ELIZABETH VON ARNIM

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Содержание

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May

May 2nd.—Last night after dinner, when we were in the garden, I said, "I want to be alone for a whole summer, and get to the very dregs of life. I want to be as idle as I can, so that my soul may have time to grow. Nobody shall be invited to stay with me, and if any one calls they will be told that I am out, or away, or sick. I shall spend the months in the garden, and on the plain, and in the forests. I shall watch the things that happen in my garden, and see where I have made mistakes. On wet days I will go into the thickest parts of the forests, where the pine needles are everlastingly dry, and when the sun shines I'll lie on the heath and see how the broom flares against the clouds. I shall be perpetually happy, because there will be no one to worry me. Out there on the plain there is silence, and where there is silence I have discovered there is peace."

"Mind you do not get your feet damp," said the Man of Wrath, removing his cigar.

It was the evening of May Day, and the spring had taken hold of me body and soul. The sky was full of stars, and the garden of scents, and the borders of wallflowers and sweet, sly pansies. All

day there had been a breeze, and all day slow masses of white clouds had been sailing across the blue. Now it was so still, so motionless, so breathless, that it seemed as though a quiet hand had been laid on the garden, soothing and hushing it into silence.

The Man of Wrath sat at the foot of the verandah steps in that placid after-dinner mood which suffers fools, if not gladly, at least indulgently, and I stood in front of him, leaning against the sun-dial.

"Shall you take a book with you?" he asked.

"Yes, I shall," I replied, slightly nettled by his tone. "I am quite ready to admit that though the fields and flowers are always ready to teach, I am not always in the mood to learn, and sometimes my eyes are incapable of seeing things that at other times are quite plain."

"And then you read?"

"And then I read. Well, dear Sage, what of that?"

But he smoked in silence, and seemed suddenly absorbed by the stars.

"See," he said, after a pause, during which I stood looking at him and wishing he would use longer sentences, and he looked at the sky and did not think about me at all, "see how bright the stars are to-night. Almost as though it might freeze."

"It isn't going to freeze, and I won't look at anything until you have told me what you think of my idea. Wouldn't a whole lovely summer, quite alone, be delightful? Wouldn't it be perfect to get up every morning for weeks and feel that you belong to yourself

and to nobody else?" And I went over to him and put a hand on each shoulder and gave him a little shake, for he persisted in gazing at the stars just as though I had not been there. "Please, Man of Wrath, say something long for once," I entreated; "you haven't said a good long sentence for a week."

He slowly brought his gaze from the stars down to me and smiled. Then he drew me on to his knee.

"Don't get affectionate," I urged; "it is words, not deeds, that I want. But I'll stay here if you'll talk."

"Well then, I will talk. What am I to say? You know you do as you please, and I never interfere with you. If you do not want to have any one here this summer you will not have any one, but you will find it a very long summer."

"No, I won't."

"And if you lie on the heath all day, people will think you are mad."

"What do I care what people think?"

"No, that is true. But you will catch cold, and your little nose will swell."

"Let it swell."

"And when it is hot you will be sunburnt and your skin spoilt."

"I don't mind my skin."

"And you will be dull."

"Dull?"

It often amuses me to reflect how very little the Man of Wrath really knows me. Here we have been three years buried in the

country, and I as happy as a bird the whole time. I say as a bird, because other people have used the simile to describe absolute cheerfulness, although I do not believe birds are any happier than any one else, and they quarrel disgracefully. I have been as happy then, we will say, as the best of birds, and have had seasons of solitude at intervals before now during which dull is the last word to describe my state of mind. Everybody, it is true, would not like it, and I had some visitors here a fortnight ago who left after staying about a week and clearly not enjoying themselves. They found it dull, I know, but that of course was their own fault; how can you make a person happy against his will? You can knock a great deal into him in the way of learning and what the schools call extras, but if you try for ever you will not knock any happiness into a being who has not got it in him to be happy. The only result probably would be that you knock your own out of yourself. Obviously happiness must come from within, and not from without; and judging from my past experience and my present sensations, I should say that I have a store just now within me more than sufficient to fill five quiet months.

"I wonder," I remarked after a pause, during which I began to suspect that I too must belong to the serried ranks of the femmes incomprises, "why you think I shall be dull. The garden is always beautiful, and I am nearly always in the mood to enjoy it. Not quite always, I must confess, for when those Schmidts were here" (their name was not Schmidt, but what does that matter?) "I grew almost to hate it. Whenever I went into it there

they were, dragging themselves about with faces full of indignant resignation. Do you suppose they saw one of those blue hepaticas overflowing the shrubberies? And when I drove with them into the woods, where the fairies were so busy just then hanging the branches with little green jewels, they talked about Berlin the whole time, and the good savouries their new chef makes."

"Well, my dear, no doubt they missed their savouries. Your garden, I acknowledge, is growing very pretty, but your cook is bad. Poor Schmidt sometimes looked quite ill at dinner, and the beauty of your floral arrangements in no way made up for the inferior quality of the food. Send her away."

