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978-1-108-07660-9 - A Garden of Pleasure
E.V. Boyle
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A Garden of Pleasure

Eleanor Vere Boyle (1825–1916), who re-created the gardens of Huntercombe Manor in Berkshire in the 1870s, was a talented artist as well as an author, illustrating both poetry and books for children. From an aristocratic family, and in later life a friend of Queen Alexandra, she produced sketches and watercolours admired by Ruskin and Landseer, and Tennyson and Bulwer Lytton contributed to her anthologies of poetry. One of a number of late nineteenth-century female writers on gardens (many of whose works have been reissued in this series), she was interested in the natural history of the garden rather than in botanical principles. This work, published in 1895, describes the sights, sounds and smells of her garden through the seasons of 1894, with frequent digressions on the weather, birds and animals, the folklore connected with individual plants, literary references, and observations on other gardens visited, in both Britain and Europe.

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A Garden of Pleasure

E.V. BOYLE



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A GARDEN OF PLEASURE

BY

E. V. B.

*Author of 'Days and Hours in a Garden,'
'Ros Rosarum,' etc.*

'Who loves a garden, still his Eden keeps.'

A. ALCOCK. 1799

LONDON

ELLIOT STOCK, 62 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

1895

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DEDICATED

TO MY ELDEST GRANDCHILD, CECIL
ALBINIA ARBUTHNOT, WHOSE DELIGHT
IS IN THE GARDEN, AND WHO MADE
IT THE EDEN OF HER CHILDHOOD.

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P R E F A C E

Since a preface is said to be a necessary evil, it may perhaps be utilised as a means for the embodying of a few notes on subjects not contained in the book itself. Among these, it should be explained that those flowers—wild or cultivated—whose outlines face first pages of the months, are not supposed to follow in any order of succession as to their proper flowering seasons. They were drawn solely for pure love of them, and were arranged wheresoever they seemed to suit the best.

On finally looking through the proof sheets, the writer has to confess to a disappointing sense of inadequacy ; a pervading, uneasy impression of how poor a thing after all these slight garden records are. The flowers named in them so few—so scanty the attempted portrayal of

them! Most emphatically so, when I see the sun-bright garden in all the joy and glory of this royal month of May—now, with Nature at full flood and flow of Spring! with the great elms in the background, half-drest in a fairy garment of budding green. The severity and fatal length of the long winter endured in the garden—though many a tender shrub and plant has died of it—is forgotten in a moment; and indeed it seems on the whole almost to have inspired fresh life and vigour of growth in those delicious things which we call Spring flowers. The rich abundance of our early favourites this year is undiminished. Though long in coming, now that they are here at last they seem more brilliantly beautiful than ever. If any long-loved habitual pleasure of the garden fails to-day, it is that birds are fewer. There are fewer thrushes, and we miss the rapture of their music. Blackbirds must know the secret of some less precarious means of living, for they are as numerous as ever. Yet somehow Merula's magic note is, or so it seems to me, less wholly dear than is the singing of the thrush. The air he sings is so brief, the burden of it so sad! He only sings over

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and over, 'Di Memoria nudrirsi, piu che di speme!' 'I live on Memory more than hope.' Of course he does not mean it in the least! but so the tune wears on in sad, sweet, iteration. In the winter, after Christmas, the holly trees in the garden shone scarlet, loaded as they were with berries. We had planned to cut away several branches of them, but until the birds had stript the fruit, the gardener's knife was not to be lifted for the pruning. Yet scarcely had 'the wise thrush' begun to feast, when down there swooped upon the hollies such flocks of field-fares from the open country that, in a day the trees were bare. So the poor throstles—to whom of right the garden fruits belong—starved and were found dead in numbers. The motto of wild Nature is always necessarily, 'Live, and let die who may.' And thus there is many a small tragedy enacted often, in the garden. One of the most pathetic perhaps, when a tiny mother-bird was found dead in a thorny brier, pierced to the heart by thorns in the Rose-Home of her choice.

