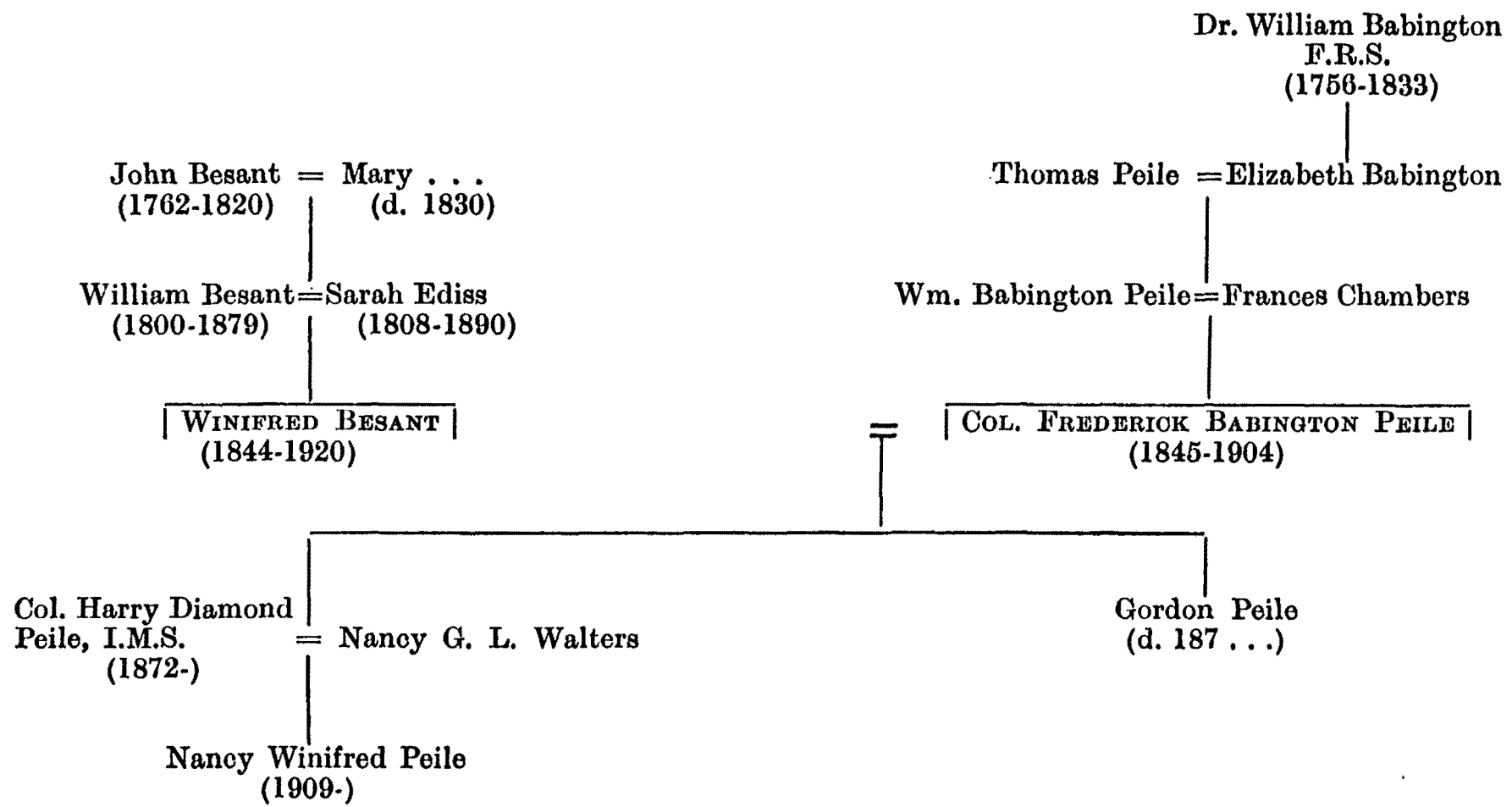
Dr. Babington was the great-grandfather of the Fred Peile who married Winnie. His daughter, Elizabeth, married a Thomas Peile, who became the father of William Babington Peile, an officer in the Indian Army. At the date of the Mutiny, young Fred was a lad of twelve and was with his parents

at Delhi. They had various adventures, lost everything they possessed and barely escaped with their lives. Fred was placed by his mother with a British regiment for safety, and was separated from his parents for many months.

