How I Served My Apprenticeship

By Frances Hodgson Burnett.

It would be difficult to explain this in detail, as my impression is that I served it quite unconsciously, and that I was serving it through all the first fifteen years of my life. And this I feel sure could be recorded by any worker. One's apprenticeship to one's art begins the first day one is conscious of thought. The thinker may not know what the work may be for which he is apprenticed by life, but he has entered upon it when he has begun, whether consciously or unconsciously, to receive impressions.

When the being who is to be a painter first finds himself observing colour and form, light and shadow; thinking “The clouds are purple and gray,” or “The blossoming wild plum-trees are beautiful”; the subtle gradual preparation has commenced. When the one who will end by being poet or novelist, says to himself or herself, of some face, “That is sad,” or “That is happy,” his first word has been written. It has been written upon himself, and not by himself; but it has been written.

Being convinced of this fact, I look back and see that my apprenticeship began in the earlier years of existence, and that it was being served steadily when I was not in the least aware that I was an apprentice to anything.

It began with stories read in the nursery, and days lived at an English young ladies' school. It was not a literary school, and as I look back I see that what I was taught there was most simple and rudimentary. In those days an English seminary for young ladies expected very little more of its pupils than that they should learn how to write letters in a neat, angular hand; that they should know obvious things about history, geography, grammar, and arithmetic; that they should acquire a few mild accomplishments in the form of dancing, drawing, French, and embroidery; and that they should have good manners.

But the history I was taught built stories for me and left on my mind impressions of the characters of human beings who had been kings, queens, warriors, or statesmen; geography opened up to me pictures of strange lands and strange creatures whose ways and means were worth dreaming about. Mythological legends gave a world of gods and goddesses, fairies and nymphs, who seemed to have curiously human characters also.
So the apprenticeship was being served day by day. At seven years old I began to write stories. I think they were rubbish. I have no doubt they were unconscious echoes of the better ones I had read, but they were an active exercise of the power of expression. In doing them I learned to say easily anything I wished to say.

In those days I remember hearing my schoolgirl letters spoken of as "remarkably clever for a child." If this were true, it was so because I had read and written so much that I could express any thought without trouble; and as every day seemed, to my imagination, full of event, ideas were not rare things to me, whether they were worth recording or not.

I wonder how many—or how few—of those who have written books the world knows well, were educated for literature? I was not. I lived among educated, but not
The Lady’s Realm.

among literary, people until I was taken to America at about fifteen years of age. Then for a time my life was spent among people who scarcely read at all. And yet I feel that among them I served a part of my apprenticeship that has counted for much.

I saw a new, though primitive, people. I studied them because it was my natural bent to delight in human beings, and study them without being aware that I was doing so. Not until after I was twenty did I find out that during those years spent among the woods and mountains of East Tennessee, I had been accumulating material out of which I could build, and from which I should draw as long as I lived.

I do not mean that it was merely East Tennessee material, or character, or dialect; it was human material, which is the same, with shades of difference, in all regions on earth. It was also the material of which skies and clouds, forests and hills, summers and winters, are made.

It will be seen that the events which made up the years of preparation were not such as could be related in a brief article. A child born with a vivid imagination found it fed by every hour that passed, every curious or interesting human creature she spoke to or looked at, every hill or tree, storm or flower. Nobody regarded her as anything but one of all the rest; but she was “serving her time.”

The business part of the process was very simple. At fifteen I completed a story I had begun at twelve and had laid away unfinished. It was very necessary that I should do some work which might finally be a means of support. As I was shy about the venture of sending a story to a publisher, I wished to keep the matter secret unless the result was successful. I confided in my two younger sisters, and together we concocted a plan for getting the money to buy foolscap and stamps.

This plan was to gather wild grapes in the woods and send them to market by a small mulatto girl who lived near. We gathered a quantity; they were sold, and brought what we needed. Then the story was sent. If it had met with a cold reception I should possibly never have sent another; but it met with a fate not entirely discouraging. The editor wrote, speaking favourably of the story; but as he was not definite about the matter of payment, I asked him to return it.

It was then sent to another editor. This one wrote, also speaking favourably of it, but asking me if it was original. This, he explained later, was because I had signed only a nom de plume, and though the story was sent from the mountains of Tennessee, it was distinctly English in atmosphere and tone. I replied that it was original, and that I had only lately come to America.

He asked me to send him another story, still doubting, I suppose. I wrote another in two days, sent it, and he accepted both, paying me twenty dollars for one and fifteen for the other.

From that time I wrote stories continually. I was only a child and very modest and timid about my efforts. I wrote a great many stories before I presumed to send one to the purely literary magazines, of which there were then very few. I sent them principally to fashion magazines which published stories.

Happily I had great good fortune. The stories were nearly always accepted and paid for in modest cheques of ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five dollars. Sometimes one came back; but I had so much encouragement that I knew it must be true that I had a sort of faculty for writing things people wanted to read, and so it was not waste of time to try again.

In those days I believe I had stories published in every magazine in America, except Harper, Scribner, the Atlantic, and such as classed with them. To those, I was not sufficiently certain of my powers to send anything. It would have seemed to me a kind of presumption to aspire to entertain the world of actual literature. When I wanted to pay a visit to my relatives in England I used to write five or six little ten- or twelve-dollar stories a month, with a view to accumulating the money I required.

When I look back I am struck with the entire aloneness of all I did. I was a shy child and a proud one, and it never occurred to me to ask advice or help of any one. I knew no one who was in the least literary, and if I had known such persons I should
How I Served My Apprenticeship.

have felt it quite out of the question to talk of my small affairs to them. I never talked to any one but my little sisters, who thought my stories adorable.

