

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-07670-8 - My Garden in the Wilderness
 Kathleen L. Murray
 Excerpt
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FAIRY TALE TREES.

CHAPTER I

I know not how it is with you
 I love the first and last—
 The whole field of the present view,
 The whole flow of the past.

Our lives and every day and hour
 One symphony appear,
 One road, one garden, every flower,
 And every bramble dear.

R. L. S.

THE chandan* trees have just finished flowering and we breathe freely again. I am not sure that I should have chosen them for my garden, but long ago some one planted a group outside our gates and we allow them to remain, in spite of the disadvantage they entail in March and in October, when for two days the house and garden are

* The Indian sandalwood.

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permeated and rendered almost uninhabitable by the pungent scent of their blossoms. But it is a cleanly odour, with an aromatic suggestion of health, almost like that of pine trees, or eucalyptus, and they are the quaintest trees I have ever seen, regular fairy tale trees with gnarled trunks and straight branches that grow stiffly upwards, and covered with precise bunches of dark green leaves. They suggest a decorative frieze by Walter Crane, and when I stand under them and look up into their branches, I seem to have left the common workaday world far behind me. And yet it is all around me, for the group marks the point at which the road branches, and, rounding the tank at the end of my garden, disappears from my view. I am glad to lose sight of it, for it is not a pleasant road, being deep in dust in summer and in mud in the rains, and down it come creaking carts, and harassed bullocks, and overladen pack ponies, that give me a pain at my heart.

In my garden there is a green refuge from the dust and glare outside. Behind the fern house the ground rises to the bank, and there, shaded by teak trees and closed in by a shrubbery, I have placed a seat. Even on hot mornings it is cool here, and I bring the dogs and a pretence of needlework and sit watching the casuarina trees

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A GREEN REFUGE FROM THE DUST
AND GLARE OUTSIDE.

SR.

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balancing their delicate spires against the pale turquoise sky. We have groups of casuarinas planted at each end of the bungalow, and the least wind causes them to sway and sigh with a sound as of waves on a pebbly shore. The dogs are distinctly bored by my tendency to loiter. They long to be scampering down the dusty road and barking up into the twisted sissoo trees that border it, returning in kind the virulent abuse heaped on them by squirrels who sit in high places. But as dogs are the quintessence of politeness, they lie about with the air of attentive resignation that they know so well how to assume, and, I suppose, hope that their devotion will, in time, touch me into doing my obvious duty to them.

My shrubbery is a mixed one, for I have not yet learnt the true landscape gardener's art of massing colours. So hibiscus, scarlet and salmon and cream, jostles *Tecoma stans* with its lime-green foliage and bunches of yellow bells, and on the fern house roof a mass of heavenly purple contends wildly with the tawny *Bignonia venusta*. I shall never be a real gardener because I love flowers so much, all of them individually, no matter where they are. Real gardeners harden their hearts, they do not permit pirate poppies and petunias to live in their rose beds, and no

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MY CLIMBING ROSES.

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real gardener would for a moment dream of allowing the all-conquering morning glory to behave so badly to the more delicate, legitimate creepers on the fern house. I wish morning glory had not such fierce, unpleasant ways; I feel helpless before it. It creeps in through the lattice-work of the fern house and strangles the young begonias and maidenheads, and it gets through the roof and worries the plants in the hanging baskets, and clings to my hair when I pass through. Some day I think I shall plant morning glory next to *Beaumontia grandiflora*, and then we shall see what happens. But perhaps beaumontia is too dignified to contend with a mere weed; there is something regal about the plant as there is about its name, a name I love to repeat to myself, it has so noble a sound. I have a sense of being honoured when, in February, the beaumontia gives me her great white, faintly scented blossoms for the yellow Doultonware bowls in my drawing-room. Perhaps it is because she flowers only then, and not, as many shrubs in India appear to do, whenever the fancy takes them. We have a coquettish kind of jessamine tree that is always taking us by surprise, and bursting into a wild revel of blossom on the excuse of a casual shower.

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There are no graves in my garden, a fact worthy of remark, for few indigo factories are without these sad memorials of the Europeans who lived and died there. I suppose this place is not old enough to have them, for the next factory has a row of big masonry monuments down the side of the vegetable garden. The oldest of these graves is dated 1812



on the slate slab let into the side, and is that of a lad, aged twenty, whose parents lived at Berhampore. That is all that is now known of him, for his name is not one of those on the factory record, which is in some sort a record of my own family for the last two generations.

Away from that garden, across a stretch of rough grass, and almost hidden amidst clumps of bamboos, lies a small walled graveyard with three

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nameless graves. From the roughly moulded urn on the flat masonry slabs we know they are Christian graves, but we can only surmise that they are those of Dutch pioneers, for the old factories were in the hands of the Dutch long before English people came to Behar. They refined saltpetre then and had nothing to do with indigo, which started here some time about 1780. I wonder sometimes what the place was like in those days, and how and where they lived, those rough Dutchmen. Was it in the long rambling house I know, to which rooms seem to have been added haphazard, for that is very old, too? Or was even the oldest portion of that built long after they had been laid to rest in the little quiet enclosure where the grass now grows rank about the cracked grave stones, and a big peepul tree has root in the crumbling wall? My imagination works vividly around this spot where

“Only the sun and the rain come
All year long.”

* * * * *

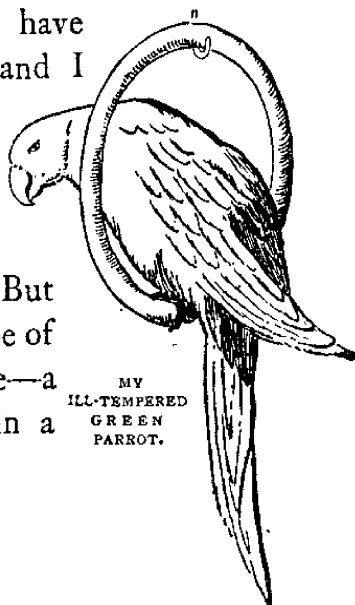
But, having no graves nearer than six miles, I am this morning exhausting my speculative faculties in wondering what green parrots want

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with hibiscus flowers. A flock of green parrots has haunted my garden for some days past, and this morning they settled on a bush of scarlet bell hibiscus, and when they left it most of them had a great flower in their beaks. They flew into the tallest casuarina tree and perched there, apparently playing some delightful game, till, on a sudden alarm, they all flew chattering and screaming away, dropping the flowers on the path, where they now look like giant spots of blood. I picked one up, and it had only two little dents, one on each side of the base of the flower, so they never meant to mangle or to eat them. It must be delightful to be an emerald hued creature, able to sway on tree tops, with a scarlet flower in your mouth, conscious of your decorative value against a blue sky. For I don't for a moment believe that those birds did it for anything but effect. I have a green parrot of my own, and I know their subtle ways.

My parrot is not a happy bird, nor am I happy in possessing him, for I do not like to have caged creatures. But I bought mine long ago, in hope of saving him from a worse fate—a poor little thirsty fledgling in a



MY
ILL-TEMPERED
GREEN
PARROT.

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cage the size of a mousetrap. Now I am afraid to let him go free, for fear his fellows should peck him to death. I take care to supply him with sugar cane, guavas, and all the seasonable fruits, but I feel there is not much sympathy between us. He is vicious and noisy, and his one hope in life is that I shall one day incautiously put a finger far enough into his cage to be seized and mangled.