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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HOW I WRITE MY NOVELS ***

Produced by Daniel Fromont

[Transcriber's note: Mrs. Hungerford (Margaret Wolfe Hamilton) (1855?-1897) "How I write my novels" (from Mrs Hungerford's *An anxious moment* pp. 275-282)]

To sit down in cold blood and deliberately set to cudgel one's brains with a view to dragging from them a plot wherewith to make a book is (I have been told) the habit of some writers, and those of no small reputation. Happy people! What powers of concentration must be theirs! What a belief in themselves—that most desirable of all beliefs, that sweet propeller toward the temple of fame. Have faith in yourself, and all me, will have faith in you.

But as for me, I have to lie awake o' nights longing and hoping for inspirations that oft-times are slow to come. But when they do come, what a delight! All at once, in a flash, as it were, the whole story lies open before me—a delicate diorama, vague here and there, but with a beginning and an end—clear as crystal. I can never tell when these inspirations may be coming; sometimes in the dark watches of the night; sometimes when driving through the crisp, sweet air; sometimes a word in a crowded drawing-room, a thought rising from the book in hand, sends them with a rush to the surface, where they are seized and brought to land, and carried home in triumph. After that the 'dressing' of them is simple enough.

But just in the beginning it was not so simple. Alas! for that first story of mine—the raven I sent you of my ark and never saw again. Unlike the proverbial curse, it did not come home to roost; it stayed where I had sent it. The only thing I ever heard of it again was a polite letter from the editor in whose office it lay, telling me I could have it back if I enclosed stamps to the amount of twopence halfpenny, otherwise he should feel it his unpleasant duty to 'consign it to the waste-paper basket'. I was only sixteen then, and it is a very long time ago; but I have always hated the words 'waste paper' ever since. I don't remember that I was either angry or indignant, but I *do* remember that I was both sad and sorry. At all events, I never sent that miserable twopence halfpenny, so I conclude my first manuscript went to light the fire of that heartless editor.

So much comfort I may have bestowed on him, but he left me comfortless; and yet who can say what good he may not have done me? Paths made too smooth leave the feet unprepared for rougher roads. To step always in the primrose way is death to the higher desires. Yet oh, for the hours I spent over that poor rejected story, beautifying it (as I fondly, if erroneously, believed), adding a word here, a sentiment there! So conscientiously minded was I, that even the headings of the chapters were scraps

of poetry (so called) done all by myself. Well, never mind. I was very young then, and, as they say upon the stage, I 'meant well'.

For a long twelvemonth after that I never dreamed of putting pen to paper. I had given myself up, as it were. I was the most modest of children, and fully decided within myself that a man so clever as a real live editor must needs be could not have been mistaken. He had seen and judged, and practically told me that writing was not my forte.

Yet the inevitable hour came round once more. Once again an idea caught me, held me, *persuaded* me that I could put it into words. I struggled with it this time, but it was too strong for me; and that early exhilarating certainty that there was 'something in me', as people say, was once more mine, and seizing my pen, I sat down and wrote, wrote, wrote, until the idea was an object formed.

With closed doors I wrote at stolen moments. I had not forgotten the quips and cranks uttered at my expense by my brother and sister on the refusal of that last-first manuscript. To them it had been a fund of joy. In fear and trembling I wrote this second effusion, finished it, wept over it (it was the most lachrymose of tales), and finally, under cover of night, induced the housemaid to carry it to the post. To that first unsympathetic editor I sent it (which argues a distant lack of malice in my disposition), and oh, joy! it was actually accepted. I have written many a thing since, but I doubt if I have ever known again the unadulterated delight that was mine when my first insignificant cheque was held within my hands.

As for my characters: you ask how I conceive them. Once the plot is rescued from the misty depths of the mind, the characters come and range themselves readily enough. A scene, we will say, suggests itself—a garden, a flower-show, a ball-room, what you will—and two people in it. A young man and woman for choice. They are always young with me, for that matter, for what under the heaven we are promised is so altogether perfect as youth! Oh, that we could all be young for ever and for ever; that Time,

'That treads more soft than e'er did midnight thief',

could be abruptly slain by some great conqueror, and we poor human beings let loose, defiant of its thralls! But no such conqueror comes, and Time flies swiftly as of yore, and drags us headlong, whether we will or not, to the unattractive grave.

If any one of you, dear readers, is as bad a sleeper as I am, you will understand how thoughts swarm at midnight. Busy, bustling, stinging bees, they forbid the needed rest, and, thronging the idle brain, compel attention. Here in the silent hours the ghosts called characters walk slowly, smiling, bowing, nodding, pirouetting, going like marionettes through all their paces. At night, I have had my gayest thoughts; at night, my saddest. All things seem open then to that giant, Imagination.

Here, lying in the dark, with as yet no glimmer of the coming dawn, no faintest light to show where the closed curtains join, too indolent to rise and light the lamp, too sleepy to put one's foot out of the well-warmed bed, praying fruitlessly for that sleep that will not come—it is at such moments as these that my mind lays hold of the novel now in hand, and works away at it with a vigour, against which the natural desire for sleep hopelessly makes battle.

Just born this novel may be, or half completed; however it is, off goes one's brain at a tangent. Scene follows scene, one touching the other; the characters unconsciously fall into shape; the villain takes a ruddy hue; the hero dons a white robe; as for the heroine, who shall say what dyes from Olympia are not hers? A conversation suggests itself, an act thrusts itself into notice. Lightest of skeletons all these must necessarily be, yet they make up eventually the big whole, and from the brain wanderings of one wakeful night three or four chapters are created for the next morning's work.

As for the work itself, mine is, perhaps, strangely done, for often I have written the last chapter first, and founded my whole story on the one episode that it contained.

As a rule, too, I never give more time to my writing than two hours out of every day. But I write quickly, and have my notes before me, and I can do a great deal in a short time. Not that I give these two hours systematically; when the idle vein is in full flow I fling aside the pen and rush gladly into the open air, seeking high and low for the children, who (delightful thought) will be sure to help me toward that state of frivolity to which the sunshine outside has tempted me to aspire.

To *force* the mind is, in my opinion, bad business. What comes spontaneously is of untold value. It is always fresh, always the best of which the writer may be capable. These unsolicited outbursts of the mind are as the wild sprays sent heavenward at times by a calm and slumbering ocean—a promise of the power that reigns in the now quiet breast. Thus dreams are of value; and to dreams (those most spontaneous and unsought of all things) I owe much."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HOW I WRITE MY NOVELS ***

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