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978-1-108-02203-3 - A Garden Diary: September 1899-September 1900

Emily Lawless

Excerpt

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A GARDEN DIARY

SEPTEMBER 1, 1899

“A WANDERER is man from his birth,” and some of us who have done comparatively little wandering in our own persons, have done our full share of those less palpable divagations which may be performed within a very small compass of the earth’s surface, nay even within the radius of a single garden chair.

The gipsy dies hard in many people, and the dreams which have fluttered round our youthful fancy flutter round it still, though youth may have become a memory, and the chances of any serious explorations be reduced to a scarce perceptible minimum. To be a traveller in the real and heroic sense is a very great and a very stirring ambition. To have the hope of wandering far and fruitfully; of bringing home the results of those wanderings; such a hope and such an aspiration is one of the biggest things that can be set before a youthful ambition. With a disregard of probabilities, which, looking back, I can only characterise as magnificent, such

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an ambition had I, in early days, set before myself. To be a traveller on the great scale; a visitor of remote solitudes, and practically untrodden shores; a discoverer of undescribed forms; a rifler of Nature's still unrifled treasure-houses—such was the hope, and such the happy dream. The words "Unknown to science" floated in those days before my youthful fancy, and were to it a shibboléth, as other and more obviously stimulating words have been to other youthful brains. Fate has not willed that any such re-sounding lot should be mine, nor was it, to tell the truth, particularly likely that it should so will it. To few of our race has it been given to add, by even a little, to the knowledge of that race, and I am not aware that any portion of my own equipment had particularly marked me out for this rôle that I had so confidently assigned to myself.

Luckily we learn to grow down gracefully, as the sedums and the pennyworts do. A lot that at ten years old seems unendurably pitiful in its narrowness, at five times that mature age comes to be regarded as quite a becoming lot, leaving room for plenty of easy self-respect, and even for a spurt or two of the purest and most invigorating vanity. As that down-growing process advances we assure ourselves, more and more confidently, that all the really important, the vital part of such explorations belongs to us, at

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least as much as to the explorers themselves. If we have not thriddled Amazonian forests in our own persons with Mr. Bates, or Nicaraguan jungles with Mr. Belt, we know all that those indefatigable travellers have seen, done, discovered, experienced, and only need to take down their books from the shelf to be in the thick of those experiences once more.

So too, with the rest—the botanists, zoologists, paleontologists—greater, as well as less great. With the prince of them all one starts once more upon that immortal *Voyage of the Beagle*, which, besides circumnavigating the world, enables one to accumulate those prodigious stores of observation, destined by-and-by to make one's own name famous to the world's end, and to endow that world itself with one or two practically new departments. With Professor Wallace, one spends years in the Malay Archipelago, till the geography of even the obscurer members of that bewildering group becomes rather more familiar than that of the next parish. With Collingwood one pores over the rock-pools of Chinese seas, which never before reflected human face, or at most that of some shore-haunting Mongolian, uninterested in zoology. With the savants of the *Challenger* one sets forth, with all the pomp of subsidised science, upon a three years' cruise, in search of Globigerinæ, of blind Decapoda, of

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Coccospheres, of Rhabdospheres, and other long-titled occupants of abyssmal depths. And if one has been tempted to now and then share the dismay felt by the youthful lieutenant, upon being shown that single teaspoonful of grey slop, as the result of nights of toil, which kept the whole crew of Her Majesty's ship from their bunks, well, one reflected that the wise men probably knew what they were about, and that the teaspoonful in question could hardly be an ordinary teaspoonful. Later, hand in hand one has journeyed with other travellers, some biological, others merely exploratory, or geographical. With Stanley groped for weeks in African forests, and been shot at by unpleasant little beasts with hands. With Miss North travelled far, yet unweariedly, in search of unknown flowering trees, and other forms of vegetation. With Nansen, until one grew to feel brittle as any icicle, and occasionally almost as callous as one. With Mrs. Bishop, across many seas, and scenes; and last of all with Miss Kingsley, the only one of these illustrious travellers in whose company I have always felt entirely secure, sure that no dangerous animal—lion, rattlesnake, cobra, shiny tattooed warrior, German trader, or the like—would dare molest me while under her ægis.*

Yes, I have been a great explorer. The earth,

* Written in September, 1899. Alas!

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and its multifarious contents has lain below my feet, as the Pacific was believed by Keats to have lain below those of Cortez, and if now and then I have been troubled by a passing doubt, a "wild surmise" as to whether all these places really have been seen by my own eyes, I have made haste to put that misgiving aside, as His Majesty King George the Fourth was no doubt in the habit of doing, whenever similar misgivings as to the heroic part played by himself at the Battle of Waterloo crossed the royal mind.