When the time came, Fred, in his turn, joined the Indian Army, becoming eventually a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Indian Staff Corps and Colonel of his regiment. Shortly after their marriage he returned to India accompanied by his wife ; and there, apart from periods of leave spent at home, they resided for many years. They had two children. The elder son, Harry, was born in India in 1872 ; a younger son, Gordon, who was born at Southsea and returned with his parents to India, died there in early childhood. Colonel Peile retired in 1894 and died ten years later. His widow survived him for many years, and died on August 5th, 1920, at the age of seventy-five. She was buried in the family vault at Portsea, beside her parents and her two elder sisters.

Her surviving son, Harry Diamond Peile, was, in accordance with the then existing custom, sent back to England at an early age, and for many years lived with his grandparents at "Spring Lawn," Southsea—the old family home. He was educated at Portsmouth Grammar School and afterwards proceeded to Guy's Hospital. He qualified in

BESANT-PEILE-BABINGTON PEDIGREE



1898 and shortly afterwards obtained his Commission in the Indian Medical Service, thus combining both lines of the Babington-Peile tradition—training at Guy's and service with the Indian Native Army. He applied for service on the North-West Frontier and on arriving in India was sent at once to the Tochi Valley in Wazoristan. It was a strange and unpleasant experience for a young man who had just qualified at a London hospital and who knew nothing of military matters. Of the Tochi Valley, Harry wrote :

“ It is a desolate, hot and stony region, where the garrison frequently turn out to chase raiders. One cannot go a hundred yards from the outposts without an armed escort, for Ghazis and other like sportsmen hang around on the chance of plugging with a bullet someone of a different creed.”

One of these casual bullets struck Harry, but fortunately only inflicted a slight wound. For his services here he was mentioned in despatches, and awarded the Frontier Medal, with clasp.

For some years he was in charge of a succession of large prisons, under the control of the Indian Government Jail Department. On one occasion, after heavy rain, a long section of the outer wall of his prison fell down. In five days they rebuilt the wall from new sun-dried bricks, which they made on the spot in a temperature which was one hundred

and eighteen degrees in the shade; and Harry was able to report to the authorities that not a single convict had escaped. The outbreak of war in Europe brought its minor troubles on the frontier, and in 1915 came a raid by a large body of Afghans who had been told by enemy agents that the British forces had no guns left in India. Fortunately the necessary guns were on the spot, the attack was easily beaten off and the raiders made for home, after sending in a message to the British commander that they did not consider it was playing the game to be assailed by gun fire on three sides at once. Shortly afterwards Harry was transferred to Mesopotamia, where he served during the remainder of the war and for some years afterwards. Here he had to deal with crowds of refugees, and on his return to camp one day found himself confronted with the following telegram :

“ Eighty thousand refugees coming down, badly infected with cholera, typhus and small-pox : make arrangements.”

They all came, and somehow or another the necessary arrangements were carried through ; but, in the process, Harry's chief medical assistant fell a victim to typhus. Harry left India in 1922 and retired the year after. He had gained five medals including the Bronze Star of 1914-15.

Apart from medical and service interests Harry's lifelong hobby has been natural history. He has always been a keenly scientific lepidopterist, which in more homely parlance means a collector of butterflies. (Harry tells me that an alternative scientific title is "Aurelian.") As his opportunities for acquiring out-of-the-way specimens have been unusual, and as his skill in mounting them is of a high order, it is not surprising that many of his scarce captures have found a permanent home in the national collections. I understand that he has discovered fourteen or fifteen new types, and that he has been honoured by the learned authorities responsible for such matters by having two of these hitherto unknown butterflies and moths named after himself. The exact titles of these, he tells me, are *Lycoena peilei* and *Lemonia peilei*. Some of the captures which he made in war time involved considerable risk to himself. In a letter to me describing what he calls a "scrap" with Afghans, he mentions that while the fight was going on he noticed a rare butterfly flitting about the enemy's sangars, and that when, a few days later, a picket of his regiment went to hold the spot, he accompanied the party and captured quite a lot of specimens.

In 1907 Harry married Nancy G. L. Walters, and they have one daughter, Nancy Winifred—always known, like her grandmother, as Winnie. After

returning from India in 1922, the family settled down in England for educational purposes, and when Winnie's schooldays came to an end, changed their residence to France. It is interesting to record that in Winnie the artistic tendencies of her grandmother have re-appeared. She has passed, with honours, all the examinations of the School of Art, South Kensington, and is fast developing as a painter in water-colours. She is also becoming recognised as an effective amateur actress.

