

WILHELMINA JANE MOLLETT'S EARLY DAYS.

RECALLED BY HER SISTER LINA.

Sometime in the year 1860 a handsome healthy baby of two sat playing with a set of alphabetical cubes at the feet of her young mother.

The cubes, a birthday gift, were a source of immense interest to both.

The baby studied the hieroglyphics with a puzzled frown—then held one up to her mother, pointing to the inscription.

"A," said the latter, "great big A."

The child nodded wisely—put the brick down and held up another. "Mmm," explained the mother, giving the phonetic sound.

Then, laughing, she placed "a" before "m,"—and "am" resulted. The baby watched gravely, while the mother, now entering into the game, arranged an "I" at some little distance from the "am," sounding it clearly several times—then the last word reversed a space beyond. The sentence: "I am ma," resulted.

With a look of joy and triumph the child glanced up. It understood. It understood. It grasped at once and definitely the truth, that sounds combined can make sense and signs stand for sound. It passed from babyhood to childhood, to the joys of thought and study, that never deserted it to the end.

Thus run the family chronicles.

They further say, that the child of two continued her investigations on letters with precocious enthusiasm, that at four she could read fluently, perusing such books as "The Swiss Family Robinson," "Holiday House," and "Leila," secretly assisted by an admiring young housemaid—her parents, at this period, neither encouraging nor discouraging her unusual precocity. In fact, this first and experimental child was to a certain extent brought up on the American plan of "giving it a good healthy letting alone."

At six, therefore, self-directed, the infant philosopher sat by herself in her father's library, and browsed unhindered and unharmed.

And here we will leave her for a while, perfectly happy, perfectly free, at home with the great, sitting cross-legged on the carpet, her dark curls hanging over her grey eyes, reading to herself.

Wilhelmina Jane Mollett, born on the 9th June, 1858, in Northfleet, Kent, was the first and lovingly welcomed child of young, healthy and well-educated parents, who themselves descended from a long-lived and robust stock.

"She is a child of roses," an admiring and favourite aunt said of her—and always roses were her favourite flowers through life.

"My flowers," she said of them, referring to the month of roses, that brought her.

She was a beautiful child, as afterwards she was a beautiful woman—strong, vivacious, enterprising, joyous, delighting in leadership, organisations and the great adventures of life; interested in humanity and in every phase of activity; but hard in judgment, even as a child, where she suspected cowardice or treachery.

The above characteristics, combined to an ardent study of history, romance and epic poetry, led her into becoming somewhat of a nursery autocrat.

Long before she was eight, she had learnt most of Macaulay's Lays by heart, and Scott's easily followed.

This was all very well, but when "Minnie" as she was generally called, insisted on her less brilliant sister, cousins and neighbour-playmates doing the same, and dramatising the most heroic incidents—always under her complete control—there was war in the land.

At six Minnie had been sent to a day school, to acquire some notions of General Knowledge, Latin and discipline.

The little school on Highgate Rise, where her mother lived in 1864, while the young father travelled on business in Asia, was kept by two ladies, the Miss Eltons, cultured and judicious women in the highest sense of the word.

The present generation often has weird notions of the general education of children sixty odd years ago, so I hasten to state that fresh air, cleanliness, truthfulness and plenty of exercise were fully appreciated, that children were encouraged to romp and play freely, to be grateful and courteous for favours shown, kindly in the treatment of animals and gentle to those weaker or poorer than themselves, and conscious of the existence of a duty, that all must accept.

Never in the course of her school days were Minnie or her sisters bullied, beaten or pampered.

Their teachers were authorities, but also friends. They did not pretend to be "know-alls," nor hold forth in self-composed oration, but, as a rule, taught openly from standard works, founding their systems on the ancient classical tenets: "The best is hardly good enough for children," and "the greatest respect is due to the young."

Sitting round a long dining-room family table, covered, as far as I can remember, by a decent greencloth, Miss Elton's class learnt its carefully explained tasks in silence, and learnt them verbatim—reciting correctly, their book being instantly returned if there was any stumbling for "you know well, or do not know," was the pedagogic argument.

Minnie, with the others, studied long columns of spelling, tables, grammar and geography. Maps were drawn and coloured—a speciality was made of illuminated texts; Latin verbs were memorised, and good authors read. There was plenty to do, but "no nonsense" at lesson-time. You worked, because you were told to do so, and because it was your duty.

There was not much talking, in fact, each child memorised silently, "so as not to disturb the class."

Women who went to similar schools sixty-five years ago, and remember the unpretentious honest system of those times, will agree with Minnie, who remembered her teachers with affection and gratitude, when she was nearly seventy, and did justice to the representatives of a school that taught self-restraint, honesty, mutual consideration and reverence.

While Minnie, aged six, began her organised and authorised studies in Highgate, the four year old Lina, hitherto her admiring follower, was shipped to Germany, to attend a model kindergarten, conducted on the strictly classical Froebel system—living meanwhile in the house of her grand- and god-mother, on a very different plane from that known in her Highgate nursery.

Students of pedagogic biography will remember Froebel's theories on the limitations of space and colour, and the teaching of elementary geometry, and basic natural laws to very little children.

In Lina's kindergarten, the very tables were divided into squares, sub-squares, primary and secondary colours, and one of the earlier things taught was to know your own square and respect your neighbour's; also to realise that the coloured cube you played with, was placed with the red face uppermost on the red sub-square of your table.

At a rather earlier period you were "given" coloured balls, but they were all taken away again after a short and tedious ownership.

This was all very strange and new.

Stranger still were the play-hours, when you were not allowed to romp at will and pretend to be wrecked on the nursery-table, turned upside-down, or climbing up a palm-tree round the bed-post, but were taught to say and sing

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)