

HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

UNDER THE TREES AND
ELSEWHERE

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Chapter I

An April Day

My study has been a dull place of late; even the open fire, which still lingers on the hearth, has failed to exorcise a certain gray and weary spirit which has somehow taken possession of the premises. As I was thinking this morning about the best way of ejecting this unwelcome inmate, it suddenly occurred to me that for some time past my study has been simply a workshop; the fire has been lighted early and burned late, the windows have been closed to keep out all disturbing sounds, and the pile of manuscript on the table has steadily grown higher and higher. "After all," I said to myself, "it is I that ought to be ejected." Acting on this conclusion, and without waiting for the service of process of formal dislodgment, I have let the fire go out, opened the windows, locked the door, and put myself into the hands of my old friend, Nature, for refreshment and society. I find that I have come a little prematurely, although my welcome has been

even warmer than it would have been later.

"This is what I like," my old friend seemed to say. "You have not waited until I have set my house in order and embellished my grounds. You have come because you love me even more than my surroundings. I have a good many friends who know me only from May to October: the rest of the year they give me cold glances of surprised recognition, or they pass me by without so much as a look. Their ardent devotion in summer fills me with a deep disdain; their admiration for great masses of colour, for high, striking effects, and for the general lavishness and prodigality of my passing mood, betrays their lack of discernment, their defect of taste, and their slight acquaintance with myself. I should much prefer that they would leave my woods and fields untrodden, and not disturb my mountain solitudes with their ignorant and vulgar raptures. The people who really know me and love me seek me oftener at other seasons, when I am more at leisure, and can bid them to a more intimate companionship. They come to understand my finer moods and deeper secrets of beauty; the elusive loveliness which I leave behind me to lure on my true friends through the late autumn, they find and follow with the eye and heart of love; the rare and splendid aspects in which I often discover my presence in midwinter they enjoy all the more because I have withdrawn myself from the gaze of the crowd; and the first faint touches of colour and soft breathings of life, which announce my return in the early spring, they greet with the deep joy of true lovers.

Those only who discern the beauty of branches from which I have stripped the leaves to uncover their exquisite outline and symmetry, who can look over bare fields and into the faded copse and find there the elusive beauty which hides in soft tones and low colours, are my true friends; all others are either pretenders or distant acquaintances."

I was not at all surprised to hear my old friend express sentiments so utterly at variance with those held by many people who lay claim to her friendship; in fact, they are sentiments which I find every year becoming more and more my own convictions. In every gallery of paintings you will find the untrained about the pictures on which the artist has lavished the highest colours from his palette; those whose taste for art has had direction and culture will look for very different effects in the works which attract them. It is among the rich and varied low colours of this season, in wood and field, that a true lover of nature detects some of her rarest touches of loveliness; the low western sun, falling athwart the bare boughs and striking a kind of subdued bloom into the brown hill-tops and across the furze and heather, sometimes reveals a hidden charm in the landscape which one seeks in vain when skies are softer and the green roof has been stretched over the woodland ways. In fact, one can hardly lay claim to any intimacy with Nature until he loves her best when she discards her royalty, and, like Cinderella, clad only in the cast-off garments of sunnier days, she crouches before the ashes of the faded year. The test of friendship is its fidelity when every

charm of fortune and environment has been swept away, and the bare, undraped character alone remains; if love still holds steadfast, and the joy of companionship survives in such an hour, the fellowship becomes a beautiful prophecy of immortality. To all professions of love Nature applies this infallible test with a kind of divine impartiality. With the first note of the bluebird, under the brief flush of an April sky, her alluring invitation goes forth to the world; day by day she deepens the blue of her summer skies and fills them with those buoyant clouds that float like dreams across the vision of the waking day; night after night she touches the stars with a softer radiance, and breathes upon her roses so that they are eager for the dawn, that they may lay their hearts open to her gaze; the forests take on more and more the lavish mood of the summer, until they have buried their great trunks in perpetual shade. The splendid pageant moves on, gathering its votaries as it passes from one marvellous change to another; and yet the Mistress of the Revels is nowhere visible. The crowds press from point to point, peering into the depths of the woods and watching stealthily where the torrent breaks from its dungeon in the hills, and leaps, mad with joy, in the new-found liberty of light and motion; but not a flutter of her garment betrays to the keenest eye the Presence which is the soul of all this visible, moving scene.

And now there is a subtle change in the air; premonitions of death begin to thrust themselves in the midst of the revelry; there is a brief hush, a sudden glow of splendour, and lo! the

pageant is seemingly at an end. The crowd linger a little, gather a few faded leaves, and depart; a few—a very few—wait. Now that the throngs have vanished and the revelry is over, they are conscious of a deep, pervading quietude; these are days when something touches them with a sense of near and sacred fellowship; Nature has cast aside her gifts, and given herself. For there is a something behind the glory of summer, and they only have entered into real communion with Nature who have learned to separate her from all her miracles of power and beauty; who have come to understand that she lives apart from the singing of birds, the blossoming of flowers, and the waving of branches heavy with leaves.

The Greeks saw some things clearly without seeing them deeply; they interpreted through a beautiful mythology all the external phenomena of Nature. The people of the farther East, on the other hand, saw more obscurely, but far more deeply; they looked less at the visible things which Nature held out to them, and more into the mysteries of her hidden processes, her silent but universal mutations; the subtle vanishings and reappearings of her presence; they seemed to hear the mighty loom on which the seasons are woven, to feel through some primitive but forgotten kinship the throes of the birth-hour, the vigils of suffering, and the agonies of death. Was there not in such an attitude toward Nature a hint of the only real fellowship with her?

