

# **AUTOBIOGRAPHI CAL SKETCHES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649068944

Autobiographical Sketches by Annie Besant

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**ANNIE BESANT**

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
SKETCHES**



0

“AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
SKETCHES.”

BY  
ANNIE BESANT



LONDON:  
FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY,  
63, FLEET STREET, E.O.

1885.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES.

---

I AM so often asked for references to some pamphlet or journal in which may be found some outline of my life, and the enquiries are so often couched in terms of such real kindness, that I have resolved to pen a few brief autobiographical sketches, which may avail to satisfy friendly questioners, and to serve, in some measure, as defence against unfair attack.

### I.

On October 1st, 1847, I made my appearance in this "vale of tears", "little Pheasantina", as I was irreverently called by a giddy aunt, a pet sister of my mother's. Just at that time my father and mother were staying within the boundaries of the City of London, so that I was born well "within the sound of Bow bells".

Though born in London, however, full three quarters of my blood are Irish. My dear mother was a Morris—the spelling of the name having been changed from Maurice some five generations back—and I have often heard her tell a quaint story, illustrative of that family pride which is so common a feature of a decayed Irish family. She was one of a large family, and her father and mother, gay, handsome, and extravagant, had wasted merrily what remained to them of patrimony. I can remember her father well, for I was fourteen years of age when he died. A bent old man, with hair like driven snow, splendidly handsome in his old age, hot-tempered to passion at the lightest provocation, loving and wrath in quick succession. As the

family grew larger and the means grew smaller, many a pinch came on the household, and the parents were glad to accept the offer of a relative to take charge of Emily, the second daughter. A very proud old lady was this maiden aunt, and over the mantel-piece of her drawing-room ever hung a great diagram, a family tree, which mightily impressed the warm imagination of the delicate child she had taken in charge. It was a lengthy and well-grown family tree, tracing back the Morris family to the days of Charlemagne, and branching out from a stock of "the seven kings of France". Was there ever yet a decayed Irish family that did not trace itself back to some "kings" ? and these "Milesian kings"—who had been expelled from France, doubtless for good reasons, and who had sailed across the sea and landed in fair Erin, and there had settled and robbed and fought—did more good 800 years after their death than they did, I expect, during their ill-spent lives, if they proved a source of gentle harmless pride to the old maiden lady who admired their names over her mantel-piece in the earlier half of the present century. And, indeed, they acted as a kind of moral thermometer, in a fashion that would much have astonished their ill-doing and barbarous selves. For my mother has told me how when she would commit some piece of childish naughtiness, her aunt would say, looking gravely over her spectacles at the small culprit: "Emily, your conduct is unworthy of the descendant of the seven kings of France." And Emily, with her sweet grey Irish eyes, and her curling masses of raven-black hair, would cry in penitent shame over her unworthiness, with some vague idea that those royal, and to her very real ancestors, would despise her small sweet rosebud self, as wholly unworthy of their disreputable majesties. But that same maiden aunt trained the child right well, and I keep ever grateful memory of her, though I never knew her, for her share in forming the tenderest, sweetest, proudest, purest, noblest woman I have ever known. I have never met a woman more selflessly devoted to those she loved, more passionately contemptuous of all that was mean or base, more keenly sensitive on every question of honor, more iron in will, more sweet in tenderness, than the mother who made my girlhood sunny as dreamland, who guarded me until my marriage from every touch of pain that she could ward off, or

---

could bear for me, who suffered more in every trouble that touched me in later life than I did myself, and who died in the little house I had taken for our new home in Norwood, worn out ere old age touched her, by sorrow, poverty and pain, in May, 1874.

Of my father my memory is less vivid, for he died when I was but five years old. He was of mixed race, English on his father's side, Irish on his mother's, and was born in Galway, and educated in Ireland; he took his degree at Dublin University, and walked the hospitals as a medical student. But after he had qualified as a medical man a good appointment was offered him by a relative in the City of London, and he never practised regularly as a doctor.

In the City his prospects were naturally promising; the elder branch of the Wood family, to which he belonged, had for many generations been settled in Devonshire, farming their own land. When the eldest son William, my father, came of age, he joined with his father to cut off the entail, and the old acres were sold. Meanwhile members of other branches had entered commercial life, and had therein prospered exceedingly. One of them had become Lord Mayor of London, had vigorously supported the unhappy Queen Caroline, had paid the debts of the Duke of Kent, in order that that reputable individual might return to England with his Duchess, so that the future heir to the throne might be born on English soil; he had been rewarded with a baronetcy as a cheap method of paying his services. Another, my father's first cousin once removed, a young barrister, had successfully pleaded a suit in which was concerned the huge fortune of a miserly relative, and had thus laid the foundations of a great success; he won for himself a vice-chancellorship and a knighthood, and then the Lord Chancellorship of England, with the barony of Hatherley. A third, a brother of the last, Western Wood, was doing good service in the House of Commons. A fourth, a cousin of the last two, had thrown himself with such spirit and energy into mining work, that he had accumulated a fortune. In fact all the scattered branches had made their several ways in the world, save that elder one to which my father belonged. That had vegetated on down in the country, and had grown poorer while the others grew richer. My father's brothers

---



had somewhat of a fight for life. One has prospered and is comfortable and well-to-do. The other led for years a rough and wandering life, and "came to grief" generally. Some years ago I heard of him as a store-keeper in Portsmouth dock-yard, occasionally boasting in feeble fashion that his cousin was Lord Chancellor of England, and not many months since I heard from him in South Africa, where he has secured some appointment in the Commissariat Department, not, I fear, of a very lucrative character.

