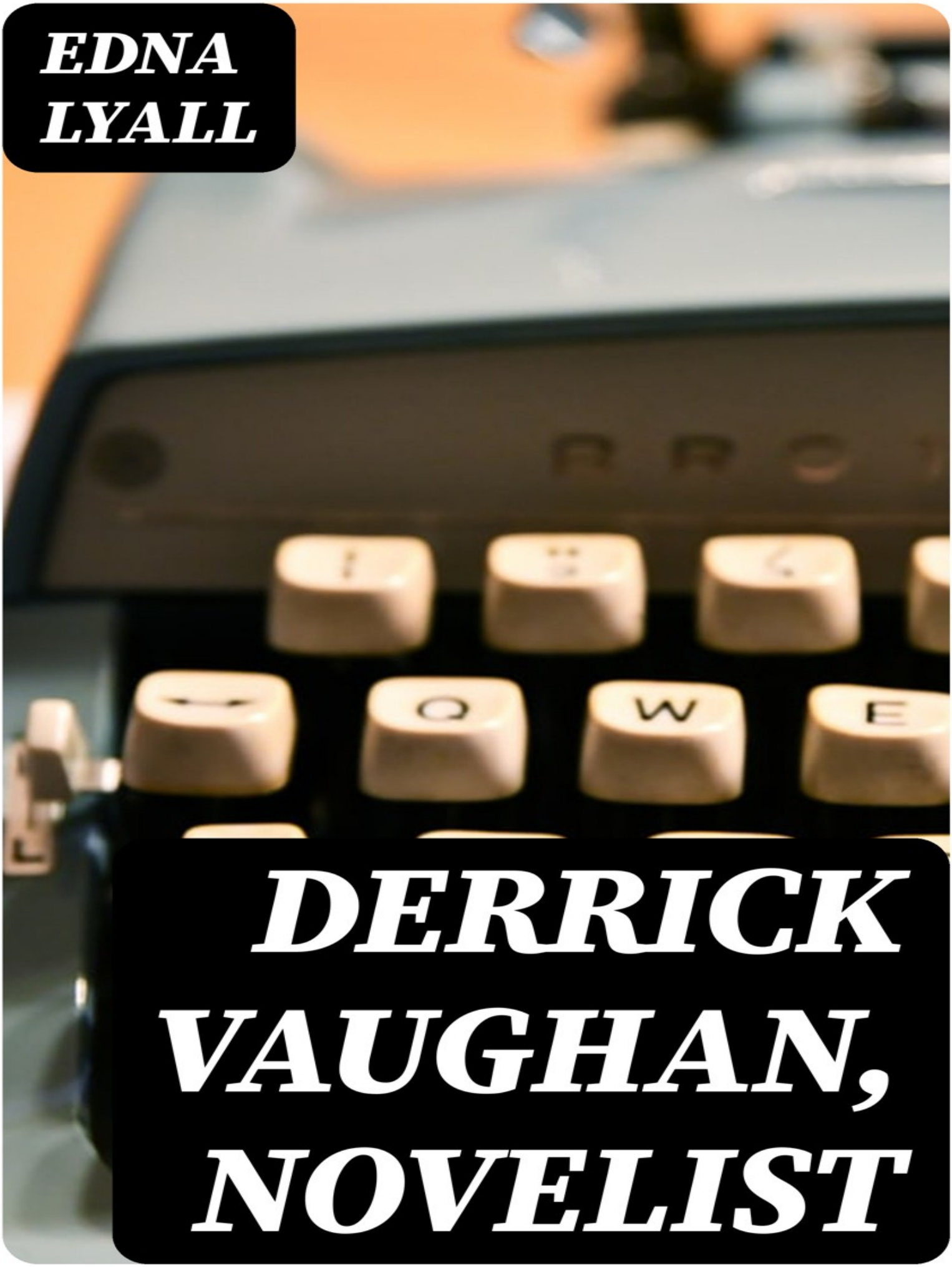
EDNA LYALL
DERRICK VAUGHAN, NOVELIST

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Chapter I.

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‘Nothing fills a child’s mind like a large old mansion; better if un- or partially occupied; peopled with the spirits of deceased members of the county and Justices of the Quorum. Would I were buried in the peopled solitude of one, with my feelings at seven years old!’—From Letters of Charles Lamb.