At this very time, as I write, through the open window comes fitfully the complaint of a solitary dove

who sits all day alone in the great red horse-chestnut. His story is a sad one. On a cold March day, twelve months ago, a ring-dove appeared no one knows whence and timidly presented himself outside the garden porch. The bird was lame and hungry, and very shy; but after three weeks of persevering attention from us, he grew fat and tame, and came regularly to feed with the pigeons. Very soon he found a mate, and brought her also with him to feed. Then they made a nest in the red chestnut tree, and in due time the pair brought a fine young one to be admired and fed at the door. Then all three flew away to the woods. Again, last March, the Dove reappeared one day, and his mate was with him and the young one too. But they only stayed a day, and never returned. And now the widowed dove sits all day in the chestnut tree, and calls and calls. From early morning till late afternoon the plaintive cry is heard: the poor bird is forsaken, and it is plain that life for him has lost its interest. Another song comes now and again from far off among the leaves; and as I listen to

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the unutterable sweetness of that sylvan note, the old long-remembered lines recur and keep time with the wood-pigeon's music.

*'I heard a stock-dove sing or say
 His homely tale this very day;
 His voice was buried among trees
 Yet to be come at by the breeze:
 He did not cease, but cooed, and cooed;
 And somewhat pensively he wooed.
 He sang of love with quiet blending,
 Slow to begin and never ending,
 Of serious faith and inward glee,
 That was the song—the song for me.'* *

Heavily has the great frost told on evergreens in the garden. The yew hedges which are our pride, look thin and seared. There is scarce a berberis left alive, and we shall sorely miss those exquisite carpets of yellow and orange which summer by summer did use to spread beneath the shrubs when their little gold bells drop; and there will be no berries ripening in purple bloom. And lavender, on which we set such store, has also suffered, so that the harvest of its fragrant yield will be less rich this year than ever we remember.

* Wordsworth.

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Yet counting all the change and loss that the passing of the seasons has brought, since those other 'Days and Hours in a Garden' of more than ten years ago—enough remains of beauty and delight for us to feel joyously as ever, the 'ver perpetuum' that irradiates the garden—whether it be small or great—the Garden that we call our own. Of that beloved spot well may it be said,

*'An hour with thee !—when earliest day
 Dapples with gold the eastern grey,
 Oh, what can frame my mind to bear
 The toil and tumult, care and care,
 New griefs, which coming hours unfold,
 And sad remembrance of the old ?*

One hour with thee !

*One hour with thee !—When sun is set,
 Oh, what can teach me to forget
 The thankless labours of the day,
 The hopes and wishes flung away ;*

*One hour with thee !' **

Lovers of their garden should have that feeling for it strong within them, or their love cannot be true.

And now, departing not from the custom which holds

* Sir Walter Scott.

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with letters as with prefaces, and by which the last word is wont to be the most important, a word must be said for the Chief Toiler of the garden, in whose hands lies the responsibility of success or failure. Perhaps there may not be many who would choose a gardener on such lines as these: not many would, so to speak, take the candidate into the garden, and pointing to a cabbage or a currant bush, give the order thus—'Dig a hole and plant that currant head downwards'; and if forthwith the man did as he was told without a word, engage him on the spot! Yet I believe such imperiousness does exist, and then, is fatal to the garden. We may love dearly our flowers; we may know (or think we know), everything about them, and call them all by their names. We may believe we are Master, and that things being done entirely under our own directions everything will grow, and all will be well. Yet nevertheless nothing will grow, nothing will be well unless the gardener is also in a sense, on his side, master. When his worth is ascertained, give him a free hand over all affairs which come specially under his control.

Give him a living interest in the garden by letting him exercise his taste (subject always to yours), in planting and in arrangement of colours, etc., and by showing your own constant interest in it; and if the man be possessed of good Intelligence and Experience, if his heart is in his work, if he has it in him to Succeed, succeed he will. The garden and the gardener will grow as it were, to understand one another, and you to trust and understand them both, while your content and gladness in the garden will increase and grow with the year's increase.

And here a grateful tribute must find place, for the Gardener, JESSE FOULK, by whose rare skill this plot grew into a Garden of Pleasure, whose ceaseless care has maintained its charm for three-and-twenty summers, and who completes the Thirtieth year of his devoted service on the 22nd of May: with which well-omened date I close my Preface.

ELEANOR VERE BOYLE.

HUNTERCOMBE MANOR,
May, 1895.