Chapter II

Under the Apple Boughs

For weeks past I have been conscious of some mystery in the air; there have been fleeting signs of secret communication between earth and sky, as if the hidden powers were in friendly league and some great concerted movement were on foot. There have been soft lights playing upon the tender grass on the lawn, and caressing those delicate hues through which each individual tree and shrub searches for its summer foliage; the mornings have slipped so quietly in through the eastern gates, and the afternoons have vanished so softly across the western hills, that one could not but suspect a plot to avert attention and lull watchful eyes into negligence while all things were made ready for the moment of revelation. At times a subdued light has filled the broad arch of heaven, and, later, a fringe of rain has moved gently across the low hills and fallow fields, rippling like a wave from that upper sea which hangs invisible in golden weather, but becomes portentous and vast as the nether seas when the clouds gather and the celestial watercourses are unlocked. One day I thought I saw signs of a falling out between the conspirators, and I set myself to watch for some disclosure which might escape from one side or the other in the frankness of anger. The earth was sullen and overcast, the sky dark and forbidding, the

clouds rolled together and grew black, and the shadows deepened upon the grass. At last there was a vivid flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, and the sudden roar of rain. "Now," I said to myself, "I shall learn what all this secrecy has been about." But I was doomed to disappointment; after a few minutes of angry expostulation the sky suddenly uncovered itself, the clouds piled themselves against the horizon and disclosed their silver linings, and over the whole earth there spread a broad smile, as if the hypocritical performance had been part of the original deception. I am confident now that it was, for that brief drenching of trees and sward was almost the last noticeable preparation before the curtain rose. The next day there was a deep, unbroken quiet across our piece of world, as if a fragment of eternity had been quietly slipped into the place of one of our brief, noisy days. The trees stood motionless, as if awaiting some signal, and I listened in vain for that inarticulate and half-heard murmur of coming life which, day and night, had filled my thoughts these past weeks, and set the march of the hours to a sublime rhythm.

The next morning a faint perfume stole into my room. I rose hastily, ran to the window, and lo! the secret was out: the apple trees were in bloom! Three days later, and the miracle so long in preparation was accomplished; the slowly rising tide of life had broken into a foam of blossoms and buried the world in a billowy sea. There will come days of greater splendour than this, days of deeper foliage, of waving grain and ripening fruit, but no later day will eclipse this vision of paradise which lies outspread

from my window; life touches to-day the zenith of its earliest and freshest bloom; to-morrow the blossoms will begin to sift down from the snowy branches, and the great movement of summer will advance again; but for one brief day the year pauses and waits, reluctant to break the spell of this perfect hour, to mar by the stir of a single leaf the stainless loveliness of this revelation of nature's unwasted youth.

I do not care to look through these great masses of bloom; it is enough simply to live in an hour which brings such an overflow of beauty from the ancient fountains; but Nature herself lures one to deeper thoughts, and, through the vision which spreads like a mirage over the landscape, hints at some hidden loveliness at the root of this riotous blossoming, some diviner vision for the eye of the spirit alone. "Look," she seems to say, as I stand and gaze with unappeased hunger of soul, "this is my holiday. In the coming weeks I have a whole race to feed, and over the length of the world men are imploring my help. They do their little share of work, and while they wait, waking and sleeping, anxiously watching winds and clouds, I vitalise their toil and turn all my forces to their bidding. The labour of the year is at hand and on its threshold I take this holiday. To-day I give you a glimpse of paradise; a garden in which all manner of loveliness blooms simply from the overflow of life, without thought, or care, or toil. This was my life before men came with their cries of hunger and nakedness; this shall be my life again when they have passed beyond. This which lies before you like a dream is a glimpse of

life as it is in me, and shall be in you; immortal, inexhaustible fulness of power and beauty, overflowing in frolic loveliness. This shall be to you a day out of eternity, a moment out of the immortal youth to which all true life comes at last, and in which it abides."

I cannot say that I heard these words, and yet they were as real to me as if they had been audible; in all fellowship with Nature silence is deeper and more real than speech. As I stood meditating on these deep things that lie at the bottom of this sea of bloom, I understood why men in all ages have connected the flowering of the apple with their dreams of paradise; I saw at a glance the immortal symbolism of these blossoming fields and hillsides. I did not need to lift my eyes to look upon that garden of Hesperides, lying like a dream of heaven under the golden western skies, whence Heracles brought back the fruit of Juno; I asked no aid of Milton's imagination to see the mighty hero in

. . . the gardens fair
Of Hesperus and his daughters three,
That sing about the golden tree;

and as I gazed, the vision of that other and nobler hero came before me, whose purity is more to us than his prowess, and who waits in Avilion, the "Isle of Apples," for the call that shall summon him back from Paradise.

I am going a long way

With these thou seest—if indeed I go
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)—
To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor even wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.

Chapter III

Along the Road

I

Since I turned the key on my study I have almost forgotten the familiar titles on which my eye rested whenever I took a survey of my book-shelves. Those friends stanch and true, with whom I have held such royal fellowship when skies were chill and winds were cold, will not forget me, nor shall I become unfaithful to them. I have gone abroad that I may return later with renewed zest and deeper insight to my old companionships. Books and nature are never inimical; they mutually speak for and interpret each other; and only he who stands where their double light falls sees things in true perspective and in right relations.

The road along whose winding course I have been making a delightful pilgrimage to-day has the double charm of natural beauty and of human association; it is old, as age is reckoned in this new world; it has grown hard under the tread of sleeping generations, and the great figures of history have passed over it in their journeys between the two great cities which mark its limits. In the earlier days it was the king's highway, and along its up-hill and down-dale course the battalions of royal troops marched

and counter-marched to the call of bugles that have gone silent these hundred years and more. It is a road of varied fortunes, like many of those who have passed over it; it is sometimes rich in all manner of priceless possessions, and again it is barren, poverty-stricken, and desolate. It climbs long hills, sometimes in a roundabout, hesitating, half-hearted way, and sometimes with an abrupt and breathless ascent; at the summit it seems to pause a moment as if to invite the traveller to survey the splendid domain which it commands. On one side, in such a restful moment, one sees the wide circle of waters, stretching far off to a horizon which rests on clusters of islands and marks the limits of the world; in the foreground, and sweeping around the other points of the compass, a landscape rich in foliage, full of gentle undulations, and dotted here and there with fallow fields, spreads itself like another sea that has been hushed into sudden immutability, and then sown, every wave and swell of it, with the seeds of exhaustless fertility.

From such points of eminence as these the road sometimes runs with hurried descent, as if longing for solitude, into the heart of the woodlands, and there winds slowly and solemnly under the overshadowing branches; there are no fences here, and the sharp lines of separation between road-bed and forest were long ago erased in that quiet usurpation of man's work, which Nature never fails to make the moment she is left to herself. The ancient spell of the woods is unbroken in this leafy solitude, and no traveller in whom imagination survives can hope to escape it.