"Send her away? Be thankful you have her. A bad cook is more effectual a great deal than Kissingen and Carlsbad and Homburg rolled into one, and very much cheaper. As long as I have her, my dear man, you will be comparatively thin and amiable. Poor Schmidt, as you call him, eats too much of those delectable savouries, and then looks at his wife and wonders why he married her. Don't let me catch you doing that."

"I do not think it is very likely," said the Man of Wrath; but whether he meant it prettily, or whether he was merely thinking of the improbability of his ever eating too much of the local savouries, I cannot tell. I object, however, to discussing cooks in the garden on a starlight night, so I got off his knee and proposed that we should stroll round a little.

It was such a sweet evening, such a fitting close to a beautiful May Day, and the flowers shone in the twilight like pale stars,

and the air was full of fragrance, and I envied the bats fluttering through such a bath of scent, with the real stars above and the pansy stars beneath, and themselves so fashioned that even if they wanted to they could not make a noise and disturb the prevailing peace. A great deal that is poetical has been written by English people about May Day, and the impression left on the foreign mind is an impression of posies, and garlands, and village greens, and youths and maidens much be-ribboned, and lambs, and general friskiness. I was in England once on a May Day, and we sat over the fire shivering and listening blankly to the north- east wind tearing down the street and the rattling of the hail against the windows, and the friends with whom I was staying said it was very often so, and that they had never seen any lambs and ribbons. We Germans attach no poetical significance to it at all, and yet we well might, for it is almost invariably beautiful; and as for garlands, I wonder how many villages full of young people could have been provided with them out of my garden, and nothing be missed. It is to-day a garden of wallflowers, and I think I have every colour and sort in cultivation. The borders under the south windows of the house, so empty and melancholy this time last year, are crammed with them, and are finished off in front by a broad strip from end to end of yellow and white pansies. The tea rose beds round the sun-dial facing these borders are sheets of white, and golden, and purple, and wine-red pansies, with the dainty red shoots of the tea roses presiding delicately in their midst. The verandah steps

leading down into this pansy paradise have boxes of white, and pink, and yellow tulips all the way up on each side, and on the lawn, behind the roses, are two big beds of every coloured tulip rising above a carpet of forget-me-nots. How very much more charming different-coloured tulips are together than tulips in one colour by itself! Last year, on the recommendation of sundry writers about gardens, I tried beds of scarlet tulips and forget-me-nots. They were pretty enough; but I wish those writers could see my beds of mixed tulips. I never saw anything so sweetly, delicately gay. The only ones I exclude are the rose-coloured ones; but scarlet, gold, delicate pink, and white are all there, and the effect is infinitely enchanting. The forget-me-nots grow taller as the tulips go off, and will presently tenderly engulf them altogether, and so hide the shame of their decay in their kindly little arms. They will be left there, clouds of gentle blue, until the tulips are well withered, and then they will be taken away to make room for the scarlet geraniums that are to occupy these two beds in the summer and flare in the sun as much as they like. I love an occasional mass of fiery colour, and these two will make the lilies look even whiter and more breathless that are to stand sentinel round the semicircle containing the precious tea roses.

The first two years I had this garden, I was determined to do exactly as I chose in it, and to have no arrangements of plants that I had not planned, and no plants but those I knew and loved; so, fearing that an experienced gardener would profit by my ignorance, then about as absolute as it could be, and

thrust all his bedding nightmares upon me, and fill the place with those dreadful salad arrangements so often seen in the gardens of the indifferent rich, I would only have a meek man of small pretensions, who would be easily persuaded that I knew as much as, or more than, he did himself. I had three of these meek men one after the other, and learned what I might long ago have discovered, that the less a person knows, the more certain he is that he is right, and that no weapons yet invented are of any use in a struggle with stupidity. The first of these three went melancholy mad at the end of a year; the second was love-sick, and threw down his tools and gave up his situation to wander after the departed siren who had turned his head; the third, when I inquired how it was that the things he had sown never by any chance came up, scratched his head, and as this is a sure sign of ineptitude, I sent him away.

Then I sat down and thought. I had been here two years and worked hard, through these men, at the garden; I had done my best to learn all I could and make it beautiful; I had refused to have more than an inferior gardener because of his supposed more perfect obedience, and one assistant, because of my desire to enjoy the garden undisturbed; I had studied diligently all the gardening books I could lay hands on; I was under the impression that I am an ordinarily intelligent person, and that if an ordinarily intelligent person devotes his whole time to studying a subject he loves, success is very probable; and yet at the end of two years what was my garden like? The failures of the first two summers

had been regarded with philosophy; but that third summer I used to go into it sometimes and cry.

