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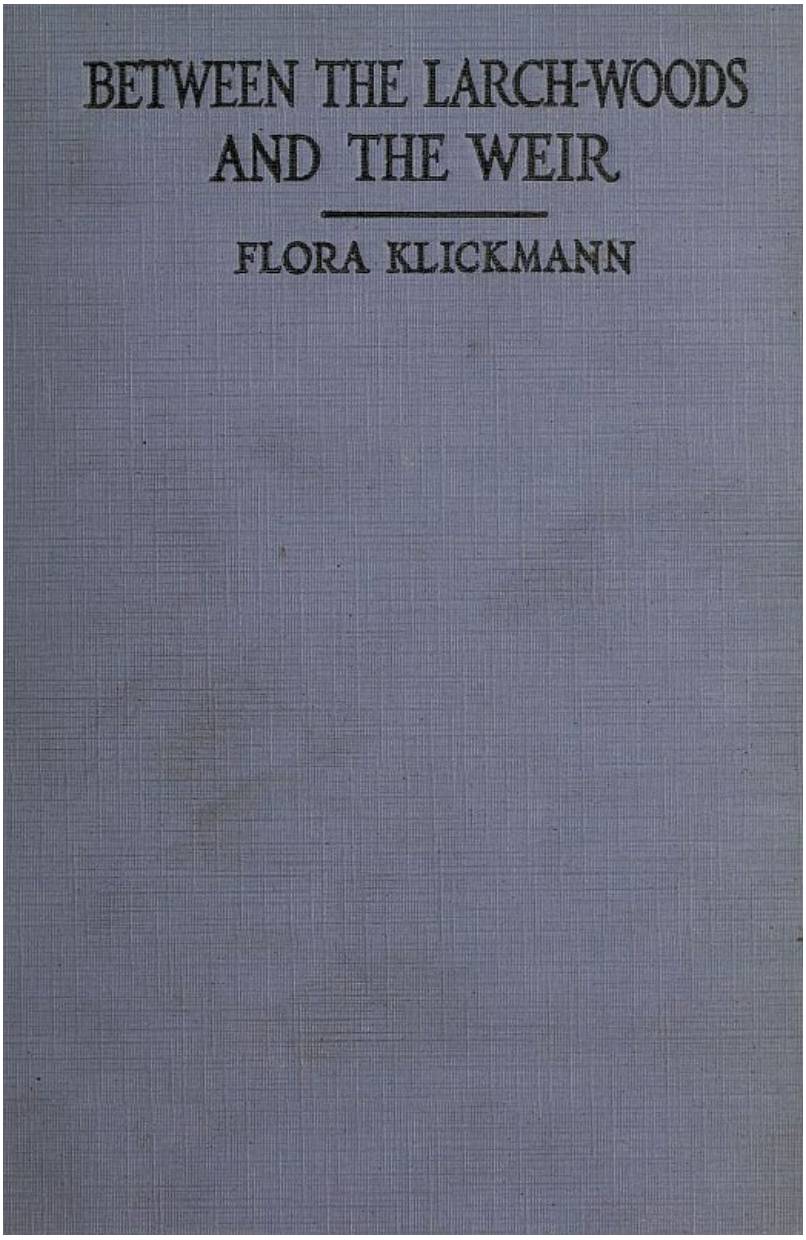
*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BETWEEN THE LARCH-WOODS AND THE WEIR ***



Between the Larch-woods

and the Weir

[2]
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Between the Larch-woods and the Weir

By
FLORA KLICKMANN
Editor of
"The Girl's Own Paper and Woman's Magazine"
Author of
"The Flower-Patch among the Hills"

NEW YORK
Frederick A. Stokes Company
Publishers

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[4]
[5]

**Dedicated to
the Memory
of Arthur,
Bertie, and
Wilfrid—my
Brothers**

---

[6]

**Move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; . . .
. . . for there is a spirit in the woods.**

I

Preamble

[7]

On one of the high hills that border the river Wye, there stands an old cottage, perched on an outstanding bluff, with apparently no way of approach save by airship.

Looking up at it from the river bank by the weir (the self-same weir beside which Wordsworth sat when he wrote his famous “Lines”), you can only glimpse the chimneys and angles of the roof, so buried is the house in the trees that clothe the hill-slopes to a height of nearly nine hundred feet.

The cottage is not quite at the top of the hill; behind it rise still more woods, making the steeps in early spring a mist of purple and brown and soft grey bursting buds, followed by pale shimmering green, with frequent splashes of white when the hundreds of wild cherries break into bloom.

A darker green sweeps over all with the oncoming of summer, which in turn becomes crimson, lemon, rust-gold, bronze-green, copper and orange in the autumn, where coppices of birch and oak, ash and beech, wild cherry, crab apple, yew and hazel intermingle with the stately ranks of [8] the larch-woods that revel in the heights, and give the hills a jagged edge against the sky.

The casual tourist who merely “does” the Wye Valley—which invariably means scorching along the one good road the district possesses, skirting the foot of the hills—has a clever knack of entirely missing, as a rule, the larch-woods and the weir. Obviously, when any self-respecting motorist finds himself on a fine road where he can trundle along at thirty miles an hour (at the least), with seldom any official let or hindrance, he naturally shows his friends what his car can do! And in such circumstances it is necessary to keep the eyes glued to the half-mile straight ahead. Even though the natives are too virtuous to need the upkeep of many policemen, stray cattle and slow-dragging timber-wains can be quite as upsetting as a constable; while a landslide down the hills may precipitate huge trees across the road any day of the year, and prove an equal hindrance.

Hence, the motorist seldom seems to have eyes to spare for anything but the road; he takes as read the woods that climb the great green walls towering far and yet farther above him. And as for the many weirs he passes—who could even hear them above the hustle of a becomingly powerful car that is hoping to boast how it covered the twenty-nine miles from Chepstow to Ross [9] in exactly thirty minutes! Small wonder that such as these never see that weather-worn cottage, half-hidden among the green.

But for those who are too poor, or too rich, to need to bother about advertising their car—those who can indulge in the luxury of walking with no fear of losing social prestige—there is, about that cottage, a world of eternal youth that never grows old, a world that is for ever offering new discoveries.