The deep breathings of primeval life are almost audible, and one feels in a quick and subtle perception the long past which unites him with the earliest generations and the most remote ages.

Passing out from this brief worship under the arches of the most venerable roof in Christendom, the road takes on a frolic mood and courts the open meadows and the flooding sunshine; green, sweet, and strewn with wild flowers, the open fields call one from either side, and arrest one's feet at every turn with solicitations to freedom and joyousness. The white clouds in the blue sky and the long sweep of these radiant meadows conspire together to persuade one that time has strayed back to its happy childhood again, and that nothing remains of the old activities but play in these immortal fields. Here the carpet is spread over which one runs with childish heedlessness, courting the disaster which brings him back to the breast of the old mother, and makes him feel once more the warmth and sweetness out of which all strength and beauty spring. A little brook crosses the road under a rattling bridge, and wanders on across the fields, limpid and rippling, running its little strain of music through the silence of the meadows. Its voice is the only sound which breaks the stillness, and that itself seems part of the solitude. By day the clouds marshal their shadows on it, and when night comes the heavens sow it with stars, until it flows like a dissolving belt of sky through the fragrant darkness. Sometimes, as I have come this way after nightfall, I have heard its call across the invisible fields, and in the sound I have heard I know not what of deep and

joyous mystery; the long-past and the far-off future whispering together, under cover of the night, of those things which the stars remember from their youth, and to which they look forward in some remote cycle of their Shining.

Past old and well-worked farms, into which the toil and thrift of generations have gone, the old road leads me, and brings my thoughts back from elemental forces and primeval ages to these later centuries in which human life has overlaid these hills and vales with rich memories. Wherever man goes Nature makes room for him, as if prepared for his coming, and ready to put her mighty shoulder to the wheel of his prosperity. The old fences, often decayed and fallen, are not spurned; the movement of universal life does not flow past them and leave them to rot in their ugliness; year by year time stains them into harmony with the rocks, and every summer a wave out of the great sea of life flings itself over them, and leaves behind some slight and seemly garniture of moss and vine. The old farm-houses have grown into the landscape, and the hurrying road widens its course, and sometimes makes a long detour, that it may unite these outlying folk with the great world. There stands the old school-house, sacred to every traveller who has learned that childhood is both a memory and a prophecy of heaven. One pauses here, and hears, in the unbroken stillness, the rush of feet that have never grown weary with travel, and the clamour of voices through which immortal youth still shouts to the kindred hills and skies. Into those windows Nature throws all manner of invitations, and

through them she gets only glances of recognition and longing. There are the fields, the woods, and the hills in one perpetual rivalry of charm; the bird sings in the bough over the window, and on still afternoons the brook calls and calls again. Here one feels anew the eternal friendship between childhood and Nature, and remembers that they only can abide in that fellowship who carry into riper years the self-forgetfulness, the sweet unconsciousness, the open mind and heart of a child.

Chapter IV

Along the Road

II

I have found that walking stimulates observation and opens one's eyes to movements and appearances in earth and sky, which ordinarily escape attention. The constant change of landscape which attends even the slow progress of a loitering gait puts one on the alert for discoveries of all kinds, and prompts one to suspect every leafy covert and to peer into every wooded recess with the expectation of surprising Nature as Actaeon surprised Diana—in the moment of uncovered loveliness. On the other hand, when one lounges by the hour in the depths of the forest, or sits, book in hand, under the knotted and familiar apple tree, on a summer afternoon, the faculty of observation is lulled into a dreamless sleep; one ceases to be far enough away from Nature to observe her; one becomes part of the great, silent movements in the midst of which he sits, mute and motionless, while the hours slip by with the peace of eternity already upon them.

When I reached the end of my walk, and paused for a moment before retracing my steps, I was conscious of the inexhaustible richness of the world through which I had come; a thousand

voices had spoken to me, and a thousand sights of wonder moved before me; I was awake to the universe which most of us see only in broken and unintelligent dreams. Through all this realm of truth and poetry men have passed and repassed these many years, I said to myself; and I began to wonder how many of those now long asleep really saw or heard this great glad world of sun and summer! I began slowly to retrace my steps, and as I reached the summit of the hill and looked beyond I saw the cattle standing knee-deep in the brook that loiters across the fields, and I heard the faint bleating of sheep borne from a distant pasturage.

These familiar sights and sounds touched me with a sudden pathos; there is nothing in human associations so venerable, so familiar, as the lowing of the home-coming kine and the bleating of the flocks. They carry one back to the first homes and the most ancient families. Older than history, more ancient than civilisation, are these familiar tones which unite the low-lying meadows and the upland pastures with the fire on the hearthstone and the nightly care of the fold. When the shadows deepen over the country-side, the oldest memories are revived and the oldest habits recalled by the scenes about the farm-house. The same offices fall to the husbandman, the same sights reveal themselves to the housewife, the same sounds, mellow with the resonance of uncounted centuries, greet the ears of the children as in the most primitive ages.

The highway itself stands as a memorial of the most venerable customs and the most ancient races. As I lift my eyes from its

beaten road-bed, and look out upon it through the imagination, it escapes all later boundaries and runs back through history to the very dawn of civilisation; it marks the earliest contact of men with a world which was wrapped in mystery. The hour that saw a second home built by human hands heard the first footfall on the first highway. That narrow foot-path led to civilisation, and has broadened into the highway because human fellowships and needs have multiplied and directed the countless feet that have beaten it into permanency. Every new highway has been a new bond between Nature and men, a new evidence of that indissoluble fellowship into which they are forever united.

I have sometimes tried to recall in imagination the world of Nature before a human voice had broken the silence or a human foot left its impress on the soil; but when I remember that what I see in this sweep of force and beauty is largely what I myself put into the vision, that Nature without the human ear is soundless, and without the human eye colourless, I understand that what lies spread before me never was until a human soul confronted it and became its interpreter. This radiant world upon which I look was without form and void until the earliest man brought to the vision of it that creative power within himself which touched it with form and colour and relations not its own. Nature is as incomplete and helpless without man as man would be without Nature. He brought her varied and inexhaustible beauty, and clothed her with a garment woven on we know not what looms of divine energy; and she fed, sheltered, and strengthened him for the life which lay

before him. Together they have wrought from the first hour, and civilisation, with all the circle of its arts, is their joint handiwork.