CHAPTER XVI

CONCLUSION

THE foregoing chapters contain all that I have been able to glean about the Besant family, from the remote past down to the present day. What of the future? Considering that William and Sarah Besant had six sons, all of whom married and had children, it is curious to find how few of our known "Besant" relatives are now living in this country. Of my own generation there remain only eight: my cousins, William and Ernest, Mary, Phil and Geoffrey, Harry, Reginald, and myself. Of these eight, three are unmarried, one has no children, two have daughters only. Ernest and Phil alone have sons to perpetuate the name—and they but three in all. Nor have any of the married daughters of the family maintained the charming old custom of using Besant as a christian name for their children, as was done in several instances during the earlier half of the last century. There are, as we have seen, some descendants of Albert in New Zealand and others in Canada, but we in this country are not very likely to keep

in touch with them or with their descendants as the years pass on. It seems inevitable, therefore, that so far as our branch of the family is concerned, the Besants of the near future will form but a tiny company. May they prove worthy of their ancestry !

I cannot close this little volume of reminiscences without recording the pleasure which I have derived from piecing together all these scattered fragments of our family history. It has been a far more difficult and exacting task than I had imagined when, with light heart, I began it over a year ago : for openings, which appeared promising at the beginning, often proved illusory and led nowhere. Even now, though I cannot at this stage carry any further my gropings into these shadows of the past, I am conscious that many Besant clues exist, still unexplored. I feel sure that between John Besant the first, who died in 1763—everything else about him being still unknown, though I am myself convinced that he must have been an old man at the date of his death—and our John Besant the fifth, born in 1762, there exist links which it ought to be possible to forge together. But my own task is completed : I have blazed the trail and it may be that in the days to come some younger Besant may follow up the leads here given. As for the book itself, it is, I admit, undoubtedly little more than a glorified catalogue : but such as it is, I submit it

to my relatives, conscious that, however dull they may deem it, these reminiscences constitute a record of our family circle such as has not hitherto been compiled, and much of which, I am certain, is now unknown to any living person save myself.