To attempt a formal biography of Derrick Vaughan would be out of the question, even though he and I have been more or less thrown together since we were both in the nursery. But I have an odd sort of wish to note down roughly just a few of my recollections of him, and to show how his fortunes gradually developed, being perhaps stimulated to make the attempt by certain irritating remarks which one overhears now often enough at clubs or in drawing-rooms, or indeed wherever one goes. “Derrick Vaughan,” say these authorities of the world of small-talk, with that delightful air of omniscience which invariably characterises them, “why, he simply leapt into fame. He is one of the favourites of fortune. Like Byron, he woke one morning and found himself famous.”

Now this sounds well enough, but it is a long way from the truth, and I—Sydney Wharncliffe, of the Inner Temple, Barrister-at-law—desire, while the past few years are fresh in my mind, to write a true version of my friend’s career.

Everyone knows his face. Has it not appeared in ‘Noted Men,’ and—gradually deteriorating according to the price of the paper and the quality of the engraving—in many

another illustrated journal? Yet somehow these works of art don’t satisfy me, and, as I write, I see before me something very different from the latest photograph by Messrs. Paul and Reynard.

I see a large-featured, broad-browed English face, a trifle heavy-looking when in repose, yet a thorough, honest, manly face, with a complexion neither dark nor fair, with brown hair and moustache, and with light hazel eyes that look out on the world quietly enough. You might talk to him for long in an ordinary way and never suspect that he was a genius; but when you have him to yourself, when some consciousness of sympathy rouses him, he all at once becomes a different being. His quiet eyes kindle, his face becomes full of life—you wonder that you ever thought it heavy or commonplace. Then the world interrupts in some way, and, just as a hermit-crab draws down its shell with a comically rapid movement, so Derrick suddenly retires into himself.

Thus much for his outer man.

For the rest, there are of course the neat little accounts of his birthplace, his parentage, his education, etc., etc., published with the list of his works in due order, with the engravings in the illustrated papers. But these tell us little of the real life of the man.

Carlyle, in one of his finest passages, says that ‘A true delineation of the smallest man and his scene of pilgrimage through life is capable of interesting the greatest men; that all men are to an unspeakable degree brothers, each man’s life a strange emblem of every man’s; and that human portraits faithfully drawn are of all pictures the welcomest

on human walls.’ And though I don’t profess to give a portrait, but merely a sketch, I will endeavour to sketch faithfully, and possibly in the future my work may fall into the hands of some of those worthy people who imagine that my friend leapt into fame at a bound, or of those comfortable mortals who seem to think that a novel is turned out as easily as water from a tap.

There is, however, one thing I can never do:—I am quite unable to put into words my friend’s intensely strong feeling with regard to the sacredness of his profession. It seemed to me not unlike the feeling of Isaiah when, in the vision, his mouth had been touched with the celestial fire. And I can only hope that something of this may be read between my very inadequate lines.

Looking back, I fancy Derrick must have been a clever child. But he was not precocious, and in some respects was even decidedly backward. I can see him now—it is my first clear recollection of him—leaning back in the corner of my father’s carriage as we drove from the Newmarket station to our summer home at Mondisfield. He and I were small boys of eight, and Derrick had been invited for the holidays, while his twin brother—if I remember right—indulged in typhoid fever at Kensington. He was shy and silent, and the ice was not broken until we passed Silvery Steeple.

“That,” said my father, “is a ruined church; it was destroyed by Cromwell in the Civil Wars.”

In an instant the small quiet boy sitting beside me was transformed. His eyes shone; he sprang forward and thrust his head far out of the window, gazing at the old ivy-covered tower as long as it remained in sight.

“Was Cromwell really once there?” he asked with breathless interest.

“So they say,” replied my father, looking with an amused smile at the face of the questioner, in which eagerness, delight, and reverence were mingled. “Are you an admirer of the Lord Protector?”

“He is my greatest hero of all,” said Derrick fervently. “Do you think—oh, do you think he possibly can ever have come to Mondisfield?”

My father thought not, but said there was an old tradition that the Hall had been attacked by the Royalists, and the bridge over the moat defended by the owner of the house; but he had no great belief in the story, for which, indeed, there seemed no evidence.

Derrick’s eyes during this conversation were something wonderful to see, and long after, when we were not actually playing at anything, I used often to notice the same expression stealing over him, and would cry out, “There is the man defending the bridge again; I can see him in your eyes! Tell me what happened to him next!”