In the atmosphere of our rich modern fellowship with Nature, the unwritten poetry to which every open heart falls heir, we forget our earliest dependence on the great mother and the lessons she taught when men gathered about her knee in the childhood of the world. Not a spade turned the soil, not an axe felled a tree, not a path was made through the forest, that did not leave, in the man whose arm put forth the toil, some moral quality. In the obstacles which she placed in their pathway, in the difficulties with which she surrounded their life, the wise mother taught her children all the lessons which were to make them great. It was no easy familiarity which she offered them, no careless bestowal of bounty upon dependents; she met them as men, and offered them a perpetual alliance upon such terms as great and equal sovereigns proffer and accept. She gave much, but she asked even more than she offered, and in the first moment of intercourse she struck in men that lofty note of sovereignty which has never ceased to thrill the race with mysterious tones of power and prophecy. Men have stood erect and fearless in the presence of the most awful revelations of the forces of Nature, affirming by their very attitude a supremacy of spirit which no preponderance of power can overshadow. Face to face through all his history man has stood with Nature, and to each generation she has opened some new page of her inexhaustible story. Beginning in the hardest toil for the most material rewards,

this fellowship has steadily added one province of knowledge and intimacy after another, until it has become inclusive of the most delicate and hidden recesses of character as well as those which are obvious and primary. In response to spirits which have continually come into a closer contact with her life, Nature has added to her gifts of food and wine, poetry and art, far-reaching sciences, occult wisdoms and skills; she has invited the greatest to become her ministers, and has rewarded their unselfish service by sharing with them the mighty forces that sleep and awake at her bidding; one after another the poets of truest gift have forsaken the beaten paths of cities and men, and found along her untrodden ways the vision that never fades; her voice, now that men begin to understand it again as their forefathers understood it, is a voice of worship. So, from their first work for food and shelter, men have steadily won from Nature gifts of insight and knowledge and prophecy, until now the mightiest secrets are whispered by the trees to him who listens, and the winds sometimes take up the burden of prophecy and sing of a fellowship in which all truth shall be a common possession.

As I walk along the old highway, the deepening shadows touch the familiar landscape with mystery; one landmark after another vanishes until the lights in the scattered farm-houses gleam like reflected constellations. A deep silence fills the great heavens and broods over the wide earth; all things have become dim and strange; and yet I feel no loneliness in the midst of this

star-lit solitude. The heavens shining over me, and the scattered household fires declare to me that fellowship of light in which Nature holds out her hand to man and leads him, step by step, to the unspeakable splendours of her central sun.

Chapter V

The Open Fields

One of the sights upon which my eyes rest oftenest and with deepest content is a broad sweep of meadow slowly climbing the western sky until it pauses at the edge of a noble piece of woodland. It is a playground of wind and flowers and waving grasses. There are, indeed, days when it lies cold and sad under inhospitable skies, but for the most part the heavens are in league with cloud and sun to protect its charm against all comers. When the turf is fresh, all the promise of summer is in its tender green; a little later, and it is sown thick with daisies and buttercups; and as the breeze plays upon it these frolicsome flowers, which have known no human tending, seem to chase each other in endless races over the whole expanse. I have seen them run breathlessly up the long slope, and then suddenly turn and rush pell-mell down again. If the wind had only stopped for a moment its endless gossip with the leaves, I am sure I should have heard the gleeful shouts, the sportive cries, of these vagrant flowers whose spell is rewoven over every generation of children, and whose unstudied beauty and joy recall, with every summer, some of the clews which most of us have lost in our journey through life. Even as I write, I see the white and yellow heads tossing to and fro in a mood of free and buoyant being, which has for me, face to face

with the problems of living, an unspeakable pathos.

What a depth of tender colour fills the arch of heaven as it bends over this playground of the blooming and beauty-laden forces of nature! The great summer clouds, shaping their courses to invisible harbours across the trackless aerial sea, love to drop anchor here and slowly trail their mighty shadows, vainly groping for something that shall make them fast. The winds, that have come roaring through the woodlands, subdue their harsh voices and linger long in their journey across this sunny expanse. It is true, they sing no lullabies as in the hollow under the hill where they themselves often fall asleep, but the music to which they move has a magical cadence of joy in it, and sets our thought to the dancing mood of the flowers.

Sometimes, on quiet afternoons, when the great world of work has somehow seemed to drop its burdens into space, and carries nothing but rest and quietude along its journey under the summer sky, I have seen a pageant in the open fields that has made me doubt whether a dream had not taken me unawares. I have seen the first sweet flowers of spring rise softly out of the grass where they had been hiding and call gently to each other, as if afraid that a single loud word would dissolve the charm of sun and warm breeze for which they had waited so long. After their dreamless sleep of months, these beautiful children of Mother Earth seemed almost afraid to break the stillness from which they had come, and strayed about noiselessly, with subdued and lovely mien, exhaling a perfume as delicate as themselves. Then,

with a rush and shout, the summer flowers suddenly burst upon the scene, overflowing with life and merriment; in lawless troops they ran hither and thither, flinging echoes of their laughter over the whole country-side, and soon overshadowing entirely their older and more sensitive fellows; these, indeed, soon vanish altogether, as if lonely and out of place under the broad glare and high colours of mid-summer. And now for weeks together the game went on without pause or break; the revelry grew fast and furious, until one suspected that some night the Bacchic throng had passed that way and left their mood of wild and lawless frolic behind.

At last a softer aspect spread itself over the glowing sky and earth. The nights grew vocal with the invisible chorus of insect life; there was a mellow splendour in the moonlight, which touched the distant hills and wide-spreading waters with a pathetic prophecy of change. And now, ripe, serene, and rich with the accumulated beauty of the summer, the autumn flowers appeared. Their movement was like the stately dances of olden times; youth and its overflow were gone forever; but in the hour of maturity there remained a noble beauty, which touched all imaginations and communicated to all visible things a splendour of which the most radiant hours of early summer had been only faintly prophetic. In the calm of these golden days the autumn flowers reigned with a more than regal state, and when the first cold breath of winter touched them, they fell from their great estate silently and royally as if their fate were matched to their

rank. And now the fields were bare once more.