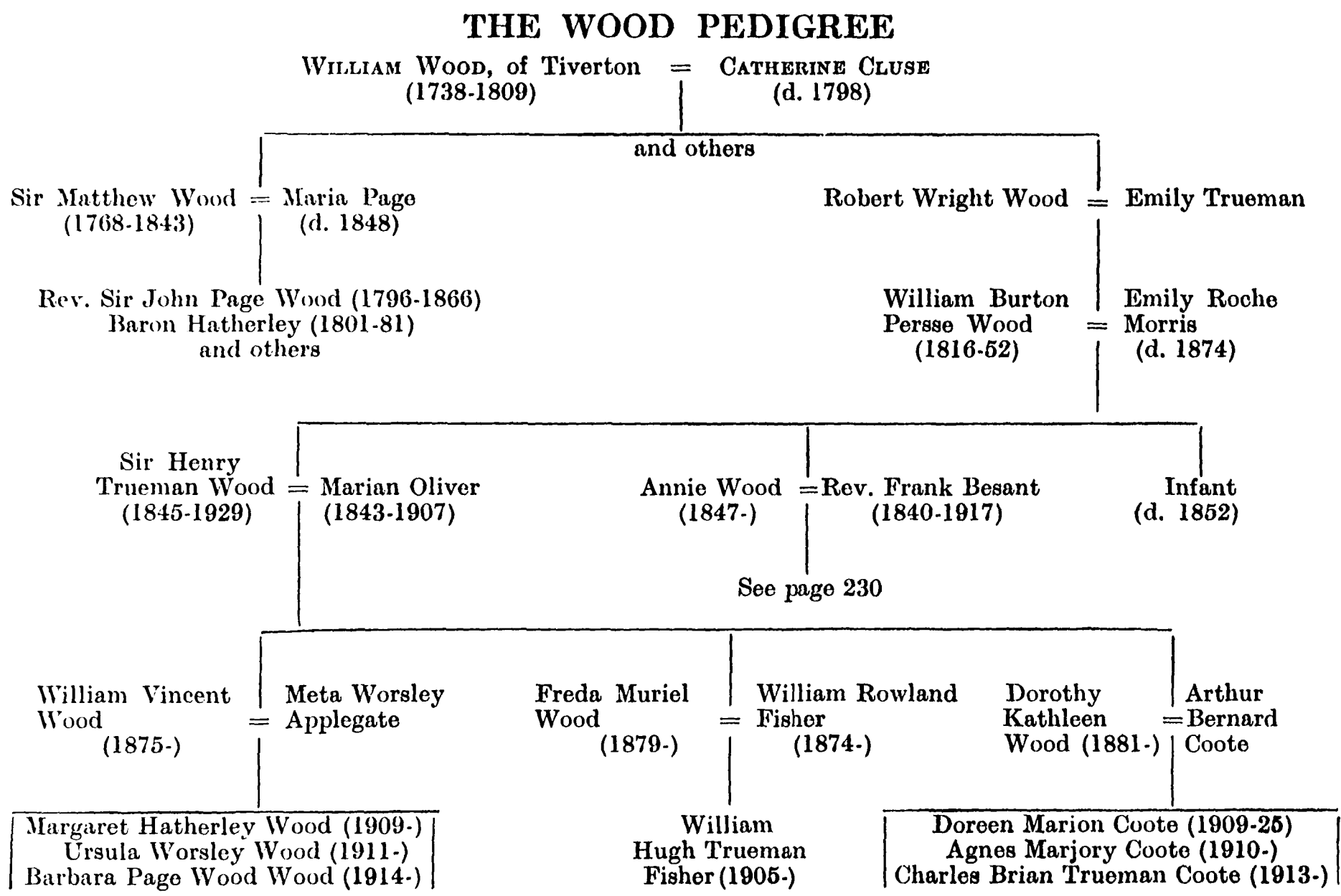
APPENDIX

APPENDIX I

THE WOOD FAMILY

As my mother was born a Wood, it seems fitting that a short note on that distinguished family should be included in this volume. And the more so, as my mother's brother, Sir Henry Trueman Wood—always known affectionately to us as “Uncle Harry”—supplied me, many years ago, with the Pedigree Table, set out overleaf.

The Wood family tree, so far as public records go, starts with a William Wood of Tiverton, who was born in 1738, and who died in 1809. He was a manufacturer of serge and appears to have had a hard struggle: for his grandson, the future Lord Hatherley, records, in his Autobiography, that “he was incapable of making any provision for a family of ten children.” William's eldest son, Matthew, was educated at the famous Blundell's Grammar School, and, after a period of apprenticeship at Exeter, gravitated to London, where he became partner in a firm of druggists. Shortly afterwards he entered municipal life, becoming first



a Common Councilman and afterwards an Alderman of the City of London. In 1809 he became Sheriff ; in 1815, and again in 1816, Lord Mayor ; and in 1817 he was elected an M.P. for the City of London, retaining that office until his death in 1843. He was an advanced Liberal in politics, and his son, Lord Hatherley, records in an Autobiographical note :

“ It is indeed most amusing to look back upon the horror which was then felt at the supposed fearful Radicalism of ‘ Alderman Wood,’ who had now become the single Liberal representative of the City of London in Parliament.”

Lord Mayor Matthew Wood is, however, chiefly remembered to-day for his persistent advocacy of the claims of Queen Caroline to recognition at the hands of her husband, King George IV. He urged the Queen to return to England to rebut the charges made against her, though there were then few in the higher ranks who had the courage to befriend her. She knew well, as she wrote in a letter addressed to her august husband, that :

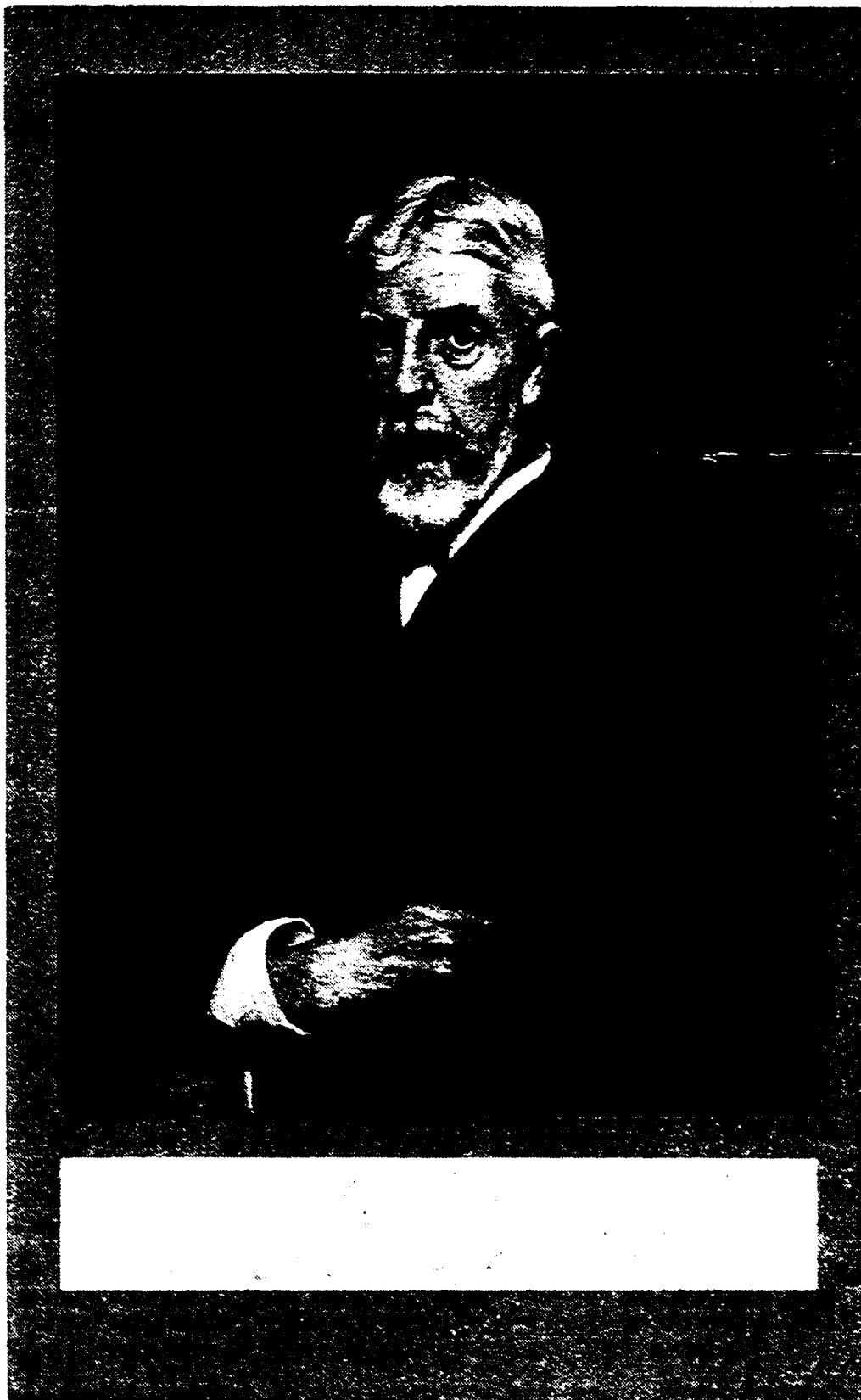
“ to caluminate your innocent wife was now the shortest road to royal favour and to betray her was to lay a sure foundation of riches and titles of honour.”