As far as I was concerned I had really learned a little, and knew what to buy, and had fairly correct notions as to when and in what soil to sow and plant what I had bought; but of what use is it to buy good seeds and plants and bulbs if you are forced to hand them over to a gardener who listens with ill-concealed impatience to the careful directions you give him, says Jawohl a great many times, and then goes off and puts them in in the way he has always done, which is invariably the wrong way? My hands were tied because of the unfortunate circumstance of sex, or I would gladly have changed places with him and requested him to do the talking while I did the planting, and as he probably would not have talked much there would have been a distinct gain in the peace of the world, which would surely be very materially increased if women's tongues were tied instead of their hands, and those that want to could work with them without collecting a crowd. And is it not certain that the more one's body works the fainter grow the waggings of one's tongue? I sometimes literally ache with envy as I watch the men going about their pleasant work in the sunshine, turning up the luscious damp earth, raking, weeding, watering, planting, cutting the grass, pruning the trees —not a thing that they do from the first uncovering of the roses in the spring to the November bonfires but fills my soul with longing to be up and doing it too. A great many things will have to happen, however, before such a state of popular

large-mindedness as will allow of my digging without creating a sensation is reached, so I have plenty of time for further grumblings; only I do very much wish that the tongues inhabiting this apparently lonely and deserted countryside would restrict their comments to the sins, if any, committed by the indigenous females (since sins are fair game for comment) and leave their harmless eccentricities alone. After having driven through vast tracts of forest and heath for hours, and never meeting a soul or seeing a house, it is surprising to be told that on such a day you took such a drive and were at such a spot; yet this has happened to me more than once. And if even this is watched and noted, with what lightning rapidity would the news spread that I had been seen stalking down the garden path with a hoe over my shoulder and a basket in my hand, and weeding written large on every feature! Yet I should love to weed.

I think it was the way the weeds flourished that put an end at last to my hesitations about taking an experienced gardener and giving him a reasonable number of helpers, for I found that much as I enjoyed privacy, I yet detested nettles more, and the nettles appeared really to pick out those places to grow in where my sweetest things were planted, and utterly defied the three meek men when they made periodical and feeble efforts to get rid of them. I have a large heart in regard to things that grow, and many a weed that would not be tolerated anywhere else is allowed to live and multiply undisturbed in my garden. They are such pretty things, some of them, such charmingly

audacious things, and it is so particularly nice of them to do all their growing, and flowering, and seed-bearing without any help or any encouragement. I admit I feel vexed if they are so officious as to push up among my tea roses and pansies, and I also prefer my paths without them; but on the grass, for instance, why not let the poor little creatures enjoy themselves quietly, instead of going out with a dreadful instrument and viciously digging them up one by one? Once I went into the garden just as the last of the three inept ones had taken up his stand, armed with this implement, in the middle of the sheet of gold and silver that is known for convenience' sake as the lawn, and was scratching his head, as he looked round, in a futile effort to decide where he should begin. I saved the dandelions and daisies on that occasion, and I like to believe they know it. They certainly look very jolly when I come out, and I rather fancy the dandelions dig each other in their little ribs when they see me, and whisper, "Here comes Elizabeth; she's a good sort, ain't she?"—for of course dandelions do not express themselves very elegantly.

But nettles are not to be tolerated. They settled the question on which I had been turning my back for so long, and one fine August morning, when there seemed to be nothing in the garden but nettles, and it was hard to believe that we had ever been doing anything but carefully cultivating them in all their varieties, I walked into the Man of Wrath's den.

"My dear man," I began, in the small caressing voice of one who has long been obstinate and is in the act of giving in, "will

you kindly advertise for a head gardener and a proper number of assistants? Nearly all the bulbs and seeds and plants I have squandered my money and my hopes on have turned out to be nettles, and I don't like them. I have had a wretched summer, and never want to see a meek gardener again."

"My dear Elizabeth," he replied, "I regret that you did not take my advice sooner. How often have I pointed out the folly of engaging one incapable person after the other? The vegetables, when we get any, are uneatable, and there is never any fruit. I do not in the least doubt your good intentions, but you are wanting in judgment. When will you learn to rely on my experience?"

I hung my head; for was he not in the pleasant position of being able to say, "I told you so"?—which indeed he has been saying for the last two years. "I don't like relying," I murmured, "and have rather a prejudice against somebody else's experience. Please will you send the advertisement to-day?"

They came in such shoals that half the population must have been head gardeners out of situations. I took all the likely ones round the garden, and I do not think I ever spent a more chastening week than that week of selection. Their remarks were, naturally, of the frankest nature, as I had told them I had had practically only gardeners' assistants since I lived here, and they had no idea, when they were politely scoffing at some arrangement, that it happened to be one of my own. The hot-beds in the kitchen garden with which I had taken such pains were objects of special derision. It appeared that they were all wrong—

measurements, preparation, soil, manure, everything that could be wrong, was. Certainly the only crop we had from them was weeds. But I began about half way through the week to grow sceptical, because on comparing their criticisms I found they seldom agreed, and so took courage again. Finally I chose a nice, trim young man, with strikingly intelligent eyes and quick movements, who had shown himself less concerned with the state of chaos existing than with considerations of what might eventually be made of the place. He is very deaf, so he wastes no time in words, and is exceedingly keen on gardening, and knows, as I very soon discovered, a vast amount more than I do, in spite of my three years' application. Moreover, he is filled with that humility and eagerness to learn which is only found in those who have already learned more than their neighbours. He enters into my plans with enthusiasm, and makes suggestions of his own, which, if not always quite in accordance with what are perhaps my peculiar tastes, at least plainly show that he understands his business. We had a very busy winter together altering all the beds, for they none of them had been given a soil in which plants could grow, and next autumn I intend to have all the so-called lawns dug up and levelled, and shall see whether I cannot have decent turf here. I told him he must save the daisy and dandelion roots, and he looked rather crestfallen at that, but he is young, and can learn to like what I like, and get rid of his only fault, a nursery-gardener attitude towards all flowers that are not the fashion. "I shall want a great many daffodils next spring," I shouted one day

at the beginning of our acquaintance.