And from the weir in the valley to the larch-woods at the summit, curiously insistent voices are calling. You have but to walk along the river bank to hear them in the tumbling, swirling waters as they pour over, and sweep around, the boulders in the river bed. And although the only living thing you may actually see is the blue glint of a darting kingfisher, or a heron standing sentinel on some mossed and water-splashed rock, or a burnished swallow skimming over the surface of the water, you know for a certainty that there is more—much more—in the murmur of the river and the clamour of the weir than the ear can ever classify.

Loud as it is when the tide is going down, it is not noisy—for noise never soothes, whereas this babbling of the waters is one of the most restful sounds the tired mind can know.

When you leave the river, and take the path that climbs up through the woods—the path you [10] have to search for, so overgrown is it with nut bushes and bracken and low hanging branches of the birches—another sense of mystery awaits you. Though the way may get easier, and the trail a little more defined, the higher you climb, you feel you are penetrating a new land—that you are the first ever to come this way.

And that inexplicable lure of the unknown seizes you; though you can see nothing ahead of you but a steep rough footpath arched over by the branches of the trees that hedge you about on either side, you are conscious of “something” beyond the croon of the ringdoves and the scuttle of the rabbit. It comes to you in the odour of last year’s dead leaves under the oaks; in the pungent warm scent of the larches in the sun. It greets you in the army of foxgloves that have monopolized the one bit of open sky space where a few trees were uprooted in a storm; and in the tall clump of dark blue campanula that has sprung up in another spot where a sun-shaft falls; and in the regiments of wild daffodils in a clearing that so far have escaped the trowel of the spoiler.

You sense it on an early Easter day, when you pause half-way up, and look back on a vast tracery of bare branches and twigs, pale grey where the light strikes on them, and bursting into [11] smiles at intervals where the blackthorn has come out.

It speaks to you when you come upon the smooth grey bark of the beeches, the beautifully ribbed rind of the Spanish chestnut, and the scaly, red trunks of the pines.

You feel it at your feet when you see the brown, uncurling fern fronds; and it pulls at your heart when you step across a brook that is quietly talking to itself, like a happy baby, as it wanders downhill, unconcerned and most haphazard, amid watercress and ragged robin and creeping jenny.

When at last you emerge for a moment—breathless—from the woods, and come upon the cottage, standing in the midst of its gay flower-patch, you think you have solved the mystery in the sweet smell of the newly turned earth; or that it hovers over the crimson flame of the Herb Robert glowing all about the tops of the grey stone walls.

Yet it is not merely the birds and the flowers, the wood scents and the trees that hold one as with a spell. Such things can be catalogued; whereas there is something intangible among the wild woods, something indefinable, beyond all material things, that makes in some incomprehensible way for peace of mind and the mending of the soul. And it is one of our greatest blessings that we cannot tabulate it, or order it by the dozen from the Stores; that it [12] cannot be “cornered” or monopolized by the money grubber.

The healing of the hills cannot be purchased with gold. It is free to all—yet it can only be had by individual, quiet seeking.

The Glory still burns in the Bush; the Light of God’s kindling can never be extinguished. But sometimes we are too preoccupied to turn aside to see the great sight; and sometimes we fail to put our shoes from off our feet, forgetting that the place whereon we stand is holy ground.

II

Enter Eileen

[13]

I HAVE no "at home" day. I confess it reluctantly, knowing what a state of social forsakenness this implies. But it is wonderful how you can manage to occupy your time with the simple little duties of an editor's office, till you never feel the lack of greater events!

Not that I am cut off from acquaintances thereby; decidedly not. They are kind enough to turn up on Saturday afternoons and take their chance of finding me in; and when they do, with one accord they proceed to pity me for all the "at homes" I've missed during the week, and they do their best to make me bright and happy for the short half-holiday I am able to take from work, while I just sit with my hands in my lap and give myself up to being entertained.

I don't do knitting on such occasions, unlike Miss Quirker who, when I chance to call, remarks, "You'll excuse my going on with this sock, won't you?—then I shan't feel that I'm *entirely* wasting my time!"

For weeks I had been feeling that, no matter what happened, I simply must get away from London for a change of scene and a change of noise—not a holiday; holidays had been out of the [14] question for some time past, with the major portion of the office staff at the front. We had been postponing and postponing going away, feeling that it was unpatriotic to be out of town when there was so much work to do. But at last I decided some fresh air was imperative, and arranged to spend a little time at my cottage on the hillside, Virginia and Ursula, my two most intimate friends, accompanying me, as the Head of Affairs was abroad on important business.

It seemed such long, long months since I had heard anything about the Flower-Patch. True, I had left Mrs. Widow (the villager who is supposed to look after the house in my absence) a bundle of stamped, addressed envelopes, when last I was down, begging her to send me an occasional letter, giving me news of the cottage, and telling me how the flowers were getting on, and whether the rose arches had blown down, and when the wild snowdrops in the orchard were in bloom, and if there were many apples on the new trees we had planted, and whether the lavender cuttings had taken hold, etc. I felt that a few details of this description might help to keep my brain balanced amid the tumult and terror of the War.

Mrs. Widow wrote regularly every month, and this is the type of letter she always sent:—

> "Dear Mam. i hope your well, my newralger has been cruell bad but it is Better now. my daugters baby ethel have two teeth. she is a smart Baby but [15] do cry a lot. Mrs Greens little girl have had something in her throat taken out. doctor says its had a noise. John Green have been called up but I expec you dont know none of them As they lives 3 mile above Monmouth. Mrs Greens sister lives to Cardiff she had a boy last week. i hope the master is well. Its the Sunday School versary tomorror. Thank you for the money. glad to say everything all rite.
>
> Yours
> MRS WIDOW."

I suppose the correct thing would be to call the letters "human documents"; but as the humans mentioned in the documents are, as often as not, people of whom I have never heard, the record of anniversaries, illnesses, births, deaths, and marriages that she sends regularly each month (as a receipt for cash received), are seldom either illuminating or exciting. There was nothing for it but to go down and glean impressions first hand.

It was known that I was going out of town the following week, therefore a collection of callers had looked in, and they were doing their utmost to "liven me up" one afternoon in February, and we were having a lovely time explaining to each other how highly strung our respective doctors [16] said we were when they insisted that we must take a complete rest. It appeared—after a lavish amount of detail—that we each suffered from far too active a brain; I found I was by no means the only one!

We also were most communicative about the brilliancy of our children—not that we said it because we were their mothers, you understand; fortunately, unlike other mothers, we were able to take quite detached views of our own children, and regard them from a purely impersonal standpoint; a great gain, because it enabled us to see how really exceptional they were.