Prior to Queen Caroline's death, Matthew Wood had begun to interest himself also in the fortunes of the Duke and Duchess of Kent, and it was said

that he provided funds for the payment of the Duke's debts in order that their infant, the Princess Victoria, heir-presumptive to the Throne, might be born on English soil. In 1837, Queen Victoria, shortly after her accession, bestowed a Baronetcy upon him in recognition of this signal service.

Sir Matthew's eldest son was the father of Field Marshall Sir H. Evelyn Wood, V.C. His second son was William Page Wood, who, after a distinguished career at the Bar and in Parliament, became a Judge and in 1868 was raised to the Peerage as Baron Hatherley and appointed Lord Chancellor in Mr. Gladstone's first Ministry. He died without issue in 1881. The only other relative of Sir Matthew with whom we are here concerned is his younger brother, Robert Wright Wood, who married Emily Trueman. Their eldest child, William Burton Persse Wood, was my grandfather. He became a physician and married Emily Roche Morris, a picture of whom is reproduced on page 199. They had three children, of whom one died in infancy : the others were my uncle, Henry Trueman, and my mother, Annie Wood. Both developed, during a long public life, intellectual powers of the highest order. In my mother's case, these took the form of oratory, devoted to religious and political activities : in my uncle's, of scientific eminence and of administrative ability.

When Henry was seven and his sister five, they



SIR HENRY TRUEMAN WOOD (1902).
From a painting by Sir Hubert von Herkomer, R.A.

lost their father, who died from galloping consumption, set up, it is believed, from an abrasion accidentally incurred during a post-mortem examination.

There followed a time of struggle and anxiety for the young widow. She made up her mind that her son should receive the best possible education and after much cogitation—as my mother records—decided that he should be educated at Harrow, with a view to proceeding in due course to Cambridge or to Oxford, as his tastes should dictate. Dr. Vaughan, the then Headmaster of Harrow, helped actively in the scheme and in 1855 my grandmother moved into a house on the top of Harrow Hill, with the headmaster's permission to take some Harrow boys into her charge under the supervision of one of the masters of the school as resident house-tutor. Harry's schoolboy career was such as one would expect of a studiously clever lad, helped throughout by his mother's wise counsel and by the guidance of the headmaster. In due course he gained a scholarship at Clare College, Cambridge, and secured a second class in the Classical Tripos of 1868. On leaving the University he entered the Patent Office, and not long afterwards became editor of the *Society of Arts Journal*. In due course this led to his being appointed Assistant Secretary of the Society ; and, three years later, in 1879, he was appointed Secretary, a position which he held for nearly forty years. On