His eyes gleamed. "Ah yes," he said with immediate approval, "they are _sehr modern."

I was divided between amusement at the notion of Spenser's daffadowndillies being *modern*, and indignation at hearing exactly the same adjective applied to them that the woman who sells me my hats bestows on the most appalling examples of her stock.

"They are to be in troops on the grass," I said; whereupon his face grew doubtful. "That is indeed *sehr modern*," I shouted. But he had grown suddenly deafer—a phenomenon I have observed to occur every time my orders are such as he has never been given before. After a time he will, I think, become imbued with my unorthodoxy in these matters; and meanwhile he has the true gardening spirit and loves his work, and love, after all, is the chief thing. I know of no compost so good. In the poorest soil, love alone, by itself, will work wonders.

Down the garden path, past the copse of lilacs with their swelling dark buds, and the great three-cornered bed of tea roses and pansies in front of it, between the rows of china roses and past the lily and foxglove groups, we came last night to the spring garden in the open glade round the old oak; and there, the first to flower of the flowering trees, and standing out like a lovely white naked thing against the dusk of the evening, was a double cherry in full bloom, while close beside it, but not so visible so late, with all their graceful growth outlined by rosy buds, were two

Japanese crab apples. The grass just there is filled with narcissus, and at the foot of the oak a colony of tulips consoles me for the loss of the purple crocus patches, so lovely a little while since.

"I must be by myself for once a whole summer through," I repeated, looking round at these things with a feeling of hardly being able to bear their beauty, and the beauty of the starry sky, and the beauty of the silence and the scent—"I must be alone, so that I shall not miss one of these wonders, and have leisure really to *live*."

"Very well, my dear," replied the Man of Wrath, "only do not grumble afterwards when you find it dull. You shall be solitary if you choose, and, as far as I am concerned, I will invite no one. It is always best to allow a woman to do as she likes if you can, and it saves a good deal of bother. To have what she desired is generally an effective punishment."

"Dear Sage," I cried, slipping my hand through his arm, "don't be so wise! I promise you that I won't be dull, and I won't be punished, and I will be happy."

And we sauntered slowly back to the house in great contentment, discussing the firmament and such high things, as though we knew all about them.

May 15th.—There is a dip in the rye-fields about half a mile from my garden gate, a little round hollow like a dimple, with water and reeds at the bottom, and a few water-loving trees and bushes on the shelving ground around. Here I have been nearly every morning lately, for it suits the mood I am in, and I like

the narrow footpath to it through the rye, and I like its solitary dampness in a place where everything is parched, and when I am lying on the grass and look down I can see the reeds glistening greenly in the water, and when I look up I can see the rye-fringe brushing the sky. All sorts of beasts come and stare at me, and larks sing above me, and creeping things crawl over me, and stir in the long grass beside me; and here I bring my book, and read and dream away the profitable morning hours, to the accompaniment of the amorous croakings of innumerable frogs.

Thoreau has been my companion for some days past, it having struck me as more appropriate to bring him out to a pond than to read him, as was hitherto my habit, on Sunday mornings in the garden. He is a person who loves the open air, and will refuse to give you much pleasure if you try to read him amid the pomp and circumstance of upholstery; but out in the sun, and especially by this pond, he is delightful, and we spend the happiest hours together, he making statements, and I either agreeing heartily, or just laughing and reserving my opinion till I shall have more ripely considered the thing. He, of course, does not like me as much as I like him, because I live in a cloud of dust and germs produced by wilful superfluity of furniture, and have not the courage to get a match and set light to it: and every day he sees the door-mat on which I wipe my shoes on going into the house, in defiance of his having told me that he had once refused the offer of one on the ground that it is best to avoid even the beginnings of evil. But my philosophy has not yet reached the acute stage that

will enable me to see a door-mat in its true character as a hinderer of the development of souls, and I like to wipe my shoes. Perhaps if I had to live with few servants, or if it were possible, short of existence in a cave, to do without them altogether, I should also do without door-mats, and probably in summer without shoes too, and wipe my feet on the grass nature no doubt provides for this purpose; and meanwhile we know that though he went to the woods, Thoreau came back again, and lived for the rest of his days like other people. During his life, I imagine he would have refused to notice anything so fatiguing as an ordinary German woman, and never would have deigned discourse to me on the themes he loved best; but now his spirit belongs to me, and all he thought, and believed, and felt, and he talks as much and as intimately to me here in my solitude as ever he did to his dearest friends years ago in Concord. In the garden he was a pleasant companion, but in the lonely dimple he is fascinating, and the morning hours hurry past at a quite surprising rate when he is with me, and it grieves me to be obliged to interrupt him in the middle of some quaint sentence or beautiful thought just because the sun is touching a certain bush down by the water's edge, which is a sign that it is lunch-time and that I must be off. Back we go together through the rye, he carefully tucked under one arm, while with the other I brandish a bunch of grass to keep off the flies that appear directly we emerge into the sunshine. "Oh, my dear Thoreau," I murmur sometimes, overcome by the fierce heat of the little path at noonday and the persistence of