I was not expected to contribute anything under this heading, save copious notes of exclamation on hearing what the various head masters and mistresses had said regarding the genius of the respective children. It was simply amazing to sit there and just contemplate how indebted the world would ultimately be to these ladies, for having bestowed such prodigies on their day and generation; for evidently there wasn't one of my guests who owned a just-ordinary child! No, these young people were all the joy and pride of their teacher, and the way all of them would have passed their exams, (if they hadn't also possessed too active brains, like their mothers), was positively phenomenal.

There was one exception though—a boy at Dulwich, who was notorious for his adhesion to the [17] lowest place in the form. But his mother, not one whit behind the others in her proud estimate of her son, confided to me that, for her part, she shouldn't think of allowing Claude to be high up in

the form. His ability was so marked, that the doctor said he must at all costs be kept back. Besides, you always knew that a school that put its brightest and most brilliant boys at the bottom of the class never showed favouritism or forced the children unduly.

I agreed with her heartily, and then listened to the confidences of another caller, a near neighbour (this one was without children, brilliant or otherwise), who told me that she had felt it her patriotic duty in war time to do all she could with her own two hands in the house; she had therefore cut down her fourteen indoor servants to nine; and she assured me she found that they could really manage quite well with this small number. Of course I looked politely incredulous; who wouldn't, knowing that there was her husband as well as herself to be waited upon?—and I raised my eyebrows interrogatively, as though to inquire how she ever succeeded in getting even the simplest war-meal served with so inadequate a staff! But before she had time to tell me how she managed, the door opened and Mrs. Griggles was announced. And as, whenever Mrs. Griggles is announced, it is the signal for everyone who can to fly, I was not surprised to see furs [18] and handbags being collected, and in a few more minutes the newcomer and I had the drawing room to ourselves.

Mrs. Griggles is a woman with, let us say, a dominant note; not that I object to that; every woman nowadays simply must have a dominant note if she is to keep her head above water (women's war-work has proved a boon in that respect), and some of them are more trying than Mrs. Griggles' pursuit of charity recipients. There is the moth-ball lady, for instance, who's perennial boast is that the moth never come near *her* furs; the nuisance is that no one else can come near them either.

Then there is the educational lady, who runs a serial story on the iniquities of our educational methods. "The whole system is wrong, abso-*lute*-ly wrong, from beginning to end," she declaims. My one consolation is, that she would be far less pleased if it were right, since she would then have nothing to rail about.

But my greatest bugbear is the inquisitorial lady—generally eulogized by the Vicar, when he is stuck fast for an adjective, as "*very* capable." She starts right away, in the middle of a piece of best war-cake, with a clear cut inquiry such as: "Does your husband wear striped flannel shirts under his white ones?" Hurriedly you try to decide on the safest reply. But she has you either [19] way! If you say Yes, she explains how injurious it is to wear coloured stripes; they may be a deadly skin irritant, for all you know. If you say No, she holds up hands of amazement that any woman can neglect the man of her heart in such a way, and instructs you in the necessity for his wearing flannel in addition to his vests.

Mrs. Griggles is a mere picnic beside the inquisitorial lady, for at least you know what her theme will be; whereas with the other you never know where she will open an attack.

Mrs. Griggles' mission in life is to be generous and charitable. "It is so beautiful to feel that you have done another a kindness, no matter how small," she constantly remarks. And I'll say this for Mrs. Griggles, I never knew anyone able to do so many kindnesses in the course of the year—at other people's expense! And I never knew anyone more generous—with other people's possessions.

Where her own belongings are concerned, she is the very soul of rigid economy; why they didn't co-opt her on to the War Savings Committee I cannot understand.

Only once has she been known to give away anything of her own, and that was a paper pattern of a dressing jacket that she cut out in newspaper from the tissue original which she had borrowed from a friend.

Whenever I see the lady looming in the offing, I find myself mentally running over my [20] wardrobe, to see what coat or skirt I can spare for the sad case she is probably just starting in a hairdresser's shop; or wondering whether I have any sheets for a sick woman; or whether the stock of knee-caps I purchased at the last Bazaar is quite exhausted; or whether the kitchen would rebel if she does send every week for the tea-leaves; or whether I've given away all the Surgical-Aid letters.

You never know what request she will make. Yet she doesn't irritate me, as she does some people, simply because I regard her as a Charity-Broker; her work is distinctly useful, and, up to a certain point, praiseworthy, if she didn't make quite such a song about her own benevolence and ignore the part in it played by other people.

She saves my time by hunting out cases that may, or may not, need help; and if she glows when she bestows my money or my boots upon them—well, I glow too, with the thought of my own kindness and beneficence. And anything that can make anybody glow in this vale of tears, isn't to be despised.

Of course I wasn't surprised when she began, with her second mouthful, "By the way, dear, I've *such* a distressing case I'm needing a little help for; really quite *heart*-breaking."

I'd heard it all before, and instantly decided that my mackintosh could go; it was rather too [21] skimpy for the fuller skirts that the season had ushered in. Likewise the plaid blouse; the pattern was very disappointing now it was made up; piece goods are so deceptive. And I would gladly part with the vermilion satin cushion embroidered with yellow eschscholtzias, that had lain in a trunk in the attic since the last Sale of Work but two, if the distressing case could be induced to

believe that it needed propping up in bed. But the rest of my goods I meant to cling to with all the tenacity of a war-reduced woman with no separation allowance. I hadn't one solitary woollen garment to spare, no matter *how* rheumaticky the heartbreak might be.

But it turned out that it wasn't clothes she was wanting, at least, only as a side issue. Her main need was for a few weeks of fresh air, a happy home, plenty of good plain food and good influence (this last, she told me, was *most* important, and that was why she had thought at once of coming to me) for a girl who had just had a bad break-down, through overwork and underfeeding in a cheap-class boarding house where she had been the maid of all work. Nothing the matter with her that you could put your finger on, but just a general slump—though Mrs. Griggles put it more choicely than that.

The girl's biographical data included: a grandmother who attended Mrs. Griggles' mothers' [22]
meeting regularly, though she had to hobble there, one of the cleanest and most respectful women you could ever hope to meet; a mother who had died in the Infirmary at her birth, a father who had never been forthcoming, and an upbringing in the workhouse schools.

