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978-1-108-07666-1 - More Pot-Pourri from a Surrey Garden  
Mrs. C.W. Earle  
Excerpt  
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## MORE POT-POURRI

### SEPTEMBER

Reasons for writing another '*Pot-Pourri*'—Advice of friends—  
Criticisms grave and gay—Return home after three months abroad  
—Disappointment with dry garden—Kingfisher—*Sedum spectabile*  
and insects—Gardening—Cooking.

*September 1st, 1898.*—It is now a year and a half since I finished my first book, and the public have been almost as appreciative and generous in their praise of it as my nieces were. Kind letters of all sorts have poured in, and I have been overwhelmed with suggestions about the future, and what I should or should not do. Some have said—and I admit that these, in all friendliness, are the most earnest in their heartfelt appeals—that I should rest on my laurels and write no more. They urge that a second book always falls flat. If on the same subject as the first, it is generally a failure. If on a new subject, it is apt to be outside the writer's experience. And then they quote several incontestable examples which jump to the recollection of everybody. I really agree with this view of the case up to the point of not acting upon it. Nothing can ever bear being done a second time. This is one of the sadnesses of life, and I do not for a moment anticipate that No. 2 can please in the same kind of way as did No. 1. The method not being new, my readers will know pretty well what to expect; and this, probably

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will immensely sharpen their critical judgment. Then there were those who said and wrote—and need I state that they are the flatterers who come most home to the author's heart, as is but natural?—‘We have read your book; we like it; we have found it useful and helpful, entertaining or suggestive. Cannot you give us more?’ To these I answered: ‘Give me time and I will try.’ The result was that throughout the last year I have been making various notes about my life, things I saw and things I did, exactly as they occurred. These very likely will prove less interesting than former notes, which were more or less connected with the life that was behind me.

One newspaper had it that I must have a very good memory. As a matter of fact, I have no memory at all, but from my youth I have kept, more or less continuously, commonplace books—a jumble of all sorts of things as I came across them in my very desultory reading. These notes were often so carelessly kept as not even to acknowledge where I stole the thought that gave me pleasure. This accounts for my having quotations at hand. Another reviewer kindly said I had a ‘marked grace of style.’ My dear old mother used to say she never considered a compliment was worth having that was not totally undeserved! I never had the slightest idea of possessing any style at all. But what is style? It is a weary topic when so much is said about ‘getting style’ (like ‘getting religion’). Schopenhauer's remarks on the subject are worth noticing. He writes: ‘There is no quality of style that can be got by reading writers who possess it. But if the qualities exist in us—exist, that is to say, potentially—we can call them forth and bring them into consciousness. We can learn the purposes to which they can be put. We can be strengthened in an inclination to use them, or get courage to do so. The only way in which reading can form style is by

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teaching us the use to which we can put our own natural gifts. We must have these gifts before we can learn the use of them. Without them, reading teaches us nothing.'

One friend wrote: 'I should have liked the book still better if the moral and domestic reflections had been jumbled up with the rest, instead of being put like an appendix at the end.' With this I entirely agree, but my judgment in the matter was overruled by others. The most general criticism has been that the various subjects in the book are not kept enough apart. Some asked: 'Won't you write a cookery book alone? or a gardening book alone?' I could only say that I am no specialist. Dozens of such books exist and are much better than any I could write. I am and must remain an ignorant amateur. My mind only works, as I said before, on the lines of collecting knowledge, sweet and bitter, as I walk along life's way. What I have I can give, but I can neither create nor imagine. The accusations of the sudden jumps from gardening to surgery, or from cooking to art, which astonished my readers, are perfectly true. But are not these violent and sudden contrasts a marked characteristic of modern life? Do we not, many of us, any morning, go from our letters or newspapers—containing, perhaps, the most tragic human stories, affecting ourselves or those we love—to the ordering of the dinner for the friend who is to come in the evening, or seeing that the carriage or the fly is not forgotten for the guest who is leaving before noon? Such is life. So my months must remain quite as varied as before. It is sad to have to repeat the un-English name of '*Pot-Pourri*,' which annoyed so many and was never very satisfactory to myself; but this book in no way aims at being more than a continuation of the first, a kind of second volume, a giving more to those who ask for it. The word '*pot-*

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*pourri* is so generally accepted in England to mean a sweet and pleasant mixture, that we do not realise that the original word meant a mixed stew, as do its synonyms of 'hotch-potch' and '*olla podrida*,' a favourite Spanish dish consisting of a mixture of various kinds of meat chopped fine and stewed with vegetables.