his retirement he was placed on the Council and became its Chairman in 1919. His interest in all branches of commercial science led him to take a leading part in the organisation of the various Exhibitions—Health, Inventions and Colonial—held in London during 1884-86 ; and soon afterwards he was appointed British Commissioner for the Paris Exhibition of 1889. For these services he was Knighted in 1890. Three years later he served in a somewhat similar capacity in connection with the great Chicago Exhibition. For a long succession of years he took an active share in the meetings of the British Association ; and as a natural sequence of his scientific activities as regards photography, he became in 1894 President of the Royal Photographic Society. His election to the London Board of the Kodak Company soon followed. In due course he became Chairman and this position he retained until, in old age, his physical powers failed. He was equally enthusiastic as regards the importance of a pure milk supply for the London area ; and for many years was Chairman of the Express Dairy Company.

In the course of his career he published several volumes, the most important of which were his *History of the Royal Society of Arts* (1913) and *Industrial England in the Middle of the Eighteenth Century* (1910). The former is, of course, his *magnum opus*, and deservedly so, for he devoted

years to its compilation. The latter book, though designed on a smaller scale, is extraordinarily interesting and, to the non-technical reader, affords a wealth of information not readily obtained elsewhere. Most of us, I fancy, associate all developments of the industrial side of the national life with the earlier part of the nineteenth century. This book is a revelation of the extent to which the earlier stages of mechanical activities had already been carried in 1754, the year in which the Royal Society of Arts was founded. A practical steam engine had, indeed, been constructed for pumping purposes so far back as 1712 : by 1776 Watt had complete engines at work : ten years later his steam engines “passed from the colliery to the workshop and began to drive the mills and the machinery of the world.” The author sums up :

“at the beginning of the eighteenth century English industry was carried on under mediæval conditions. At the end of it the conditions were almost those which now prevail.”

Uncle Harry was a tall spare man, gifted with a caustic tongue, which concealed a kindly heart. His hobbies in earlier life were mountaineering and photography : in later life golf and bridge. He continued to play bridge regularly at the Athenæum until failing eyesight made this impossible. Then he took to Patience, and invented innumerable new

systems. To failing eyesight was added increasing deafness and feebleness: but his mental powers remained unclouded to the end. One day, shortly before his death, he remarked grimly to me that his last link with the outer world was his wireless set; for curiously enough he could still hear distinctly on the wireless, though he had become almost completely deaf. In old age there was a pathetic difference between my uncle's feebleness and my mother's vigorous activities. Despite complete divergence of views on all political and theological matters, a curiously deep affection existed between them, and on her periodical visits to England, my mother never failed to call upon him in his daughter's country home, no matter how great might be the pressure on her time.

In 1873 he married Marian Oliver, who died very suddenly in 1907. There were five children, of whom two died from diphtheria within a week of each other—a terrible blow to the parents. The three surviving children, Vincent, Freda and Dorothy are all married and all have children. For the last few years of his life my uncle lived with his devoted daughter Freda at Bourne End, and there he died on January 7th, 1929, at the age of eighty-three. His body was cremated and the ashes deposited in the grave of his wife in Kensal Green cemetery.

APPENDIX II

TWO GLADSTONE LETTERS

THE two following letters from Mr. Gladstone are interesting. The first was addressed to my mother in 1876, at the time when Gladstone, defeated at the polls by Disraeli, had retired from political life and in his place Lord Hartington had been elected leader of the Liberal party. This retirement, as things turned out, proved to be of short duration. The Bulgarian atrocities roused Gladstone and brought him back to politics : the fiery Midlothian campaign followed : and for nearly twenty years thereafter Gladstone continued to be a dominating force in public life.

Hawarden,

MADAM,

Nov. 25, 1876.

I received and perused yesterday, without any knowledge of the authorship, the pamphlet entitled "Why did Gladstone fall from Power."

It seemed to me to state with very great ability the points of the Eastern question : as to most of it indeed I thought it quite admirable. When I came to its treatment of Lord Hartington, I

deemed it to be, though without any ill intention on the part of the writer, such as I could not on grounds of justice accept either as a whole or partially. And with regard to the passage about Lord Granville I thought within myself how strongly I could assure the writer that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, there was no foundation for it whatever.

As for myself, I have receded from none of my statements, and abated none of my feelings : but I was not able, consistently with honour, to take the part which the pamphlet flatters me by pointing out ; my study has been and will be, how best, in a private station, to promote the progress, with as little shock as may be, of the great work of liberation in the East.

It is not my custom, for it is not in my power, to acknowledge so particularly tracts on public or other affairs which I may receive, even if they convey as pointed an appeal ; but I beg you, Madam, to accept this note as a willing tribute to the ability and force, as well as the integrity and sense of justice, with which you have discussed a question of vital interest.