Then, generally pacing to and fro in the apple walk, or sitting astride the bridge itself, Derrick would tell me of the adventures of my ancestor, Paul Wharncliffe, who performed incredible feats of valour, and who was to both of us a most real person. On wet days he wrote his story in a copy-book, and would have worked at it for hours had my mother allowed him, though of the manual part of the work he had, and has always retained, the greatest dislike. I remember well the comical ending of this first story of his. He skipped over an interval of ten years, represented on the page by

ten laboriously made stars, and did for his hero in the following lines:

“And now, reader, let us come into Mondisfield churchyard. There are three tombstones. On one is written, ‘Mr. Paul Wharncliffe.’”

The story was no better than the productions of most eight-year-old children, the written story at least. But, curiously enough, it proved to be the germ of the celebrated romance, ‘At Strife,’ which Derrick wrote in after years; and he himself maintains that his picture of life during the Civil War would have been much less graphic had he not lived so much in the past during his various visits to Mondisfield.

It was at his second visit, when we were nine, that I remember his announcing his intention of being an author when he was grown up. My mother still delights in telling the story. She was sitting at work in the south parlour one day, when I dashed into the room calling out:

“Derrick’s head is stuck between the banisters in the gallery; come quick, mother, come quick!”

She ran up the little winding staircase, and there, sure enough, in the musician’s gallery, was poor Derrick, his manuscript and pen on the floor and his head in durance vile.

“You silly boy!” said my mother, a little frightened when she found that to get the head back was no easy matter, “What made you put it through?”

“You look like King Charles at Carisbrooke,” I cried, forgetting how much Derrick would resent the speech.

And being released at that moment he took me by the shoulders and gave me an angry shake or two, as he said

vehemently, “I’m not like King Charles! King Charles was a liar.”

I saw my mother smile a little as she separated us.

“Come, boys, don’t quarrel,” she said. “And Derrick will tell me the truth, for indeed I am curious to know why he thrust his head in such a place.”

“I wanted to make sure,” said Derrick, “whether Paul Wharncliffe could see Lady Lettice, when she took the falcon on her wrist below in the passage. I mustn’t say he saw her if it’s impossible, you know. Authors have to be quite true in little things, and I mean to be an author.”

“But,” said my mother, laughing at the great earnestness of the hazel eyes, “could not your hero look over the top of the rail?”

“Well, yes,” said Derrick. “He would have done that, but you see it’s so dreadfully high and I couldn’t get up. But I tell you what, Mrs. Wharncliffe, if it wouldn’t be giving you a great deal of trouble—I’m sorry you were troubled to get my head back again—but if you would just look over, since you are so tall, and I’ll run down and act Lady Lettice.”

“Why couldn’t Paul go downstairs and look at the lady in comfort?” asked my mother.

Derrick mused a little.

“He might look at her through a crack in the door at the foot of the stairs, perhaps, but that would seem mean, somehow. It would be a pity, too, not to use the gallery; galleries are uncommon, you see, and you can get cracked doors anywhere. And, you know, he was obliged to look at her when she couldn’t see him, because their fathers were on different sides in the war, and dreadful enemies.”

When school-days came, matters went on much in the same way; there was always an abominably scribbled tale stowed away in Derrick’s desk, and he worked infinitely harder than I did, because there was always before him this determination to be an author and to prepare himself for the life. But he wrote merely from love of it, and with no idea of publication until the beginning of our last year at Oxford, when, having reached the ripe age of one-and-twenty, he determined to delay no longer, but to plunge boldly into his first novel.

He was seldom able to get more than six or eight hours a week for it, because he was reading rather hard, so that the novel progressed but slowly. Finally, to my astonishment, it came to a dead stand-still.

I have never made out exactly what was wrong with Derrick then, though I know that he passed through a terrible time of doubt and despair. I spent part of the Long with him down at Ventnor, where his mother had been ordered for her health. She was devoted to Derrick, and as far as I can understand, he was her chief comfort in life. Major Vaughan, the husband, had been out in India for years; the only daughter was married to a rich manufacturer at Birmingham, who had a constitutional dislike to mothers-in-law, and as far as possible eschewed their company; while Lawrence, Derrick’s twin brother, was for ever getting into scrapes, and was into the bargain the most unblushingly selfish fellow I ever had the pleasure of meeting.

“Sydney,” said Mrs. Vaughan to me one afternoon when we were in the garden, “Derrick seems to me unlike himself,