Most of the letters I received were of kindly and affectionate appreciation. But some frankly criticised, while others marked short-comings. As usual, however, in such cases perfectly incompatible qualities were required. For instance, most of my gardening friends were disappointed at the information about gardening being so elementary, telling them little they did not know. They very likely overrated what I had to tell them, but they entirely missed the point of my omitting to make my information as detailed and special as I could have done—first, because I referred them to real gardening books, and secondly because I wanted what I did tell to be particularly addressed to beginners with small gardens who wished to do their best, but had little time to spend in the study of other books. On the other hand the ignorant amateurs, for whom it was specially written, mournfully complained that it still did not begin enough at the beginning. To these I always answered that Mr. Robinson must have realised this difficulty, as some years ago he reprinted the '*Amateur Gardener*,' by Mrs. Loudon (Fredk. Warne & Co.), which is full of this elementary information, and to be had from any bookseller for the sum of ninepence.

A third difficulty was the slavish admirer, who in all soils and even with different climates said: 'I have strictly carried out your instructions, and utter failure has been the result.' I wish once more to reiterate that anything I say, both in the last volume and in this, with regard to plant life is merely the result of my own

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personal experience. All that I state is by way of suggestion, not by any means as a law to be carried out at all times and in all places. Several letters of approval I received from working gardeners gave me great pleasure, and one said that he found the book 'very bright and holding.' This seems to me a most expressive word. Another complaint came from a Londoner, representing the opinion of the inhabitants of towns. He was in exact contrast to the gardener-friend in the suburbs and the country. He complained bitterly of the long lists of plants, the many details about gardening, and asked pitifully if this part might not have been relegated to an appendix, suggesting that this would make the book much more readable.

One man who professed to be no gardener at all said his leading idea in gardening was to dismiss the under-gardener. This is a very common theory with the master of the house who thinks gardens can be well kept very much under-handed. As a rule the best gardens are those where the master of the house superintends the gardening himself.

A woman friend who dislikes both garden books and gardening wrote: 'Notices of gardening books might for the sake of the village idiot, for whom everyone writes, have been put in a chapter quite at the end. "Fat," as the actors call it, should come at the beginning of a book to encourage the reader.' Perhaps she was not wrong, for I believe, so far as I can gather from the letters, that the non-gardening people like my book best—gardeners after all being, as they are the first to acknowledge, one-idea'd. And yet no, it cannot have been really so, as by far the most genuine and sympathetic letters I have received have been from real garden lovers—the sick, the old, the expatriated, all joining in one pæan of praise over the soul-satisfying occupation of gardening.

A few of the London booksellers were rather amusing on the subject, and I have considerable sympathy with

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their opinions. One said to a friend of mine, a few months after the book had come out, that it was going into the sixth edition and that he 'couldn't conceive why, as there was nothing in it.' Another shrewdly remarked that he called the book 'a social success, not a literary one.' There was a vein running through several letters which I thought perhaps accounted in some way for the success of the book, as it proved that many people wished to give it to someone else because they found in it a gentle rod wherewith to scourge their neighbour. One critic said that 'a spirit of benign and motherly materialism broods over the book'—an expression which I thought rather nice, as it was what I had aimed at. A second said the book was 'full of good spirits from beginning to end,' and a third discovered that 'a tone of sadness ran through it all.'

After critics came the friends who amusingly said: 'The book is so extraordinarily like yourself, we can hear your voice speaking all through it.' Strangers, I am told, who know me only by reputation or not at all, kindly settled that it was not written by me, but by some mysterious unknown person they could not quite hit upon.

It is quite true, and I wish to state it again, as I did in my first preface, that I had very real and practical assistance from one of my nieces, who made a most efficient secretary. Our method of working was simple enough. I wrote what I wanted to say and then dictated it to her. In reading aloud, the more flagrant mistakes and repetitions struck the ear quicker than the eye, as is but natural for one more accustomed to speak than to write. Two or three other people helped me by toning down my crude opinions and taking out whole sentences that might have been causes of offence. It has for a long time been a favourite theory of mine that, as

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people generally write books with a vague hope that they may be read, it is wise to consult a small number of people typical of the public and to be guided, without too much self-esteem, by the opinions of these selected few. Of course this opens up the further discussion whether, as I saw it well put the other day in the 'Spectator,' 'Success with the multitude is in itself desirable, or if it is not rather the hall-mark of a commonplace inferiority. Who pleases foolish readers must himself be a fool. If the general reader is after all quite such a fool as the superior *junta* think him is another question altogether. But he has the marked advantage of holding the verdict in his hands.' The only *raison d'être* of ephemeral literature is that it should be read. The writer of genius comes under a different category. He stands on a mountain-top and breathes a rarer atmosphere, and often can only be understood from a distance. 'Bethia Hardacre' exactly expresses this in verse :

I pray to fail, if to succeed  
Means faithlessness unto my creed.

Lady Eastlake says on this point: 'Genius, with its divine inspirations, may be left to find its way to the admiration of the few and in the end to the acknowledgment of all.' Many will remember when Mr. Quaritch brought out Fitzgerald's translation of 'Omar Khayyam,' disgusted at its complete failure, he threw the whole edition into a 'penny box.' Dante Rossetti found them, and we all know the rest.