From such a dream as this I often awake joyfully to find the drama still in its first act, and to feel still before me the ever-deepening interest and ever-widening beauty of the miracle play to which Nature annually bids us welcome. Across this noble playground, with its sweep of landscape and its arch of sky, I often wander with no companions but the flowers, and with no desire for other fellowship. Here, as in more secluded and quiet places. Nature confides to those who love her some deep and precious truths never to be put into words, but ever after to rise at times over the horizon of thought like vagrant ships that come and go against the distant sea line, or like clouds that pass along the remotest circle of the sky as it sleeps upon the hills. The essence of play is the unconscious overflow of life that seeks escape in perfect self-forgetfulness. There is no effort in it, no whip of the will driving the unwilling energies to an activity from which they shrink; one plays as the bird sings and the brook runs and the sun shines—not with conscious purpose, but from the simple overflow. In this sense Nature never works, she is always at play. In perfect unconsciousness, without friction or effort, her mightiest movements are made and her sublimest tasks accomplished. Throughout the whole range of her activity one never comes upon any trace of effort, any sign of weariness; one is always impressed—as Ruskin said long ago of works of genius—that he is standing in the presence, not of a great effort, but of a great power; that what has been done is only a single

manifestation of the play of an inexhaustible force. There is somewhere in the universe an infinite fountain of life and beauty which overflows and floods all worlds with divine energy and loveliness. When the tide recedes it pauses but a moment, and then the music of its returning waves is heard along all shores, and its shining edges move irresistibly on until they have bathed the roots of the solitary flower on the highest Alp.

It is this divine method of growth which Nature opposes to our mechanisms; it is this inexhaustible life, overflowing in unconsciousness and boundless fulness, that she forever reveals. The truth which underlies these two great facts needs no application to human life. Blessed, indeed, are they who live in it, and have caught from it something of the joy, the health, and the perennial beauty of Nature.

Chapter VI

Earth and Sky

In nature, as in art, it is the sky which makes the landscape. Given the identical fields, woods, and retreating hills, and every change of sky, every modulation of light, will produce a new landscape; in light and atmosphere are concealed those mysteries of colour, of distance, and of tone which clothe the changeless features of the visible world with infinite variety and charm. This fruitful marriage of the upper and the lower firmaments is perhaps the oldest fact known to men; it was the earliest discovery of the first observer, it still is the most illusive and beautiful mystery in nature. The most ancient mythologies began with it, the latest books of science and natural observation are still dealing with it. Myths that are older than history portray it in lofty symbolism or in splendid histories that embody the primitive ideals of divinity and humanity; the latest poets and painters would fain touch their verse or their canvas with some luminous gleam from the heart of this perpetual miracle. The unbroken procession of the seasons changes month by month the relations of earth and sky; day and night all the water-courses of the world rise in invisible moisture to a fellowship with the birds that have passed on swift wing above their currents; the great outlying seas, that sound the notes of their vast and passionate

unrest upon the shores of every continent, are continually drawn upward to swell the invisible upper ocean which, out of its mighty life, feeds every green and fruitful thing upon the bosom of the earth. This movement of the oceans upon the continents through the illimitable channels of the sky is, in some ways, the most mysterious and the most sublime of those miracles which each day testify to the presence and majesty of that Spirit behind Nature of whom the greatest of modern poets thought when he wrote:

Thus at the roaring loom of time I ply
And weave for God the robe thou seest Him by.

The vast inland grain fields, that stretch in unbroken procession from horizon to horizon, have the seas at their roots not less truly than the fertile soil out of which they spring; the verdure upon the mountain ranges, that keep unbroken solitude at the heart of the continents, speaks forever of the distant oceans which nourish it, and spread it like a vesture over the barren heights. No traveller, deep in the recesses of the remotest inland, ever passes beyond the voice of that encircling ocean which never died out of the ears of the ancient Ulysses in the first Odyssey of wandering.

Two months ago the apple trees were white with the foam of the upper sea; to-day the roses have brought into my little patch of garden the hues with which sun and sea proclaimed their

everlasting marriage in the twilight of yester even. In the deep, passionate heart of these splendid flowers, fragrant since they bloomed in Sappho's hand centuries ago, this sublime wedlock is annually celebrated; earth and sky meet and commingle in this miracle of colour and sweetness, and when I carry this lovely flower into my study all the poets fall silent; here is a depth of life, a radiant outcome from the heart of mysteries, a hint of unimagined beauty, such as they have never brought to me in all their seeking. They have had their visions and made them music; they have caught faint echoes of rushing seas and falling tides; the shadows of mountains have fallen upon them with low whisperings of unspeakable things hidden in the unexplored recesses of their solitudes; they have searched the limitless arch of heaven when it was sown with stars, and glittered like "an archangel full panoplied against a battle day;" but in all their quest the sublime unity of Nature, the fellowship of force with force, of sea with sky, of moisture with light, of form with colour, has found at their hands no such transcendent demonstration as this fragile rose, which to-night brings from the great temple to this little shrine the perfume and the royalty of obedience to the highest laws, and reverence for the divinest mysteries. Here sky and earth and sea meet in a union which no science can dissolve, because God has joined them together. Could I but penetrate the mystery which lies at the heart of this fragile flower, I should possess the secret of the universe; I should understand the ancient miracle which has baffled wisdom from the beginning and will

not discover itself to the end of time.