To have been so far, and to have seen so much is good, but to have retained a lowly spirit with it all is even better. To be able, with Alphonse Karr, to set forth on the five hundred and first tour round one's garden, brimming with expectation, and all the certainty of new discovery. To be as thrilled over the alternations between the nut-tree walk in winter, and the alpine heights in summer, as ever the family of the Vicar were over those between the blue parlour and the brown. These are the things that really carry a traveller comfortably forward in an easy jog-trot towards his predestined bourne. And if there happen to be a pair of such travellers, a pair of such explorers, and if each of them carries his or her own wallet, or knapsack, and if those two travellers part often, yet often come together again, then what an opening up of budgets takes place! What a retailing of

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adventures; what a comparison of discoveries; what a vastly extended sense of the round world, and of all the fulness thereof! That there are really great journeys to be performed, great events in life, and great adventures to be met with, I am quite willing to concede; also that there are very small journeyings, very small events, and very small adventures. But the odd thing is that no one seems ever able to decide for one finally and authoritatively which is which!

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SEPTEMBER 4, 1899

IT has been wet, and is now fine again, consequently our view of the downs exhibits those tones of vinous purple, shading into indigo, that in moments of patriotic expansion I am apt to call Irish. I do not think it is quite friendly of our neighbours, especially those who live upon the ridge above our heads, to smile so significantly whenever that word "view" happens to slip out, as it did just now, in alluding to our new possession, and its prospects. For what, after all, is a view? The question seems to suggest a reference to the dictionary, and here is Webster, ponderous in brown calf. "View. 1st. Act of seeing, or beholding; sight; survey; examination by the eye. 2nd. That which is looked towards, or kept in sight; an appearance; a show." Well, have we not something to look towards, to keep in sight, some appearance, some show? For that matter, so, it may be urged, has the habitant of the "two pair back," or the rustic whose prospect is limited to a survey of his or her neighbours' under

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garments,—those “short and simple flannels of the poor” hung to dry in silhouette against a back fence. The truth is it is not at all desirable to be so haughty. I will not go so far as to say that it is unchristian, but it is certainly unbecoming, for are we not all fellow-creatures? What if you *can* command seven counties from your windows? What if on one particular morning—to me incredible—you did see three ships cross Shoreham gap? What if from your garden chair you can be regaled by a fantasia of changing lights and shadows? be lapped into peace upon summer afternoons, or stirred by the drama of battle clouds, flung into blackness by a storm? Well, if you can, be glad of it, but for pity’s sake abstain from bragging! “Gi’ God thanks, and say no more o’ it.” Believe me it is not even commonly lucky to be so proud, and I speak with some little authority upon that subject.

For as regards this matter of views, I too have been haughty to the point of insupportableness. I too have believed that the possession of wide prospects argued some peculiar, some ineffable superiority in myself. There was a time when nothing short of an entire ocean, none of your petty babbling channels, but the whole thundering Atlantic, sufficed for my ambition. In those days only upon the largest combination of sea, sky, mountain; sea-scape, land-scape, cloud-scape, did it seem possible adequately to exist. As for

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a mere rustic landscape, as for a confined one, as for a humdrum English one, above all as for a landscape within fifty miles of London, why the mention of such things merely moved my commiseration! Those were the days when to be called upon to leave what is sometimes uncivilly called the ruder island, and to repair, even temporarily, to the more prosperous one, seemed a fall and a degradation hardly to be measured by words. When the contraction of the horizon seemed like a contraction of all life, and of all that made life worth having. When the remembrance that one would have to wake in the morning with no dim blue line to greet one, appeared, to a patriotic, a self-respecting being, to be a wrong and an indignity hardly to be endured without revolt.

Such an attitude is, I now hold, unbecoming in mere mortals, and, like other vaulting ambitions, is apt to precede a fall. The man who starts in life determined to be either Cæsar, or nothing, frequently fails to become Cæsar, whereas with regard to the other alternative, the gods are quite capable of taking him at his word. Happily, life is for most of us a liberal education, and the narrowing of the horizon comes to be endured with a philosophy born of other, and more serious deprivations. It may even be open to question whether any man or woman ever yet was made the better by the possession of a noble view?

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That he or she ought to have been made so is quite true, but as a matter of fact, have they? We are moulded out of exceedingly stubborn stuff, and are not often ennobled, I suspect, by the landscapes that surround us, any more than we are by the pursuits we follow, or the names that we carry about with us. Furthermore the essentials of all landscape show a considerable similarity. Much the same sort of clouds and sunshine, much the same sort of nights and days, much the same sort of summers and winters, visit alike the tamest and the wildest of them. Even the more dramatic and exciting fluctuations—snow, and hail, storm, and lightning—exhibit a greater impartiality than might have been expected. The gale that has just unroofed your lordly tower, has equally swept the tiles off our humble porch; in the same way that moralists are fond of assuring us that sickness and sorrow, loss and pain, old age and death, fall equally upon the homes of beggars and of kings.

Never having belonged to the last of these classes, I cannot take it upon me to answer for the discomforts that pertain to it. With regard to the other, though I have often seen myself figuring, or upon the point of figuring, amongst its sad and tattered ranks, the impression has never been a particularly agreeable one, and I prefer, therefore, not to dwell upon it. It was