I hadn't been exactly planning to take on an orphan at that time: they are proverbial for their appetites, and the butcher's book hadn't led my thoughts in that particular direction, any more than the dairyman's weekly bill. All the same, when Mrs. Griggles showed me how plain my duty lay before me, naturally I said: "Send her and her grandmother round to see me this evening." I was even more anxious to see the grandmother than the girl; for I had long ago given up all hope of ever meeting again such a phenomenon (or perhaps it should be phenomena, being feminine) as a woman who was clean as well as respectful!

They arrived promptly. The grandmother seemed a sensible, hard-working body, who had migrated from Devonshire to London when she married; for over forty years she had lived, or rather existed, in the back-drifts of our great city with never a glimpse of her native village. Yet ——

On my writing table there stood a bowl of snowdrops, in a mass of sweet-scented frondy moss, [23]
with sprigs of the tiny-leaved ivy; they had arrived only that morning from the Flower-Patch among the hills. When she saw them, the old woman clasped her hands with genuine emotion. "Oh, ma'am, *how* they 'mind me of when I was a girl!" she exclaimed. "And with that moss and all! Why, I can just feel my fingers getting all cold and damp as they used to when I did gather them in the lane 'long by our house—it seems on'y yesterday, that it do!" and tears actually came to her eyes.

I decided on the spot that her granddaughter should have the freshest of air and the best of food (to say nothing of unlimited good influence) for the next month, at any rate.

As for the granddaughter herself, I think she was the most utterly dejected, forlorn, of-no-account-looking girl I have ever set eyes on. She told me she was twenty (though her intelligence seemed about fourteen), and her name was Eileen. It was noticeable, however, that her grandmother, in the fit of reminiscent absent-mindedness occasioned by the snowdrops, called her Ann.

It wasn't that she looked ill; hers was an expression of hopelessness; the look that comes to a young thing from a course of systematic unkindness from which it has neither the wit nor the courage to escape. Since she had left the Parish Schools, she had apparently drifted from one [24]
place to another, each worse than the last. Fortunately her grandmother had kept a firm hold of her, and had done her best to keep her clean—both in body and mind; but her whole appearance said as plainly as any words, that no one else had ever taken the slightest personal interest in her, or given her anything to hope for.

Her hair was screwed round in a small tight knot in the nape of her neck, and kept there by two huge hairpins the size of small meat skewers; her dress was merely a dingy-black shapeless covering, not even a fancy button to brighten it; her hat was a plain all-black sailor. She had that blank, dazed look that one so often sees when lower-class children are brought up in masses, where individual attention is impossible.

I told them that I was going down to the West of England the following week, and if she thought she could stand the quiet, and the absence of shops and people, Eileen could come for a month, and just breathe the fresh air and do her best to get strong.

She was genuinely delighted—there was no mistake about that. She seemed quite to wake up, and became almost animated at the thought of going into the country. *That* was the thing that appealed to her; and she looked at me with open-eyed amazement when I told her that the [25]
snowdrops grew wild in the orchard there.

In the orchard? And might she pick a few for herself and send one or two to her grandmother? Wouldn't "they" mind if anyone picked some? She had never seen a violet or a primrose growing wild in her life, though she had always wanted to.

And she and her grandmother looked and smiled at each other with some new bond of sympathy.

Heredity will out!

“But,” said the grandmother firmly, almost ashamed of her own sentimental lapse of the minute before, “of course she will work, ma’am, and work well—or she’s no granddaughter of mine!—in return for your great kindness in having her. She can’t pay you in money, but she can work, and I hope you’ll find her very useful. You’ll do your best for the lady, won’t you, Ann?”—most severely to the girl.

“Yes, grandmother,” she replied, dropping back into an attitude of meek dejection. “Of course I’ll do my *very* best.”

I told them there was no need for her to do more than make her own bed. Abigail would be there to do all I needed. But the girl protested she should be happier if she had proper work to do, if only I could find something I wanted done; and her grandmother insisted that she hoped [26] she knew her place, and it wasn’t a lady she was born to be, and therefore I must see that she didn’t sit with her hands idle.

So I said she and the housemaid must settle it between them, and I summoned Abigail to be introduced to Eileen, and explained that they would be spending the next week or two together.

Abigail listened, I presume, though her gaze was on the curtain-pole at the far end of the room; and she finally departed with neither look nor word that betrayed the slightest consciousness of Eileen’s existence; Eileen meanwhile looked nervously frightened and more dejected than ever.

I was by no means surprised when Abigail sought me out next morning to inquire, if it was all the same to me, might cook go down to the country this time, in her stead? as her sister was expecting to be married immediately—well, it might be next week, or the week after, or next month; she couldn’t say exactly; it all depended on when her young man got leave. But naturally she, Abigail, wanted to be present at the wedding; and one couldn’t get up in half-an-hour from Tintern! In any case, she was having a new dress made, in readiness for the event, and wanted to go to the dressmaker next Friday.

It would be a most inhuman person who sought to part a girl and her sister’s wedding; [27] naturally I said on no account must she be away from London on such an occasion—and please send cook to me.

She came, with pursed lips.

Of course, if Madam wished her to go down to the country, Madam had only to give instructions, etc.—the inference being that whenever Madam gave instructions, crowds flew to carry them out!

But her left ankle had been very troublesome lately; Madam probably remembered that it was all due to the time she turned her foot under on the rough path in the lower wood the very last occasion she went down. She had thought of asking for a couple of hours off, to go to the doctor about it to-morrow; but of course, if there wasn’t time for that, etc.——

February in the country never did agree with her; always gave her hay fever, she was never herself for six months after; still, if I wished her to go next week, etc.——

Only, there was one point on which she would be glad of a clear understanding before she went: *was she expected to wait on that young person?*

I told her, no; and she need not wait on me either. I shouldn’t take either of them down with me. I left it at that—to her surprise.

Then I sought out Eileen and her grandmother, asked if she felt she could make the fires and [28] wash up, if Mrs. Widow and I did all the rest; as, if so, I should pay her at the same rate that I paid Abigail. You should have seen the look of relief that came over her face when she heard Abigail was not going.

“Oh, I could do *everything*,” she said. “I’d so much rather do it and be by myself. I’m very strong; and I’m afraid I might upset Miss Abigail.”