the flies, "did you have flies at Walden to exasperate you? And what became of your philosophy then?" But he never notices my plaints, and I know that inside his covers he is discoursing away like anything on the folly of allowing oneself to be overwhelmed in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner, which is situated in the meridian shallows, and of the necessity, if one would keep happy, of sailing by it looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses. But he gets grimly carried back for all that, and is taken into the house and put on his shelf and left there, because I still happen to have a body attached to my spirit, which, if not fed at the ordinary time, becomes a nuisance. Yet he is right; luncheon is a snare of the tempter, and I would perhaps try to sail by it like Ulysses if I had a biscuit in my pocket to comfort me, but there are the babies to be fed, and the Man of Wrath, and how can a respectable wife and mother sail past any meridian shallows in which those dearest to her have stuck? So I stand by them, and am punished every day by that two-o'clock-in-the-afternoon feeling to which I so much object, and yet cannot avoid. It is mortifying, after the sunshiny morning hours at my pond, when I feel as though I were almost a poet, and very nearly a philosopher, and wholly a joyous animal in an ecstasy of love with life, to come back and live through those dreary luncheon-ridden hours, when the soul is crushed out of sight and sense by cutlets and asparagus and revengeful sweet things. My morning friend turns his back on me when I reenter the library; nor do I ever touch him in the afternoon. Books have their idiosyncrasies

as well as people, and will not show me their full beauties unless the place and time in which they are read suits them. If, for instance, I cannot read Thoreau in a drawing-room, how much less would I ever dream of reading Boswell in the grass by a pond! Imagine carrying him off in company with his great friend to a lonely dell in a rye-field, and expecting them to be entertaining. "Nay, my dear lady," the great man would say in mighty tones of rebuke, "this will never do. Lie in a rye-field? What folly is that? And who would converse in a damp hollow that can help it?" So I read and laugh over my Boswell in the library when the lamps are lit, buried in cushions and surrounded by every sign of civilisation, with the drawn curtains shutting out the garden and the country solitude so much disliked by both sage and disciple. Indeed, it is Bozzy who asserts that in the country the only things that make one happy are meals. "I was happy," he says, when stranded at a place called Corrichatachin in the Island of Skye, and unable to get out of it because of the rain,—"I was happy when tea came. Such I take it is the state of those who live in the country. Meals are wished for from the cravings of vacuity of mind, as well as from the desire of eating." And such is the perverseness of human nature that Boswell's wisdom delights me even more than Johnson's, though I love them both very heartily.

In the afternoon I potter in the garden with Goethe. He did not, I am sure, care much really about flowers and gardens, yet he said many lovely things about them that remain in one's memory just as persistently as though they had been inspired expressions of

actual feelings; and the intellect must indeed have been gigantic that could so beautifully pretend. Ordinary blunderers have to feel a vast amount before they can painfully stammer out a sentence that will describe it; and when they have got it out, how it seems to have just missed the core of the sensation that gave it birth, and what a poor, weak child it is of what was perhaps a mighty feeling! I read Goethe on a special seat, never departed from when he accompanies me, a seat on the south side of an ice-house, and thus sheltered from the north winds sometimes prevalent in May, and shaded by the low-hanging branches of a great beech-tree from more than flickering sunshine. Through these branches I can see a group of giant poppies just coming into flower, flaming out beyond the trees on the grass, and farther down a huge silver birch, its first spring green not yet deepened out of delicacy, and looking almost golden backed by a solemn cluster of firs. Here I read Goethe— everything I have of his, both what is well known and what is not; here I shed invariable tears over Werther, however often I read it; here I wade through Wilhelm Meister, and sit in amazement before the complications of the Wahlverwandschaften; here I am plunged in wonder and wretchedness by Faust; and here I sometimes walk up and down in the shade and apostrophise the tall firs at the bottom of the glade in the opening soliloquy of Iphigenia. Every now and then I leave the book on the seat and go and have a refreshing potter among my flower beds, from which I return greatly benefited, and with a more just conception of what, in this world, is worth

bothering about, and what is not.

In the evening, when everything is tired and quiet, I sit with Walt Whitman by the rose beds and listen to what that lonely and beautiful spirit has to tell me of night, sleep, death, and the stars. This dusky, silent hour is his; and this is the time when I can best hear the beatings of that most tender and generous heart. Such great love, such rapture of jubilant love for nature, and the good green grass, and trees, and clouds, and sunlight; such aching anguish of love for all that breathes and is sick and sorry; such passionate longing to help and mend and comfort that which never can be helped and mended and comforted; such eager looking to death, delicate death, as the one complete and final consolation—before this revelation of yearning, universal pity, every-day selfishness stands awe-struck and ashamed.