Some people said that what really pleased them most in the book were the little bits of poetry. Considering that not one of these was mine, the remark by way of compliment was rather humorous. Another curious vein of flattery that ran through dozens of the letters was expressive of the writers' regret that they had not written '*Pot-Pourris*' of their own, proving the general

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truth of how easy everything is if we only take the trouble to do it.

The cooking receipts caused panic in some minds and indignation in others. One poor bachelor told his housekeeper to try the receipt in '*Pot-Pourri*' for making a soup. She happened to hit upon the French *chef's* extravagant directions for making *consommé* and, horrified by the numberless pounds of beef recommended, said: 'Really, sir, it would be far cheaper to have down a quantity of tinned soups from the Stores!' Another careful mistress of her own house complained very much of different meats amounting to six pounds being used for one pie. But in her case the household consisted of one thin brother and two thinner maids. My receipts, of course, were jumbled together for big and little establishments, to be used at the discretion of the housewife. A French lady writes that I make a mistake in thinking that it is usual in France to baste chickens with butter, and that they are much better done with the fat of bacon, or suet, or even common lard. I myself generally roast chickens with butter, and find that people like them very much. But of course only fresh butter must be used; never that horror called 'cooking butter.' It is true that basting them with the fat of good bacon does make them a better colour.

In a most humorous article from that delightful writer of the 'Pages from a Private Diary' in the 'Cornhill' there were several funny allusions to my book. I quote the following as a specimen: 'While "doing" my Michaelmas accounts this morning, I found that the butter book (for we use Tom's dairy) was half as much again as last quarter, and the reason given by the responsible Eugenia is that Mrs. Earle protests against economy in butter. On referring to the passage I find that she suggests instead an economy in meat, and I pointed this



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out to E. ; but the butcher's book shows no proportionate diminution. This has led me to reflect how much more infectious extravagance is than economy.'

One of my most complimentary letters was from an old friend, Mrs. Roundell, asking me to allow her to quote some of my receipts in a new cookery book she was compiling. This has since appeared under the name of 'A Practical Cookery Book' (Bickers & Son), and is so excellent that it thoroughly convinces me of my wisdom in declining to write one myself. My praise of this book almost suggests a mutual admiration society, as Mrs. Roundell is very complimentary to me. She begins by thanking me for my receipts, and ends by a quotation from '*Pot-Pourri*' on hospitality and house-keeping. It will be many a long year before her own book is superseded. The receipts are clear and economical, and its only fault seems to be that at present it costs seven-and-sixpence.

A literary friend writes that he has a point of dissent — 'a bit of pedantic purism. You say "*chickens*." There is no such word: *chicken* is a plural. *Hose*, *hosen*; *chick*, *chicken*; and in old days many more—as *house*, *housen*; *place*, *pleäsen*. A farmer's wife, at least in the west, says correctly that she is going to feed her *chicken*—meaning not one, but many.' It is difficult to know when custom asserts itself sufficiently to change grammar, and my critic himself admits that many of the words he quotes are obsolete. I fear I shall hardly have the courage to say 'truss two fine *chicken*' if I come across such a phrase in a receipt.

I received very few letters on the nurse question. It had been a good deal discussed in periodicals just before the book came out.

An old friend, a doctor, wrote: 'Your chapter on health I take some exception to; on the question that

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starvation is a cure for most of the minor ailments of life I agree with you, but I think you are wrong on the subject of nurses. You *may* get some affection and kindness on the part of a mother, or a sister, or a wife, but I have always held that in really bad cases all three make the worst possible nurses, because so few women can really control their feelings, and where there were great affection and grave anxiety they would be apt to fail in some small details which might be of the utmost importance, where a good trained nurse would not, because *she* looks on the patient only as a "case," which, if she is a conscientious woman, it is her one object to get well. My experience also does not tally with yours, that the nurse is the tool of the doctor and is bound to approve and agree with him. On the contrary I think many of them, through "a little learning," think they know quite as much as, if not more than, the doctor, and often use their own *discretion* (?) as to whether they will carry out all the orders given them. If the doctor finds out this and remonstrates, he then makes an enemy of a person who at any time may have an opportunity of doing him much professional injury.' I am quite ready to acknowledge the correctness of these remarks, and if the nurse and doctor do not work well together any opposition on the part of the nurse might make the situation very disagreeable for the doctor, and *vice versa*. If, on the other hand, they work extremely well together, the patient may be the sufferer, supposing the doctor were mistaken about the case, which does happen with men of the greatest talent. The too literal carrying-out of the doctor's orders, especially with regard to medicines and sleeping-draughts, is often very injurious to the patient. I did not for a moment mean to imply that love and devotion could supply the qualities that are the result of training. But a kind of clear-sightedness and instinct that comes from love