If I permit my thought to rest upon this fragrant flower, to touch petal and stem and root, and unite them with the vast world in which, by a universal contribution of force, they have come to maturity, I find myself face to face with the oldest and the deepest questions men have ever sought to answer. Elements of earth and sea and sky are blended here in one of those forms of radiant and vanishing beauty with which the unseen life of Nature crowns the years in endless and inexhaustible profusion. As it budded and opened into full flower in the garden, how complete it seemed in itself, and how isolated from all other visible things! But in reality how dependent it was, how entirely the creation of forces as far apart as earth and sky! The great tide from the Unseen cast it for a moment into my possession; for an hour it has filled a human home with its far-brought sweetness; to-morrow it will fall apart and return whence it came. As I look into its heart of passionate colour, the whole visible universe, that seems so fixed and stable, becomes immaterial, evanescent, vanishing; it is no longer a permanent order of seas and continents and rounded skies; it is a vision painted by an unseen hand against a background of mystery. Dead, cold, unchangeable as I see it in the glimpses of a single hour, it becomes warm, vital, forever changing as I gaze upon it from the outlook of the centuries. It is the momentary creation of forces that stream through it in endless ebb and flow, that are to-day touching the sky with elusive splendour, and to-morrow

springing in changeful loveliness from the depths of earth. The continents are transformed into the seas that encircle them; the seas rise into the skies that overarch them; the skies mingle with the earth, and send back from the uplifted faces of flowers greetings to the stars they have deserted. Mountains rise and sink in the sublime rhythm to which the movement of the universe is set; that song without words still audible in the sacred hour when the morning stars announce the day, and the birds match their tiny melodies with the universal harmony.

In the unbroken vision of the centuries all things are plastic and in motion; a divine energy surges through all; substantial for a moment here as a rock, fragile and vanishing there as a flower; but everywhere the same, and always sweeping onward through its illimitable channel to its appointed end. It is this vital tide on which the universe gleams and floats like a mirage of immutability; never the same for a single moment to the soul that contemplates it: a new creation each hour and to every eye that rests upon it. No dead mechanism moves the stars, or lifts the tides, or calls the flowers from their sleep; truly this is the garment of Deity, and here is the awful splendour of the Perpetual Presence. It is the old story of the Greek Proteus translated into universal speech. It is the song of the Persian poet:

The sullen mountain, and the bee that hums,
A flying joy, about its flowery base,
Each from the same immediate fountain comes,
And both compose one evanescent race.

There is no difference in the texture fine
That's woven through organic rock and grass,
And that which thrills man's heart in every line,
As o'er its web God's weaving fingers pass.

The timid flower that decks the fragrant field,
The daring star that tints the solemn dome,
From one propulsive force to being reeled;
Both keep one law and have a single home.

Chapter VII

The Mystery of Night

Every day two worlds lie at my door and invite me into mysteries as far apart as darkness and light. These two realms have nothing in common save a certain identity of form; colour, relation, distance, are lost or utterly changed. In the vast fields of heaven a still more complete and sublime transformation is wrought. It is a new hemisphere which hangs above me, with countless fires lighting the awful highways of the universe, and guiding the daring and reverent thought as it falters in the highest empyrean. The mind that has come into fellowship with Nature is subtly moved and penetrated by the decline of light and the oncoming of darkness. As the sun is replaced by the stars, so is the hot, restless, eager spirit of the day replaced by the infinite calm and peace of the night. The change does not come abruptly or with the suddenness of violent movement; no dial is delicate enough to register the moment when day gives place to night. With that amplitude of power which accompanies every movement, with that sublime quietude of energy which pervades every action, Nature calls the day across the hills and summons the night that has been waiting at the eastern gates. No stir, no strife, no noise of great activities, put forth on a vast scale, break the spell of an hour which is the daily witness of a miracle, and

waits, hushed and silent, in a world-wide worship, while the altar fires blaze on the western hills.

In that unspeakable splendour, earth and air and sea are for the moment one, and through them all there flashes a divine radiance; time is not left without the witness of its sanctity as it fades off the dials of earth and slips like a shining rivulet into the shoreless sea of light beyond. The day that was born with seas and suns at its cradle is followed to its grave by the long procession of the stars. And now that it has gone, with its numberless activities, and the heat and stress of their contentions, how gently and irresistibly Nature summons her children back to herself, and touches the brow, hot with the fever of work, with the hand of peace! An infinite silence broods over the fields and upon the restless bosom of the sea. Insensibly there steals into thought, spent and weary with many problems, a deep and sweet repose; the soul does not sleep; it returns to the ancient mother, and at her breast feels the old hopes revived, the old aspirations quickened, the old faiths relight their dying fires. The fever of agonising struggle yields to the calm of infinite trust; the clouds fall apart and reveal the vision, that seemed lost, inviolate forever; the brief, fierce, fruitless strife for self is succeeded by an unquestioning trust in that universal good, above and beyond all thought, for which the universe stands. Who shall despair while the fields of earth are sown with flowers and the fields of heaven blossom with stars? The open heart knows, in a revelation which comes to it with every dawn and sunset, that life does not mock its

children when it holds this cup of peace to their anguished lips, and that into this tideless sea of rest and beauty every breathless and turbulent streamlet flows at last.

In the silence of night how real and divine the universe becomes! Doubt and unbelief retreat before the awful voices that were silenced by the din of the day, but now that the little world of man is hushed, seem to have blended all sounds into themselves. Beyond the circle of trees, through which a broken vision of stars comes and goes with the evening wind, the broad earth lies hushed and hidden. Along the familiar road a new and mysterious charm is spread like a net that entangles the feet of every traveller and keeps him loitering on where he would have passed in unobservant haste by day. The great elms murmur in low, inarticulate tones, and the shadows at their feet hide themselves from the moon, moving noiselessly through all the summer night. The woods in the distance stand motionless in the wealth of their massed foliage, keeping guard over the unbroken silence that reigns in all their branching aisles. Beyond the far-spreading waters lie white and dreamlike, and tempt the thought to the fairylands that sleep just beyond the line of the horizon. A sweet and restful mystery, like a bridal veil, hides the face of Nature, and he only can venture to lift it who has won the privilege by long and faithful devotion.

If the night be starlit the shadows are denser, the outlook narrower, the mystery deeper; but what a vision overhangs the world and makes the night sublime with the poetry of God's

thought visible to all eyes! Who does not feel the passage of divine dreams over his troubled life when the infinite meadows of heaven are suddenly abloom with light? On such a night immortality is written on earth and sky; in the silence and darkness there is no hint of death; a sweet and fragrant life seems to breathe its subtle, inaudible music through all things. In the depths of the woods one feels no loneliness; no liquid note of hermit thrush is needed to make that silence music. The harmony of universal movement, rounded by one thought, carried forward by one power, guided to one end, is there for those who will listen; the mighty activities which feed the century-girded oak from the invisible chambers of air and the secret places of the earth are so divinely adjusted to their work that one shall never detect their toil by any sound of struggle or by any sight of effort. Noiselessly, invisibly, the great world breathes new life into every part of its being, while the darkness curtains it from the fierce ardour of the day.