When I drive in the forests, Keats goes with me; and if I extend my drive to the Baltic shores, and spend the afternoon on the moss beneath the pines whose pink stems form the framework of the sea, I take Spenser; and presently the blue waves are the ripples of the Idle Lake, and a tiny white sail in the distance is Phaedria's shallow ship, bearing Cymochles swiftly away to her drowsy little nest of delights. How can I tell why Keats has never been brought here, and why Spenser is brought again and again? Who shall follow the dark intricacies of the elementary female mind? It is safer not to attempt to do so, but by simply cataloguing them collectively under the heading Instinct, have done with them once and for all.

What a blessing it is to love books. Everybody must love something, and I know of no objects of love that give such substantial and unfailing returns as books and a garden. And how easy it would have been to come into the world without this, and possessed instead of an all-consuming passion, say, for hats, perpetually raging round my empty soul! I feel I owe my forefathers a debt of gratitude, for I suppose the explanation is that they too did not care for hats. In the centre of my library there is a wooden pillar propping up the ceiling, and preventing it, so I am told, from tumbling about our ears; and round this pillar, from floor to ceiling, I have had shelves fixed, and on these shelves are all the books that I have read again and again, and hope to read many times more—all the books, that is, that I love quite the best. In the bookcases round the walls are many that I love, but here in the centre of the room, and easiest to get at, are those I love the *best*—the very elect among my favourites. They change from time to time as I get older, and with years some that are in the bookcases come here, and some that are here go into the bookcases, and some again are removed altogether, and are placed on certain shelves in the drawing-room which are reserved for those that have been weighed in the balance and found wanting, and from whence they seldom, if ever, return. Carlyle used to be among the elect. That was years ago, when my hair was very long, and my skirts very short, and I sat in the paternal groves with *Sartor Resartus*, and felt full of wisdom and *Weltschmerz*; and even after I was married, when we lived in town, and the

noise of his thunderings was almost drowned by the rattle of droschkies over the stones in the street below, he still shone forth a bright, particular star. Now, whether it is age creeping upon me, or whether it is that the country is very still and sound carries, or whether my ears have grown sensitive, I know not; but the moment I open him there rushes out such a clatter of denunciation, and vehemence, and wrath, that I am completely deafened; and as I easily get bewildered, and love peace, and my chief aim is to follow the apostle's advice and study to be quiet, he has been degraded from his high position round the pillar and has gone into retirement against the wall, where the accident of alphabet causes him to rest in the soothing society of one Carina, a harmless gentleman, whose book on the *Bagni di Lucca* is on his left, and a Frenchman of the name of Charlemagne, whose soporific comedy written at the beginning of the century and called *Le Testament de l'Oncle*, *ou Les Lunettes Cassees*, is next to him on his right. Two works of his still remain, however, among the elect, though differing in glory—his *Frederick the Great*, fascinating for obvious reasons to the patriotic German mind, and his *Life of Sterling*, a quiet book on the whole, a record of an uneventful life, in which the natural positions of subject and biographer are reversed, the man of genius writing the life of the unimportant friend, and the fact that the friend was exceedingly lovable in no way lessening one's discomfort in the face of such an anomaly. Carlyle stands on an eminence altogether removed from Sterling, who stands, indeed, on no

eminence at all, unless it be an eminence, that (happily) crowded bit of ground, where the bright and courageous and lovable stand together. We Germans have all heard of Carlyle, and many of us have read him with due amazement, our admiration often interrupted by groans at the difficulties his style places in the candid foreigner's path; but without Carlyle which of us would ever have heard of Sterling? And even in this comparatively placid book mines of the accustomed vehemence are sprung on the shrinking reader. To the prosaic German, nourished on a literature free from thunderings and any marked acuteness of enthusiasm, Carlyle is an altogether astonishing phenomenon.

And here I feel constrained to inquire sternly who I am that I should talk in this unbecoming manner of Carlyle? To which I reply that I am only a humble German seeking after peace, devoid of the least real desire to criticise anybody, and merely anxious to get out of the way of geniuses when they make too much noise. All I want is to read quietly the books that I at present prefer. Carlyle is shut up now and therefore silent on his comfortable shelf; yet who knows but what in my old age, when I begin to feel really young, I may not once again find comfort in him?

What a medley of books there is round my pillar! Here is Jane Austen leaning against Heine—what would she have said to that, I wonder?—with Miss Mitford and *Cranford* to keep her in countenance on her other side. Here is my Goethe, one of many editions I have of him, the one that has made the acquaintance

of the ice-house and the poppies. Here are Ruskin, Lubbock, White's *Selborne*, Izaak Walton, Drummond, Herbert Spencer (only as much of him as I hope I understand and am afraid I do not), Walter Pater, Matthew Arnold, Thoreau, Lewis Carroll, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Hawthorne, *Wuthering Heights*, Lamb's *Essays*, Johnson's *Lives*, Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, Gibbon, the immortal Pepys, the egregious Boswell, various American children's books that I loved as a child and read and love to this day; various French children's books, loved for the same reason; whole rows of German children's books, on which I was brought up, with their charming woodcuts of quaint little children in laced bodices, and good housemothers cutting bread and butter, and descriptions of the atmosphere of fearful innocence and pure religion and swift judgments and rewards in which they lived, and how the *Finger Gottes* was impressed on everything that happened to them; all the poets; most of the dramatists; and, I verily believe, every gardening book and book about gardens that has been published of late years.