“*Miss* Abigail!” snorted the old grandmother. “Has to earn her living same as the rest of us, I suppose! But I’m much more easy in my mind, ma’am, that Ann is going without her. She’ll look after you well, she will; you’ll want nothing, her’ll see to that” (slipping back into her old-time Devonshire), “but she’s not bin used to stuck-up society.”

Thus it came about that instead of the fashionably-attired and efficient Abigail, I eventually went down to my cottage accompanied by a girl who looked precisely like an estimable orphan, just stepped out of some Early Victorian Sunday-school library book; and you felt sure she would come to an equally virtuous end.

Nevertheless, I didn’t go the following week, as I had planned.

III

“You Never Know”

[29]

Life is full of surprises.

Virginia has always maintained that the motto of my house ought to be “YOU NEVER KNOW,” simply because of the rapidity with which I change my mind, and the complications and unexpected developments that follow thereupon.

She begged me to have it carved in the wooden beams above the mantelpiece. But as I didn’t, she brought me a Chinese tablet (her brother is a persistent traveller, and I think she had unearthed it from some of his effects), bearing on a red background three imposing-looking Chinese symbols, in gold.

I asked her what they meant; though I have never embarked on any language of China, Virginia has studied most things under the sun, and I concluded she knew. She replied that it was the household motto: “You never know”; and she placed it in a conspicuous position above the fireplace in my London dining-room. And when guests asked its meaning, of course I translated it for them, with the air of one who had spoken Mandarin from her cradle; and they looked proportionately impressed.

[30]

One day, however, an Oriental scholar of unquestionable authority chanced to be dining with us, and he suddenly raised his glasses and studied the tablet with evident interest.

“May I ask why you have that above the mantelpiece?” he inquired politely.

“Oh, it’s merely the family motto,” I answered airily, “but we have it in Chinese to-night, in your honour.”

“Really! You do surprise me!! It seems so curious to be greeted with that in your house!!!” And he looked at me in undisguised amazement.

Then I grew anxious, and wondered to myself what it did mean; and since discretion is the better part of a good many things, I thought it would be wisest to explain that I hadn’t the faintest idea what it stood for.

He smiled when I confessed. “Well, I can tell you,” he said, as he proceeded to mumble a little in an unknown tongue to himself, reading each collection of strokes in turn. “It means—er—let me see—well—to translate it quite broadly, you understand, in the vernacular, the nearest equivalent in English is ‘Beware of Pickpockets.’”

Truly, you never know!

[31]

Work was extra heavy in my office that week. Like every other business house, we were understaffed, with the majority of our expert men at the front. Moreover, I was trying to get things a little ahead, as I was going away on the Friday.

I did not get home till nearly nine o’clock on the Tuesday following my adoption of Eileen, and by that time I was too tired to trouble about matters domestic. Nevertheless I noticed that the house seemed very draughty; but I put it down to a very high wind that had set in earlier in the day.

As I was going upstairs to bed about half-past ten, I noticed the powerful draught again. I like plenty of air in the house, but after all a line should be drawn somewhere when it is blowing a hurricane, and I said so.

“*Well*, and to think I forgot to tell you!” said Abigail cheerfully. “The skylight’s blown clean away, and rain’s been pouring in like anything on the top landing!” Judging by her pleased expression, you might have thought that the deluge was in gold.

If you have ever been fortunate enough to find yourself minus a fair-sized skylight on a stormy night, and the man of the house away on urgent business, and not expected back for a month, you will know what my feelings were when I heard the news. It is useless for me to try to describe them.

[32]

Virginia and Ursula, who live near me in London, were hastily summoned. By the time we had all done exclaiming, “Well, I never!” singly and in chorus, and had heard full details of the catastrophe repeated for the eighth time by Abigail, it was eleven o’clock. And as no self-respecting builder’s man can do any work after five o’clock (and few seem able to do any before that hour), it was obviously useless to hope for professional aid. So we took a step-ladder to the top landing and piled it on a table, with me on top of all, domestics clutching the step-ladder fervently as I balanced myself on its dizzy height, and exclaiming, “Oh, do be careful, madam!” at frequent intervals; with Virginia and Ursula offering unlimited advice in a running duet.

At last I was high enough to get my head out of the space where the skylight ought to have been, and there I saw it further down the roof. I fished for it with the crook of an umbrella-handle, and got it up at last, though it threatened to blow away again every moment. We managed to secure it by putting some screws in the framework of the roving skylight, and also in the woodwork to which that skylight was supposed to be attached, but wasn’t; and then winding

copper wire round and round both sets of screws. In this way we kept the flighty creature anchored till the morning. I was rather proud of the neat and effectual job I had made of it, when I surveyed it from below. [33]

The builder smiled politely but pitifully when he gazed at my efforts next day. He then proceeded to explain to me that though, of course, he was quite competent to refix that skylight as it ought to be fixed (and as, indeed, it never had been fixed since the day the house was built), nevertheless it would be an exceedingly awkward job. From what I could gather from his technical conversation, and diagrams made with a stubby bit of pencil on old envelopes from his pocket, that skylight had been placed in absolutely the most inaccessible part of the whole roof; it would take all sorts of ladders, to say nothing of scaffolding, to get anywhere near it, etc. It would be a dangerous job, too, and of course he must take every precaution and run no risks. All of which I knew from past experience was by way of letting me know that (being the unfortunate owner of the property) I should have the privilege of settling a nice long bill presently.

I did feebly suggest that rather than imperil the lives of his most valuable-looking assistants, he should simplify matters by dealing with the skylight from the inside. But he only looked at me witheringly and said, “Madam, the hinges are outside.”

Naturally, I was humiliated and effectually silenced.

When, finally, they had accomplished the well-nigh impossible, and reached that skylight, the builder returned to report that never, in all his life, had he seen a roof in worse condition than mine was. It appeared to be simply a special providence that the whole covering to the house had not blown clean away—or else tumbled in on top of us! He said he just wished I would come up and see it; he didn’t ask anyone merely to take his word for it; there it was for me to see; and I might believe him when he said that if the roof needed three new slates it needed three hundred. [34]

Once again I got in a gentle word to the effect that it was strange we had never had any trouble with the roof, nor a drop of rain come through; but the look of injured, virtuous dignity he put on at the mere hint of doubt on my part, made me hastily beg him to proceed with the necessary work—otherwise I saw myself sitting up another night sick-nursing a skylight!

The builder told me I needn’t worry about the gentleman being away; lots of gentlemen he was in the habit of working for were away just now; he would superintend the work his own self, and he went off assuring me that he meant to make a *good* job of it.