I have the honour to be,

Your faithful servant,

W. E. GLADSTONE.

Mrs. ANNIE BESANT.

The second letter, written a few months after his final retirement from political life, was sent in reply to a letter which, as an impetuous young man, I had ventured to address to him protesting against some of the views he had expressed in an article reviewing my mother's Autobiography and published in *The Nineteenth Century*. Considering the relative ages and positions of the writer and the recipient, the letter is a wonderful example of courtesy and dignity.

Hawarden Castle,
Chester,
October 4, 1894.

DEAR SIR,

I thank you sincerely for the singular gentleness with which you treat me in your very kind and also very touching letter.

It scarcely admits of argument from my side—for who would argue with a profoundly affectionate son to prove to him (and I cannot prove, for I have only such conjectural knowledge as the book supplies) that his mother was not exempt from the general law of human kind, and consequently had imperfections?

At an earlier period I should have been happy to make Mrs. Besant's acquaintance: but my age and the condition of more senses than one are now great impediments to the extension of my circle.

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One word of explanation on my article, only to say that what it imputes to the book is what I have known in actual life as attaching to estimable excellent, perhaps even illustrious characters.

I remain dear Sir,

With sincere appreciation,

Your very faithful

W. E. GLADSTONE.

DIGBY BESANT, ESQ.

APPENDIX III

THE FALSE JOAN OF ARC

By SIR WALTER BESANT

HARDLY were the flames of the Rouen stake extinct when the popular imagination, inflamed by the ever increasing fame of the murdered Joan, and ready to believe the greatest marvels, opened the way for imposters.

Could Joan be dead? Could she, sent by Heaven for the freeing of France, have been hurried away by death while the task was yet only half done? Such grief as the disciples of the Lord felt when the first news of His death was brought to them from Jerusalem, and before they were told of the glorious Resurrection, fell upon the hearts of the people.

And as our Lord died but rose again, so, it began to be whispered about, had the Divine Maid perished indeed in the flames but been raised again from the dead by the hand of God, to show His power, and to carry the miraculous history to its legitimate end? Even in that age of faith there were found many who

could not accept a Resurrection and yet could not believe that the Maid was dead: these adopted another version. A woman like Joan was publicly burned, but she herself was still living. There was no desire to lessen the guilt of the English in burning Joan—not at all. That the English, who were clearly the enemies of God in resisting Joan, should carry their wickedness to the point of making her a martyr was quite in accordance with the fitness of things. It is forbidden to heroes in all ages to die—Arthur, Frederick Barbarossa, Charlemagne—these are not dead but sleeping. At their own good time they will come back again.

Joan came back. On the 20th of May, 1436, a young girl appeared at the village of Grange aux Ormes near the township of Saint Privat, one league from Metz, who called herself the Maid of France, and asked to speak to certain seigneurs of Metz who were assembled in the place. No document exists to show who she was or where she came from. The Dean of St. Thibaud, reporting the incident, remarks only that she was called Claude. Her age corresponded, to all appearance, exactly with that of Joan. In her movements her resemblance to Joan, particularly when dressed as a man, was extraordinary. Among those who first saw her were certain *écuyers* who had been at Rheims for the coronation of Charles VII. These recognised her

at once for Joan of Arc. She parried questions and answered the most difficult of them without embarrassment; she would not declare her intentions as to the future; and when they asked her to perform miracles, as Joan was reported to have done, she replied that her power would not be restored to her till the Feast of St. John the Baptist.

So far, all is probable; but on the very day of her first appearance, the 20th of May, the two brothers of Joan, Pierre and Jean du Lys, who were in the vicinity, were summoned to give evidence. Extraordinary to relate, they both declared that they saw their sister before them. They took her away with them and kept her at a village called Bacquillon for a week. This week was probably spent by the pretended Joan in acquiring all the information possible that might be of use to her from those two simple peasants, who do not seem to have been privy to the plot. She then spent three weeks at the house of a man called Jehan Cugnot during which she was visited by crowds from Metz curious to see the Maid restored to life. The Duchess of Luxembourg received her with the highest honours and the young Count of Wurtemberg, Ulrich, named himself her protector, gave her a magnificent cuirass and brought her to Cologne. There, however, in spite of the Count's belief in her, an unfriendly eye was watching her and an unfriendly hand was taking

notes. Joan, dazzled by the ease of her success, was forgetting her saintly character. She danced with men and she ate and drank, says Kalt-Eysen who made the notes, more than was befitting her sex.