In the night the fountains are open and flowing; a marvellous freshness touches leaf and flower and grass, and rebuilds their shattered loveliness. The stars look down from their inaccessible heights on a new creation, and as the procession of the hours passes noiselessly on, it leaves behind a dewy fragrance which shall exhale before the rising sun, like a universal incense, making the portals of the morning sweet with prophecies of the flowers which are yet to bloom, and the birds whose song still sleeps with the hours it shall set to music. The unbroken repose

of Nature, born not of idleness but of the perfect adjustment of immeasurable forces to their task, becomes more real and comprehensible when the darkness hides the infinitude of details, and leaves only the great massive effects for the eye to rest upon. While men sleep, the world sweeps silently onward under the watchful stars, in a flight which makes no sound and leaves no trace. Through the deep shadows the mountains loom in solitary and awful grandeur; the wide seas send forth and recall their mighty tides; the continents lie veiled in rolling mists; the immeasurable universe glitters and burns to the farthest outskirts of space; and yet, nestled amid this sublime activity, the little flower dreams of the day, and in its sleep is ministered to as perfectly as if it were the only created thing.

When one stands on the shores of night and looks off on that mighty sea of darkness in which a world lies engulfed, there is no thought but worship and no speech but silence. Face to face with immensity and infinity, one travels in thought among the shining islands that rise up out of the fathomless shadows, and feels everywhere the stir of a life which knows no weariness and makes no sound, which pervades the darkness no less than the light, and makes the night glorious as the day with its garniture of constellations; and even as one waits, speechless and awestruck, the morning star touches the edges of the hills, and a new day breaks resplendent in the eastern sky.

Chapter VIII

Off Shore

Who has not heard, amid the heat and din of cities, the voice of the sea striking suddenly into the hush of thought its penetrating note of mystery and longing? Then work and the fever which goes with it vanished on the instant, and in the crowded street or in the narrow room there rose the vision of unbroken stretches of sky, free winds, and the surge of the unresting waves. That invitation never loses its alluring power; no distance wastes its music, and no preoccupation silences its solicitation. It stirs the oldest memories, and awakens the most primitive instincts; the long past speaks through it, and through it the buried generations snatch a momentary immortality. History that has left no record, rich and varied human experiences that have no chronicle, rise out of the forgetfulness in which they are engulfed, and are puissant once more in the intense and irresistible longing with which the heart answers the call of the sea. Once more the blood flows with fuller pulse, the eye flashes with conscious freedom and power, the heart beats to the music of wind and wave, as in the days when the fathers of a long past spread sail and sought home, spoil, or change upon the trackless waste. Into every past the sea has sometime sounded its mighty note of joy or anguish, and deep in every memory there remains

some vision of tossing waves that once broke on eyes long sealed.

All day the free winds have filled the heavens, and flung here and there a handful of foam upon the surface of the deep. No cloud has dimmed the splendour of a day which has filled the round heavens with soft music and touched the sea with strange and changeful beauty. It has been enough to wait and watch, to forget self, to escape the limitations of personality, and to become part of the movement, which, hour by hour, has passed through one marvellous change after another, until now it seems to pause under the sleepless vigilance of the stars. They look down from their immeasurable altitudes on the vast expanse of which only a miniature hemisphere stretches before me. How wide and fathomless seems the ocean, even from a single isolated point! What infinite distances are only half veiled by the distant horizon line! What islands and continents and undiscovered worlds lie beyond that faint and ever receding circle where the sight pauses, while the thought travels unimpeded on its pathless way? There lies the untamed world which brooks no human control, and preserves the primeval solitude of the epochs before men came; there are the elemental forces mingling and commingling in eternal fellowships and rivalries. There the winds sweep, and the storms marshal their shadows as on the first day; there, too, the sunlight sleeps on the summer sea as it slept in those forgotten summers before a sail had ever whitened the blue, or a keel cut evanescent furrows in the trackless waste.

Every hour has brought its change to make this day

memorable; hour by hour the lights have transformed the waters and hung over them a sky full of varied and changeful radiance. Across the line of the distant horizon white sails have come and gone in broken and mysterious procession, and the imagination has followed them far in their unknown journeyings. As silently as they passed from sight, all human history enacted in this vast province of nature's empire has vanished, and left no trace of itself save here and there a bit of driftwood. There lies the unconquered and forever inviolate kingdom of forces over which no human skill will ever cast the net of conquest.

The sea speaks to the imagination as no other aspect of the natural world does, because of its vastness, its immeasurable and overwhelming power, its exclusion from human history, its free, buoyant, changeful being. It stands for those strange and unfamiliar revelations with which Nature sometimes breaks in upon our easy relation with her, and brings back on the instant that sense of remoteness which one feels when in intimate fellowship a friend suddenly lifts the curtain from some great experience hitherto unsuspected. In the vast sweep of life through Nature there must always be aspects of awful strangeness; great realms of mystery will remain unexplored, and almost inaccessible to human thought; days will dawn at intervals in which those who love most and are nearest Nature will feel an impenetrable cloud over all things, and be suddenly smitten with a sense of weakness; the greatest of all her interpreters are but children in knowledge of her mighty activities and forces. On the

sea this sense of remoteness and strangeness comes oftener than in the presence of any other natural form; even the mountains make sheltered places for our thought at their feet, or along their precipitous ledges; but the sea makes no concessions to our human weakness, and leaves the message which it intones with the voice of tempest and the roar of surge without an interpreter. Men have come to it in all ages, full of a passionate desire to catch its meaning and enter into its secret, but the thought of the boldest of them has only skirted its shores, and the vast sweep of untamed waters remains as on the first day. Homer has given us the song of the landlocked sea, but where has the ocean found a human voice that is not lost and forgotten when it speaks to us in its own penetrating tones? The mountains stand revealed in more than one interpretation, touched by their own sublimity, but the sea remains silent in human speech, because no voice will ever be strong enough to match its awful monody.