Then I sent a note to Eileen, asking her kindly to postpone packing for a few days, as I was unavoidably detained in town.

The men got on the top of the roof most mornings at about half-past six, and apparently started to play golf up there—judging by the sounds overhead. But they always found it too windy, or too wet, or too something, to stay up there, once they had awakened the whole household. So they invariably went away again till about three-thirty in the afternoon—by which time I suppose the roof was thoroughly well aired, and it was safe for them to sit on it and smoke a pipe or two. [35]

It was a fortnight before that roof was finished. Finally they left. And the kitchen staff grew pensive.

But the very day after they had cleared their ladders away, I saw a tiny stream oozing out of the sodden grass in the front garden. I knew, even before the builder returned and looked wise, that it was a leak in the pipe leading from the water-main.

The pipe-mending squad that arrived next morning was not the same as the roof-mending squad; but the kitchen, being quite impartial, recovered its spirits immediately.

These men, evidently most competent, started work in a business-like manner, by removing the two sets of gates, that terminate the semi-circular carriage drive, and blocking up the stable door with them. Next they dug what looked like a network of trenches for giants. They piled up the edging tiles from the beds, and the gravel from the paths, on the front door step; they banked up turf and more gravel under the windows; they uprooted laurels and privet, and the usual array of evergreens that are the only things that will keep alive in a London front garden, and laid them one on top of the other, effectually barricading the tradesmen’s entrance. And when they had made it delightfully impossible for anyone to get either in or out of the house, they one and all came to a halt, and leant wearily on their picks. [36]

Just then a brilliant idea seemed to strike one of them whereby he might make himself a still greater nuisance, and he hurriedly turned off the water.

They spent the remainder of the day resting on their tools—save when they were gallantly passing in cans and jugs of water (borrowed from my neighbour) to smiling Cook or Abigail at the side door.

It rained hard all night, and by next morning we had quite a spacious lake in the front garden. The squad returned to the post of duty, and once more disposed themselves like guardian angels on its banks. When, in sheer exasperation, I asked them how long they were going to leave things like that, and the house without a drop of water, the foreman replied, politely but non-committally, that he couldn’t exactly say, but the Boss was coming round to see me shortly. [37]

The builder arrived later, to inform me that this was a most serious leak; he didn’t know when

he had seen one precisely like it before. Of course, it was partly due to the pipe; how any man could have called himself a plumber, and put in such a pipe as *that!*—well, words failed him! He himself was not a man to boast of his own doings, but he didn't mind telling me that I could take up any piece of ground I liked, where he had laid a pipe, and see the sort *he* put underground.

Then it transpired that the leakage was of such a character that he dare not proceed an inch farther with it without calling in the water company's officials. Did I authorise him to do so? Of course they would charge special fees for "opening up the ground." I wondered where else they would find any to "open up" on my premises, seeing that by this time the whole estate was a gaping void! As I saw the turncock and a variety of other gentlemen with gold letters embroidered on their collars, propping themselves up against my holly hedge, I just said, "Oh, yes; do anything you please."

And they did.

Some of the embroidered ones then proceeded to dig up the whole pavement, and right out into the middle of the road (the leak being inside the garden, close beside my front door!). It does [38] not take long to write about it, but I don't want to mislead you into thinking there was any feverish haste about their methods. Oh, no! theirs was the calm un-hurrying work of the true artist; and the builder's squad stood round admiringly, most careful not to interfere.

Once again the whole lot came to a standstill, and rested on any available implement; and they now made a goodly crowd (I had no idea there were so many non-khaki men still loose), which was further supplemented by a policeman, one or two aged men who had discarded the workhouse for the more leisurely life that modern business offers, and a variety of languid young ladies who had been sent out on urgent errands from sundry local shops.

In the lull, the chief official from the water company sought an interview with me, when he broke the news that never, in all his life, had he seen a more antiquated stop-cock (which, by the way, had been made in Germany) than the one I had had placed (apparently out of sheer perversity or malice) in the front of my premises. It seems that there was no key in the whole of London that would turn that stop-cock; and when finally it had turned it, that key could not be got out again. However, or whenever, I had managed to evade the Eye of Authority so far as to drop that stop-cock into the ground, he could not think; but, at any rate, out it would have to come [39] again.

Here I managed to get in a word sideways, and told him that the much maligned article had been placed there by another squad of men from the same water company (after a similar harangue), and then duly "passed" by an inspector only two years ago.

Two years ago! he exclaimed, why, *that* inspector had been called up in the spring, and he was no loss to the company! Not that he (the speaker) was one to say anything against another man's work, but if I would just come out and examine it for myself (it was raining torrents, and the stop-cock was an island in a watery waste) I would see that the whole affair was scandalous. He was the last to utter an ill-word about any man, more especially behind his back, but conscientiousness compelled him to state that the late inspector was about as fit to be in the employ of a water company as—"as *you* are, ma'am." Evidently he could think of no more hopelessly incapable specimen of humanity.

Then it transpired that the real object of his call on me was to ask whether I authorised him to put in a new stop-cock (more special fees, of course).

As I didn't seem to be left much choice in the matter, and I wasn't sure whether, if I left it in, [40] after being told to take it out, the Defence of the Realm couldn't come and have me shot at dawn, I told him he had my full permission to put in twenty new stop-cocks if he liked; he was at liberty to place them as a trimming outside my garden wall, or as an edging at the kerb, or in a fancy zigzag design around the drive—anything—everything—whatsoever and howsoever he pleased, so long as it enabled him, conscientiously, *to turn on my water again*.

(The lady next door had already said that while she was delighted to give me the water, and would even throw in all the jugs and cans she possessed, she really couldn't spare her coachman (aged 73) for more than half-an-hour at each delivery, as he was the one ewe-lamb left them, since war claimed the rest, and would I kindly see that my kitchen limited their conversation to that extent, and returned him, carriage forward, within that time.)

The Chief Official looked at me thoughtfully for half a moment, and then retired in silence—to have the door-mat he had just vacated immediately monopolised by the builder, who had been waiting respectfully in the background. (I say background, because I can't think of any other comprehensive term that signifies a couple of narrow, wobbly, muddy planks, laid across a well-filled moat; *ground* there was none.)