She placed upon the archiepiscopal throne of Trèves one of the two candidates who were disputing its possession, and then, returning to Cologne, caused it to be given out that she had performed two miracles. Kalt-Eysen opened a court of enquiry and cited the sorceress to appear before him. She refused and was excommunicated. The Count rescued her from the prison into which she would have been thrown. She then married a knight of noble descent named Robert des Armoises and for some time remained at Metz, being now known as Jeanne des Armoises.

Meantime her brother Jean du Lys, full of this great thing which had befallen his family in the resurrection of his sister, was trudging through France to find the King who was in Touraine. Charles heard the news without any sign of disbelief and ordered him to receive a grant of a hundred francs. Jeanne des Armoises also wrote a letter to the King which was sent off on the 2nd of September. In November she was still at Metz, where there exists a deed of sale, executed by her husband and herself, in which she is called Jehanne du Lys, Pucelle de

France, Dame de Thichiemont. She is next reported to have deserted her husband for a certain clerk in Metz, an action which she did not conceive to be inconsistent with her character as the Maid of Orleans and one which does not seem to have greatly lessened the number of her adherents. Some time during the next two years she made a very strenuous journey into Italy, under the pretext of seeking absolution from the Pope. Was the real reason of the journey to get out of the way of unpleasant enquiries? Whether she obtained a hearing of the Pope does not appear, but it is certain that she enrolled herself in the service of Eugène IV. In July 1439 she reappears on the scene. On the 28th, 29th and 30th of July splendid banquets are held in her honour at Orleans. On the 1st of August she is invited to what we should call a God-speed dinner at which she is presented with two hundred and ten livres, “voted to Jeanne d’Armoises, after deliberation made, by the Council of the city and in return for the benefits which she conferred upon the city during the siege.” A gift of wine arrived too late for her and it was bestowed upon Jean Luillier, the draper who had clothed Joan of Arc by command of Duke Charles.

In September she returned to Orleans, whence she set out for the Touraine. During the month the *Bailli* of this province wrote a letter on the subject to

the King. The courier who brought it to Charles gave him also one from the lady herself who, according to the story, was busy rivalling the exploits of the woman whose name she had assumed.

But these are doubtful. It seems clear, however, that she was fighting at Poitou. The King declined to receive her ; but her reputation grew. In the year 1440 she found herself near Paris, and was either arrested or obeyed an order to appear before the University and the Parliament. They asked her questions, set her on the marble stones of the Palace for the people to look at her, and preached at her. She was accused of being no longer a maid, of having married a knight, of having committed some sin so heinous as to oblige her to seek absolution in Rome, of having twice committed homicide in battle. But they did not apparently try to detain her in Paris. At any rate she escaped. Still her followers increased in number. Finally the King grew curious and sent word that he would see her. Charles tried upon her the same experiment that had failed with the real Maid. He ordered a gentleman of the court to personate him and retired behind a trellis. But this trial failed also, because Jeanne des Armoises had been too well drilled. She knew the signs by which to recognise the King and cried out that she was being cheated. Then Charles, astonished, presented himself, and was immediately

saluted by the pretender. He was struck by a sudden thought and said "Maiden, my friend, (Pucelle, ma mie), welcome back again in the name of God who knows the secret between you and me." This unexpected turn disconcerted the Lady of Armoises. She stammered, hesitated, and at last, falling on her knees, demanded pardon and confessed her imposture.

This was in 1441, ten years after the death of Joan of Arc. The comedy had lasted five years. They punished severely—*asprément*—her accomplice but let her go. For sixteen years longer, however, this Amazon continued her career, dressed in armour, fighting with soldiers, riding up and down the country. She would not go back to Luxembourg or Lorraine where her history was too well known. She remained in Anjou, where, her first husband dying, she married an Angevin named Jean Douillet of low birth, and after many adventures, of which little is known, she got into difficulties with the Dame de Saumoussay and her family, and fell into prison at Saumur, where she lay for three months. She was helped out of her dungeon by King René. There was nothing that could be brought against her except that she habitually wore men's clothes and fought when she could. On the other hand she had certain small claims on René. The family of des Armoises had been protected by him and

Isabella : the pretended Maid had supported René's chancellor and friend Jacques de Sierk in his claim to the archbishopric of Trèves : she fought for Eugène IV. when that Pope supported the King of Sicily. Accordingly René released her, but on conditions hard for her to bear. She was not to stay in Anjou for more than five years without fresh permission ; she was to cease fighting ; she was to wear woman's dress again, and she was to behave properly. She must have been then forty-five years old and it was high time that she should "range herself." Probably she did, for we hear nothing more about her. Doubtless she remained, to her last day, in vulgar estimation, the Maid of Orleans.

W.B.

**SPACE AVAILABLE
FOR FUTURE NOTES ON THE
BESANT FAMILY**

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