It is because the sea preserves its secret that it sways our imagination so royally, and holds us by an influence which never loosens its grasp. Again and again we return to it, spent and worn, and it refills the cup of vitality; there is life enough and to spare in its invisible and inexhaustible chambers to reclothe the continents with verdure, and recreate the shattered strength of man. Facing its unbroken solitudes the limitations of habit and thought become less obvious; we escape the monotony of a routine, which blurs the senses and makes the spirit less sensitive to the universe about it. Life becomes free and plastic

once more; a deep consciousness of its inexhaustibleness comes over us and recreates hope, vigour, and imagination. Under the little bridges of habit and theory, which we have made for ourselves, how vast and fathomless the sea of being is! What undiscovered forces are there; what unknown secrets of power, what unsearchable possibilities of development and change! How fresh and new becomes that which we thought outworn with use and touched with decay! How boundless and untravelled that which we thought explored and sounded to its remotest bound!

At night, when the vision of the waters grows indistinct, what voices it has for our solitude! The "eternal note of sadness," to which all ages and races have listened, and the faint echoes of which are heard in every literature, fills us with a longing as vast as the sea and as vague. Infinity and eternity are not too great for the spirit when the spell of the sea is on it, and the voice of the sea fills it with uncreated music.

Chapter IX

A Mountain Rivulet

This morning the day broke with a promise of sultry heat which has been faithfully kept. The air was lifeless, the birds silent; the landscape seemed to shrink from the ardour of a gaze that penetrated to the very roots of the trees, and covered itself with a faint haze. All things stood hushed and motionless in a dream of heat; even the harvest fields were deserted. On such a day nature herself becomes voiceless; she seems to retreat into those deep and silent chambers where the sources of her life are hidden alike from the heat and cold, from darkness and light. A strange and foreboding stillness is abroad in the earth, and one hides himself from the sun as from an enemy.

In this unnatural hush there was one voice which made the silence less ominous, and revived the spent and withered freshness of the spirit. To hear that voice seemed to me this morning the one consolation which the day offered. It called me with cool, delicious tones that seemed almost audible, and I braved the deadly heat as the traveller urges his way over the desert to the oasis that promises a draught of life. As I passed along the broad aisle of the village street, arched by the venerable trees of an older generation, I seemed to be in dreamland; no sound broke the repose of midday, no footstep echoed far

or near; the cattle stood motionless in the fields beneath the sheltering branches. I turned into the dusty country road, and saw the vision of the great encircling hills, remote, shadowless, and dreamlike, against the white August sky. I sauntered slowly on, pausing here and there at the foot of some sturdy oak or wide-branched apple, until I reached the little stream that comes rippling down from the mountain glen. A short walk across the fields under the burning sun brought me into the shadow of the trees that skirt the borders of the woodland. The brook loitered between its green and sloping banks and broke in tiny billows over the smooth stones that lay in its bed; the shadows grew denser as I advanced, and a delicious coolness from the depths of the woods touched the sultry atmosphere. A moment later, and I stood within the glen. The world of human activity had vanished, shut out of sight and sound by the deepening foliage of the trees behind me. Overhead hardly a leaf stirred, but the branching boughs spread a marvellous roof between the heavens and the woodland paths, and suffered only a stray flash of light here and there to strike through. As I advanced slowly along the well-worn path beside the brook, the glen grew more and more narrow, the hillsides more and more precipitous. In the dusky light that sifted down through the great trees I felt the delicious relief of low tones after the glare of the summer day. It was another world into which I had come; a world of unbroken repose and silence, a world of sweet and fragrant airs cooled by the mountain rivulet and shielded by the mountain summits and the arching umbrage.

The path vanished at last and nothing remained but the narrow channel of the brook itself, the smooth stones making a precarious and uncertain footing for the adventurous explorer. How soothing was the ceaseless splash of that little stream, fretting its moss-grown banks and dashing in miniature surge against the stones in its path! What infinite peace reigned in this place, around which the brotherhood of mountains had gathered, to hold it inviolate against all comers! The great rocks were moss-covered, the steep slopes on either side were faintly flecked with light, and one saw here and there, through the clustered trunks of trees, a gleam of blue sky. Sometimes the brook narrowed to a tiny stream, rushing with impetuous current between the rocky walls that formed its channel; then it spread out shallow and noisy over some broader expanse of white sand and polished pebble; then it loitered in the shadow of a great rock and became a deep, silent pool, full of shadows and the mysteries which lurk in such remote and dusky places.

It was beside such a pool that I paused at last, and seated myself with infinite content. Before me the glen narrowed into a rocky chasm, over which the adventurous trees that clung to the precipitous hillsides spread a dense roof of foliage. The dark pool at my feet was full of mysterious shadows and seemed to cover epochs of buried history. As I studied its motionless surface the old mediaeval legends of black, fathomless pools came back to me, and I felt the air of enchantment stealing over me, lulling my latter-day scepticism into sleep, and making all mysteries rational

and all marvels probable. In these silent depths no magical art had ever submerged cities or castles; on the stillest of all quiet afternoons no muffled echoes, faint and far, float up through the waveless waters. But who knows what shadows have sunk into these sunless depths; what reflections of waving branches, what sittings of subdued light, what hushed echoes of the forgotten summers that perished here ages ago?

In such a place, at such an hour, one feels the most subtle and the most searching spell which Nature ever throws over those that seek her; a spell woven of many charms, magical potions, and powerful incantations. The quiet of the place, awful with the unbroken silence of centuries; the soft, half light, which conceals more than it discloses; the retreating trunks of trees interlacing their branches against invasion from light or heat or sound; the steep ravine, receding in darker and darker distance, until it seems like one of the fabled passages to the under world: the wide, shadowy pool, into which no sunlight falls, and in which night itself seems to sleep under the very eyes of day—all these things speak a language which even the dumbest must understand. As I sit musing, conscious of the darkest shadows and deepest mysteries close at hand, and yet undisturbed by them, I recall that one of the noblest poems on Death ever written was inspired in this place; and I note without surprise, as its solemn lines come back to me, that there is no horror in it, no ignoble fear, but awe and reverence and the sublimity of a great and hopeful thought. The organ music of those slow-moving verses seems like the very

voice of a place out of which all dread has gone from the thought of death, and where the brief span of life seems to arch the abyss of death with immortality.

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