These gardening books are an unfailing delight, especially in winter, when to sit by my blazing peat fire with the snow driving past the windows and read the luscious descriptions of roses and all the other summer glories is one of my greatest pleasures. And then how well I get to know and love those gardens whose gradual development has been described by their owners, and how happily I wander in fancy down the paths of certain specially charming ones in Lancashire, Berkshire, Surrey,

and Kent, and admire the beautiful arrangement of bed and border, and the charming bits in unexpected corners, and all the evidences of untiring love! Any book I see advertised that treats of gardens I immediately buy, and thus possess quite a collection of fascinating and instructive garden literature. A few are feeble, and get shunted off into the drawing-room; but the others stay with me winter and summer, and soon lose the gloss of their new coats, and put on the comfortable look of old friends in every-day clothes, under the frequent touch of affection. They are such special friends that I can hardly pass them without a nod and a smile at the well-known covers, each of which has some pleasant association of time and place to make it still more dear.

My spirit too has wandered in one or two French gardens, but has not yet heard of a German one loved beyond everything by its owner. It is, of course, possible that my countrymen do love them and keep quiet about them, but many things are possible that are not probable, and experience compels me to the opinion that this is one of them. We have the usual rich man who has fine gardens laid out regardless of expense, but those are not gardens in the sense I mean; and we have the poor man with his bit of ground, hardly ever treated otherwise than as a fowl-run or a place dedicated to potatoes; and as for the middle class, it is too busy hurrying through life to have time or inclination to stop and plant a rose.

How glad I am I need not hurry. What a waste of life, just getting and spending. Sitting by my pansy beds, with the slow

clouds floating leisurely past, and all the clear day before me, I look on at the hot scramble for the pennies of existence and am lost in wonder at the vulgarity that pushes, and cringes, and tramples, untiring and unabashed. And when you have got your pennies, what then? They are only pennies, after all—unpleasant, battered copper things, without a gold piece among them, and never worth the degradation of self, and the hatred of those below you who have fewer, and the derision of those above you who have more. And as I perceive I am growing wise, and what is even worse, allegorical, and as these are tendencies to be fought against as long as possible, I'll go into the garden and play with the babies, who at this moment are sitting in a row on the buttercups, singing what appear to be selections from popular airs.

June

June 3rd.—The Man of Wrath, I observe, is laying traps for me and being deep. He has prophesied that I will find solitude intolerable, and he is naturally desirous that his prophecy should be fulfilled. He knows that continuous rain depresses me, and he is awaiting a spell of it to bring me to a confession that I was wrong after all, whereupon he will make that remark so precious to the married heart, "My dear, I told you so." He begins the day by tapping the barometer, looking at the sky, and shaking his head. If there are any clouds he remarks that they are coming up, and if there are none he says it is too fine to last. He has even gone the length once or twice of starting off to the farm on hot, sunny mornings in his mackintosh, in order to impress on me beyond all doubt that the weather is breaking up. He studiously keeps out of my way all day, so that I may have every opportunity of being bored as quickly as possible, and in the evenings he retires to his den directly after dinner, muttering something about letters. When he has finally disappeared, I go out to the stars and laugh at his transparent wiles.

But how would it be if we did have a spell of wet weather? I do not quite know. As long as it is fine, rainy days in the future do not seem so very terrible, and one, or even two really wet ones are quite enjoyable when they do come—pleasant times that remind one of the snug winter now so far off, times of reading, and

writing, and paying one's bills. I never pay bills or write letters on fine summer days. Not for any one will I forego all that such a day rightly spent out of doors might give me; so that a wet day at intervals is almost as necessary for me as for my garden. But how would it be if there were many wet days? I believe a week of steady drizzle in summer is enough to make the stoutest heart depressed. It is to be borne in winter by the simple expedient of turning your face to the fire; but when you have no fire, and very long days, your cheerfulness slowly slips away, and the dreariness prevailing out of doors comes in and broods in the blank corners of your heart. I rather fancy, however, that it is a waste of energy to ponder over what I should do if we had a wet summer on such a radiant day as this. I prefer sitting here on the verandah and looking down through a frame of leaves at all the rosebuds June has put in the beds round the sun-dial, to ponder over nothing, and just be glad that I am alive. The verandah at two o'clock on a summer's afternoon is a place in which to be happy and not decide anything, as my friend Thoreau told me of some other tranquil spot this morning. The chairs are comfortable, there is a table to write on, and the shadows of young leaves flicker across the paper. On one side a Crimson Rambler is thrusting inquisitive shoots through the wooden bars, being able this year for the first time since it was planted to see what I am doing up here, and next to it a Jackmanni clematis clings with soft young fingers to anything it thinks likely to help it up to the goal of its ambition, the roof. I wonder which of the two will get there

first. Down there in the rose beds, among the hundreds of buds there is only one full-blown rose as yet, a Marie van Houtte, one of the loveliest of the tea roses, perfect in shape and scent and colour, and in my garden always the first rose to flower; and the first flowers it bears are the loveliest of its own lovely flowers, as though it felt that the first of its children to see the sky and the sun and the familiar garden after the winter sleep ought to put on the very daintiest clothes they can muster for such a festal occasion.