He congratulated me on having been let off by the Official so easily, and cited instances of [41] owners of property he knew who had been compelled to lay miles of fresh pipes (or it seemed to be miles, judging by the time he took to describe it) as the result of inattention to Official Rules and Regulations regarding Stop-cocks. But he intimated that he had put in a good word for me, and besought them to deal leniently with me, "Knowing, ma'am, how generous you and the gentleman always are."

I didn't respond to the hint.

Just at this point he made an opportunity to suggest that in view of the shocking workmanship revealed in the pipes outside, it would certainly be wise of me to have the pipes overhauled all through the house, because one could never tell when one might burst without a moment's notice, and a flood of water ruin everything. It would only necessitate his taking up the floors in the dining-room and the study and the hall and the kitchens and the greenhouse next the house, and possibly a landing and bath-room and dressing-room upstairs. As it was, the pipes might be leaking terribly under the ground-floors already, disseminating damp and disease throughout the house (though the servants and I were particularly healthy at the time). There was a terrible amount of illness about, he continued; next door to him a little boy had whooping-cough, and the local undertaker, a friend of his, had just told him trade had never been better; although they [42] were working day and night they could hardly manage to execute all the orders. Of course, all this was primarily due to damp.

Even as he spoke he pressed his ample foot so heavily on the hall floor, that but for a stout linoleum I feel sure he would have gone through; then he said it looked to him very much as though dry rot had set in there already, and it would probably be necessary to re-floor the hall.

In vain I reminded him that it had rained without cessation—so far as my distraught memory served me—for the past eighteen months, hence *dry* rot would seem little short of a miracle. But he only looked at me in that pitying way builders do when any feminine owner of property ventures a remark; and he next asked if I had noticed signs of damp anywhere in the upstairs room? After all, the upstairs pipes might be leaking too.

Then I remembered, and I told him there undoubtedly was damp upstairs, now he mentioned it, one patch about two feet square, and another smaller one. He was instantly alert, said it would certainly be one of the pipes leading from the cistern; most dangerous, too, for you never knew when the whole cistern might be flowing down over everything. So I took him up and showed him [43] the big wet patches on a ceiling, one dripping with a melancholy hollow sound into a zinc bath Abigail had placed below; they were on the ceiling directly under that portion of the roof where his men had played golf each morning, the cistern being in another part of the house, and no pipes were anywhere near.

He became silent, and I left him meditating, while I went down to see Virginia, who had come in.

"Ursula and I have been making plans for you," she began, "as you seem too distracted to make any for yourself."

"Distracted! I should think I am; so would you be if you had the cheerful prospect of a cistern emptying itself on top of you at any moment—that is to say, if it ever gets full again—and the whole of the downstairs floor to come up, and dry-rot in the hall, and the Law down on you because you've been harbouring an alien stop-cock, and exactly a pint of water in the house (apart from that which is coming in through the roof, of course), and whooping-cough and a watery grave just ahead of you, and the undertaker too busy to bury you!"

"Just listen to me," she said soothingly. "You are probably not aware that you have got the back of your skirt fastened somewhere about your left hip, and the braiding that ought to be [44] down the centre in front, is just at your right hand. Now when a woman puts on her clothes like *that*, it's a sure sign she needs a little rest. Therefore I'm going to take you right off to the cottage first thing to-morrow morning; I've told Eileen to be ready; and Ursula is coming in here to assume charge of affairs till such time as those amiable British workmen see fit to remove themselves."

I protested that I was far too necessary to the well-being of London to be spared at the moment, and widespread havoc would result if I left town at this juncture. By way of reply, she asked if I would take some linen blouses with me, as well as my thicker things, in case the weather turned warmer? And then she summoned Abigail to help her do my packing.

Next morning, as I was being tenderly placed in the one and only cab our suburb now possesses, the whole battalion of workmen, embroidered and otherwise, paused respectfully in the midst of further excavations and a vastly extended scheme of earthworks they had started upon; and I saw a look on the face of the Chief Official that plainly said he considered they were removing me to an asylum none too soon!

IV

The Hill-Side Trail

[45]

Eileen didn't say much on the journey, save an occasional burst of ecstasy when she saw a rabbit sitting up and washing its face. It was interesting to watch the Devonshire ancestry looking out through eyes that hitherto had seen little but the sordid grey-brown grime of London, but were now drinking in everything on that loveliest of English lines—and where can you equal the G.W.R. for beautiful scenery, combined with such good carriage springs, such courteous officials, and such always-attentive guards?

Owing to the accommodating character of the Time Table, as re-arranged by our paternal government, there was no Wye Valley connection, and we had some time to wait at Chepstow. We went into the hotel and I ordered a meal, Eileen choosing fried ham and eggs as the greatest flight of luxury to which her mind could soar. I admit it was reckless extravagance for war-time, but Virginia and I, to say nothing of Eileen, were cold and hungry, and really one can't be held accountable for one's actions under such circumstances. It was a noble dish when it came, enough for five people.

[46]

When Eileen had cleared her first helping, she merely gazed at me with a seraphic smile, still clutching her knife and fork. I asked if she would like any more?

"No, thank you, ma'am," she replied, in the most polite company style. But seeing her eyes still on the dish, I pressed her to have another slice; I knew she would have several hours of keen fresh air before we could get our next meal.

She leant a little towards me, her knife and fork held upright on the table the while. "Well, it's like this," she said, in a loud stage whisper, that sent a ripple over the few people who were in the coffee room. "Does you have to pay for it whether you eats it or not?"

I nodded.

"Then I *will* have some more, thank you," and she heaved a sigh of deep contentment.

Perhaps it was as well Abigail didn't come!

The drive from the station to my cottage seemed to be through one long vista of sweet odours.

Up to Monmouth the Wye is a tidal river, and the water was rushing up, backed by a strong wind, bringing with it, faint but unmistakable, the salt tang of the sea, that seems all the more delicious when it has swept over woods and meadows and ploughed fields.

[47]

As we left the river bank and started the long uphill climb, the scent of the newly-turned earth became more and more insistent as one passed stray farms and cottages, where the most was being made of the little bright sunshine.

Although it was only the end of February, the brave bit of sunshine had stirred in the larches thoughts of coming spring, and already there was a suspicion of the resinous odour that is one of their many delightful characteristics.