Let us come back to Pheasantina, who, I am told, was a delicate and somewhat fractious infant, giving to both father and mother considerable cause for anxiety. Her first attempts at rising in the world were attended with disaster, for as she was lying in a cradle, with carved iron canopy, and was for a moment left by her nurse in full faith that she could not rise from the recumbent position, Miss Pheasantina determined to show that she was capable of unexpected independence, and made a vigorous struggle to assume that upright position which is the proud prerogative of man. In another moment the recumbent position was re-assumed, and the nurse returning found the baby's face covered with blood, streaming from a severe wound on the forehead, the iron fretwork having proved harder than the baby's head. The scar remains down to the present time, and gives me the valuable peculiarity of only wrinkling up one side of my forehead when I raise my eyebrows, a feat that I defy any of my readers to emulate. The heavy cut has, I suppose, so injured the muscles in that spot that they have lost the normal power of contraction.

My earliest personal recollections are of a house and garden that we lived in when I was three and four years of age, situated in Grove Road, St. John's Wood. I can remember my mother hovering round the dinner-table to see that all was bright for the home-coming husband; my brother—two years older than myself—and I watching "for papa"; the loving welcome, the game of romps that always preceded the dinner of the elder folks. I can remember on the first of October, 1851, jumping up in my little cot, and shouting out triumphantly: "Papa! mamma! I am four years old!" and the grave demand of my brother, conscious of superior age, at dinner-time: "May not Annie have a knife to-day, as she is four years old?"

---

It was a sore grievance during that same year 1851, that I was not judged old enough to go to the Great Exhibition, and I have a faint memory of my brother consolingly bringing me home one of those folding pictured strips that are sold in the streets, on which were imaged glories that I longed only the more to see. Far-away, dusky, trivial memories, these. What a pity it is that a baby cannot notice, cannot observe, cannot remember, and so throw light on the fashion of the dawning of the external world on the human consciousness. If only we could remember how things looked when they were first imaged on the retina; what we felt when first we became conscious of the outer world; what the feeling was as faces of father and mother grew out of the surrounding chaos and became familiar things, greeted with a smile, lost with a cry; if only memory would not become a mist when in later years we strive to throw our glances backward into the darkness of our infancy, what lessons we might learn to help our stumbling psychology, how many questions might be solved whose answers we are groping for in vain.

## II.

The next scene that stands out clearly against the background of the past is that of my father's death-bed. The events which led to his death I know from my dear mother. He had never lost his fondness for the profession for which he had been trained, and having many medical friends, he would now and then accompany them on their hospital rounds, or share with them the labors of the dissecting room. It chanced that during the dissection of the body of a person who had died of rapid consumption, my father cut his finger against the edge of the breast-bone. The cut did not heal easily, and the finger became swollen and inflamed. "I would have that finger off, Wood, if I were you," said one of the surgeons, a day or two afterwards, on seeing the state of the wound. But the others laughed at the suggestion, and my father, at first inclined to submit to the amputation, was persuaded to "leave Nature alone".

About the middle of August, 1852, he got wet through,

riding on the top of an omnibus, and the wetting resulted in a severe cold, which "settled on his chest". One of the most eminent doctors of the day, as able as he was rough in manner, was called to see him. He examined him carefully, sounded his lungs, and left the room followed by my mother. "Well?" she asked, scarcely anxious as to the answer, save as it might worry her husband to be kept idly at home. "You must keep up his spirits", was the thoughtless answer. "He is in a galloping consumption; you will not have him with you six weeks longer." The wife staggered back, and fell like a stone on the floor. But love triumphed over agony, and half an hour later she was again at her husband's side, never to leave it again for ten minutes at a time, night or day, till he was lying with closed eyes asleep in death.

I was lifted on to the bed to "say good-bye to dear Papa" on the day before his death, and I remember being frightened at his eyes which looked so large, and his voice which sounded so strange, as he made me promise always to be "a very good girl to darling Mamma, as Papa was going right away". I remember insisting that "Papa should kiss Cherry", a doll given me on my birthday, three days before, by his direction, and being removed, crying and struggling, from the room. He died on the following day, October 5th, and I do not think that my elder brother and I—who were staying at our maternal grandfather's—went to the house again until the day of the funeral. With the death, my mother broke down, and when all was over they carried her senseless from the room. I remember hearing afterwards how, when she recovered her senses, she passionately insisted on being left alone, and locked herself into her room for the night; and how on the following morning her mother, at last persuading her to open the door, started back at the face she saw with the cry: "Good God! Emily! your hair is white!" It was even so; her hair, black, glossy and abundant, which, contrasting with her large grey eyes, had made her face so strangely attractive, had turned grey in that night of agony, and to me my mother's face is ever framed in exquisite silver bands of hair as white as the driven unsullied snow.

I have heard that the love between my father and mother was a very beautiful thing, and it most certainly stamped her character for life. He was keenly intellectual and

---