Through the open schoolroom windows I can hear the two eldest babies at their lessons. The village schoolmaster comes over every afternoon and teaches them for two hours, so that we are free from governesses in the house, and once those two hours are over they are free for twenty-four from anything in the shape of learning. The schoolroom is next to the verandah, and as two o'clock approaches their excitement becomes more and more intense, and they flutter up and down the steps, looking in their white dresses like angels on a Jacob's ladder, or watch eagerly among the bushes for a first glimpse of him, like miniature and perfectly proper Isoldes. He is a kind giant with that endless supply of patience so often found in giants, especially when they happen to be village schoolmasters, and judging from the amount of laughter I hear, the babies seem to enjoy their lessons in a way they never did before. Every day they prepare bouquets for him, and he gets more of them than a *prima donna*, or at any rate a more regular supply. The first day he came I was afraid

they would be very shy of such a big strange man, and that he would extract nothing from them but tears; but the moment I left them alone together and as I shut the door, I heard them eagerly informing him, by way of opening the friendship, that their heads were washed every Saturday night, and that their hair-ribbons did not match because there had not been enough of the one sort to go round. I went away hoping that they would not think it necessary to tell him how often my head is washed, or any other news of a personal nature about me; but I believe by this time that man knows everything there is to know about the details of my morning toilet, which is daily watched with the greatest interest by the Three. I hope he will be more successful than I was in teaching them Bible stories. I never got farther than Noah, at which stage their questions became so searching as to completely confound me; and as no one likes being confounded, and it is especially regrettable when a parent is placed in such a position, I brought the course to an abrupt end by assuming that owl-like air of wisdom peculiar to infallibility in a corner, and telling them that they were too young to understand these things for the present; and they, having a touching faith in the truth of every word I say, gave three contented little purrs of assent, and proposed that we should play instead at rolling down the grass bank under the south windows—which I did not do, I am glad to remember.

But the schoolmaster, after four weeks' teaching, has got them as far as Moses, and safely past the Noah's ark on which I came

to grief, and if glibness is a sign of knowledge then they have learned the story very thoroughly. Yesterday, after he had gone, they emerged into the verandah fresh from Moses and bursting with eagerness to tell me all about it.

"Herr Schenk told us to-day about Moses," began the April baby, making a rush at me.

"Oh?"

"Yes, and a *boser*, *boser Konig* who said every boy must be deaded, and Moses was the *allerliebster*."

"Talk English, my *dear* baby, and not such a dreadful mixture," I besought.

"He wasn't a cat."

"A cat?"

"Yes, he wasn't a cat, that Moses—a boy was he."

"But of course he wasn't a cat," I said with some severity; "no one ever supposed he was."

"Yes, but mummy," she explained eagerly, with much appropriate hand- action, "the cook's Moses *is* a cat."

"Oh, I see. Well?"

"And he was put in a basket in the water, and that did swim. And then one time they comed, and she said—"

"Who came? And who said?"

"Why, the ladies; and the *Konigstochter* said, *'Ach hormal*, *da schreit so etwas*.'"

"In German?"

"Yes, and then they went near, and one must take off her shoes

and stockings and go in the water and fetch that tiny basket, and then they made it open, and that *Kind* did cry and cry and *strampel* so"—here both the babies gave such a vivid illustration of the *strampeln* that the verandah shook—"and see! it is a tiny baby. And they fetched somebody to give it to eat, and the *Konigstochter* can keep that boy, and further it doesn't go."

"Do you love Moses, mummy?" asked the May baby, jumping into my lap, and taking my face in both her hands—one of the many pretty, caressing little ways of a very pretty, caressing little creature.

"Yes," I replied bravely, "I love him."

"Then I too!" they cried with simultaneous gladness, the seal having thus been affixed to the legitimacy of their regard for him. To be of such authority that your verdict on every subject under heaven is absolute and final is without doubt to be in a proud position, but, like all proud positions, it bristles with pitfalls and drawbacks to the weak-kneed; and most of my conversations with the babies end in a sudden change of subject made necessary by the tendency of their remarks and the unanswerableness of their arguments. Happily, yesterday the Moses talk was brought to an end by the April baby herself, who suddenly remembered that I had not yet seen and sympathised with her dearest possession, a Dutch doll called Mary Jane, since a lamentable accident had bereft it of both its legs; and she had dived into the schoolroom and fished it out of the dark corner reserved for the mangled and thrust it in my face before I had

well done musing on the nature and extent of my love for Moses—for I try to be conscientious—and bracing myself to meet the next question.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.