Somehow I felt quite sure that if I could do anything I must do it myself. I was not in the least sure that what I could do was of any great consequence, but I knew it was harmless, and that I could live on what I earned by it if I worked hard enough.

I have sometimes been asked who "encouraged" me in those days. But, as I have said, I did not ask any one to "encourage" me. I lived quite in the country and quite without neighbours. The nearest town was at that time a small provincial one, whose inhabitants were certainly not literary people nor connected in any way with the literary world. If any of them were reading people, those were not the ones I knew.

I knew very few people indeed. I had no library and knew no one who had one. In my early years in England my friends and relations had books in their houses whether they cared very much for them or not. In Tennessee I had no books.

I remember with a great feeling of gratitude a man who lent me a book—from what impulse of kindness I could not explain. He was a young man and scarcely knew me at all, except as one of three little girls who wore shabby calico frocks and worn shoes and lived in a little frame house on some land which belonged to him. He was not a Tennessean, but a New Yorker or Bostonian, I do not know which.

I remember that I realised somehow that he was a gentleman, and an educated person, and I used to wish we knew him. I wondered very much if he had ever realised that, in spite of our bare little house and shabby calico frocks, we were ladies, and had been born in the world to which I suspected he himself belonged.

He had bought as an investment the land about us and on which the little house was built, and occasionally he used to ride over from the town on a sort of tour of inspection. He was very blonde, and rode a rather smart bay horse, and when he rode by I always watched him with the deepest interest—I so longed for the society of people who had lived as I had lived before the change of our fortunes had driven us into exile.

If he had known what his well-groomed person and refined face expressed to me I am sure he would have come into the bare little house and talked. But I think he only entered on one occasion. I am not
sure to-day of the details of his visit, but I believe that he was out shooting and the friend who was with him met with a trifling accident, and they came to us for some slight aid. I was in the room, and we exchanged a few words.

How we spoke of books I cannot recollect. The whole incident was only a matter of a few minutes, but when he went away he had promised to send me a book. It was Mrs. Gaskell’s “Sylvia’s Lovers,” and the joy of reading it was immense. I remember the stiff, formal little note of thanks I wrote when I returned it to him.

I was sufficiently English to be horribly afraid of saying too much or seeming too forward, and I was so full of trembling hope that he would send me another book and come again, that I dared not write naturally for fear of showing unseemly eagerness.

I am sure he would have sent me all the books he had, if he had only known; but he was young and had many interests, and could not have expected to remember a little tenant in such a shabby frock. Nevertheless, I remember his one kind thought to this day, and thank him for it, wherever he may be.

If we had known each other, perhaps he might have proved to be the person who “encouraged” me. But we never knew each other, and I remained, throughout the first part of my apprenticeship at least, unencouraged as far as sympathetic companionship went.

But there is one man whom I shall always remember with a gratitude it would not be easy to put into words. He has been out of this world some years. He was the owner and editor of Peterson’s Ladies’ Magazine. He was Mr. Charles Peterson, and though his publication contained fashion plates and cooking recipes, he himself had the literary, and cultivated, mind.

Other editors were kind enough to praise my work when they accepted it, but I did not find that their admiration caused them to add to the size of their cheques of payment. I was an inexperienced child, and should never have dared to ask them to increase the payment they gave me. I needed it so much that I was glad to get what they offered me.

Mr. Charles Peterson began by paying me as the rest did; but after I had sent him a few stories, he wrote me a letter I could not easily forget. It was so kind, and so far from being actuated by the purely business spirit which gets all it can for the smallest return that is possible.

He told me that my work was worth more to him than that of his other contributors, and that, this being the case, he thought it only fair that he should pay me more than he paid them. And he sent me a cheque which was almost double what I had received before. That was “encouragement.” He not only told me that my work was good, but proved to me that it was so in the most unmistakable way. And that he had so proved it gave me a courage I had never known before.

This was only the initial act of a series of many kindnesses. I was young and unprotected by any worldly knowledge, and he protected me against my own simplicity. This is not a small thing or a common one, Heaven knows; and when I am asked who “encouraged” me, I know that this one man—this one honourable and generous gentleman—did.

It was just before I returned to England for the first time that I wrote a story in the Lancashire dialect, which I had always thought picturesque, and had learnt as a child in Manchester through hearing it spoken by the people of the working classes. The story was called “Surly Tim’s Trouble,” and somehow it so broke my heart as I wrote it, and I found myself so sobbing and weeping, that I could not help thinking that at last I had written something I might offer to one of the higher class magazines.

I sent it to Scribner’s Monthly, which was then edited by Dr. Holland, and the letter written accepting it proved to me that it was all, and more, than I had dared to hope. It told me that “in the office” also it had been sobbed and wept over, and that they were all full of enthusiasm over the unknown little person who had sent it to them. That seemed to me to open for me the gates of Paradise. I knew that having done this
How I Served My Apprenticeship.

I could do other things, and that I need not be afraid to send my stories to other magazines as good.

From that time all went well. I began to write only for purely literary periodicals. They payed so much better than the smaller publications that it was not necessary to write six stories a month when one wished to cross the Atlantic. Less than two years later I wrote "That Lass O' Lowries."

That was my first book. I had written a number of serial love stories before, but I had never thought of any of them as books. "That Lass O' Lowries" was a success.

If one's apprenticeship can ever be said to be ended, I think mine came to a close after the publication of the little sorrowful Lancashire story, "Surly Tim's Trouble." But to my mind one is always apprenticed to the work still to be done, and apprenticeship does not end so long as one's work goes on.