But it would be impossible to name even a fraction of the perfumes that were floating about that day: everything in Nature had responded to the welcome sun-warmth; and incense was rising from myriads of leaf-buds, closely sheathed as yet; from uncountable armies of grass blades; from flowering moss, and uncurling ferns, and bursting acorns; from the hundreds of thousands of catkins swinging on the hazels; from primroses pushing up pink stems and yellow blossoms in sheltered corners, where they had been protected by drifts of dead leaves. And probably the leaves of the wild hyacinths, now an inch or so above ground, had brought up some of the sweet earth-scents from below; likewise the blue-green leaves of the daffodils just poking through the soil, and the snowdrop spears, whose white flowers were nodding in big patches in orchards and front gardens. And it is certain that some early violets were hiding under their leaves.

[48]

It is noticeable that while the scents of autumn are often strong and bitter, the scents of spring are usually delicate and sweet.

It seems to me that in time we town-dwellers will lose our sense of smell! The odours that pervade our cities are so surpassingly abominable, that in sheer self-defence we have to "turn off our nose," if you know what I mean by that; we are getting to smell as little as possible, just as we are getting to breathe as little as possible, owing to the vitiated air of the great crowded centres; with the result that we seem to be losing our power to smell sensitively and keenly, as well as our power to breathe deeply.

In town, the winds and the seasons seem only distinguishable by the grade of one's underwear. Outer garments are no guide, for in December and January one meets bare chests in the public thoroughfares and transparent gowns indoors; while in August, with equal suitability, we trim a chiffon blouse with fur! (and, by the way, it is instructive to recall the fact that it was a German Court dressmaker who first set going the inappropriate, vulgar, inartistic fashion of trimming frail transparent dress materials with fur).

If you live in clean fresh air, however, you know the seasons by their odours, and it is possible to distinguish with absolute certainty the four winds of heaven by their scent, just as at sea you can smell land, or an iceberg, before it is anywhere within sight. [49]

The scent of the east wind is entirely different from the scent of the north wind, though both are cold and penetrating. In the same way, the scent of growing bracken—for instance—is entirely different from the scent of moss. But it takes time for the town-dweller to be able to distinguish between the more subtle of the thousand fragrances that Nature flings broadcast about the countryside, so blunted is the sense of smell by the coarse reek of dirt, and petrol, and chemicals, and smoke, and over-breathed poisoned atmosphere that does duty for “air” in the modern centres of civilisation.

Virginia was vowing that she could actually smell the salmon in the river, when we entered the village; at the same time, the fish cart that makes a weekly tour of these hills was standing outside the “New Inn” (dated 1724). I omitted to draw her attention to the coincidence, because at that moment the lady of the post-office stepped out into the road and waved a telegram at our approaching steed.

It was from the Head of Affairs, briefly stating that he had returned home, safe and sound, that he would soon have the little mess cleared up, and that I need not worry.

Naturally, my inclination was to turn round there and then, get back home as soon as possible, and fall on his overcoat; but Virginia reminded me that there was no train returning that day, and if there were, we should probably only cross one another on the road—in accordance with my usual method of meeting people. [50]

So I went on, a huge load having been lifted from my brain. I am sufficiently out-of-date and weak-minded to be profoundly thankful when the Head of Affairs steps in and re-adjusts my always-very-much-in-a-tangle affairs, and sets them on a business-like basis again: and knowing his capability to deal both with mind and matter, I didn’t worry another moment, though I was sceptical about any speedy clearing up of the mess!

And because my heart was lighter, I seemed to see so many things I had not noticed before. In every sheltered corner shoots were showing, and green things starting from the earth—and every shoot set one’s mind running on ahead to the things that were yet to be. I have heard people deplore the fact that human nature is so prone to anticipate events; I have been told that the reason animals live such a placid, contented life, is because they only concentrate on the present. It may be so; but personally, I wouldn’t be without my anticipations, even though it may mean a loss of placidity.

The commandment is to take no *anxious* thought for the morrow; there is nothing said against looking ahead for happiness. [51]

And a wander among our hills and along our lanes on a mild February day, means that in addition to the loveliness of early spring, you sense the beauty of summer—and much more besides.

Every soft, grey-green shoot on the tangled honeysuckle stems sets you thinking of the yellow, rosy-tinged blossoms that will fill the long summer evenings with fragrance; every crimson thorn and bursting leaf on the wild rose, tells of far-flung branches that will arch the hedges and flush them with pale-pink flowers later on; the rosettes of foxglove leaves on the roadside banks remind you of the bells that will be ringing all along the lanes when summer sets in.

And although the fresh green of all the courageous little things that have braved the winds and peeped forth, is exquisite enough in itself to satisfy that eternal craving of the human heart for something fresh from the Hand of God, yet the promise that each proclaims carries one into further realms of loveliness, and conjures up visions that can never be put down in black and white.

One dimly understands how impossible was the task St. John set himself when he tried to describe the glimpse that was permitted him of the City not made with hands. He wrote of gold, and pearls, and crystal, and inexhaustible gems—yet these are but cold, lifeless things, and the list of them leaves us unmoved. With all the words at his command, with all the similes he could muster, nothing brings us so near a conception of that vision as his indication of the Divine understanding of poor human needs, and the promise of a fuller, richer life, freed from earthly disadvantages and with nothing to sever us from God. [52]

At a time like the present, when souls innumerable are bearing silent sorrows, and the whole earth is scarred with the iron hoof of the Prussian beast, how much more to us than all the radiance of topaz, jacinth, sapphire and amethyst is the assurance—“There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain . . . and there shall be no more curse: but the Throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and His servants shall serve Him: and they shall see His Face.”

At this season of new-bursting life we, too, catch a glimpse of the Beyond, and underlying all our delight in the material beauty of spring, is there not the still deeper joy arising from the promise it brings of greater beauty yet unfulfilled—beauty that transcends all earthly imaginings?

The heart, whether conscious of it or not, assuredly finds comfort in the reminder of the Resurrection that Nature whispers wheresoever we may turn. [53]

It is no mere haphazard chance that Easter falls about the time of the blossoming of the bare blackthorn bough.

One very satisfying feature of the landscape, about this part of the river side, is the sight of the cottages, yellow-washed or white, that seem literally to nestle in the hollows on the hillside. While crowded streets hold no charm for me, and modern mansions leave me unmoved, there is something very appealing about a little homestead standing in its own bit of garden, with its couple of beehives beside a towering sunflower, its few gnarled apple trees, its cow and hayrick maybe, if there is a bit of pasture land about the cottage that has been redeemed by the hardest of labour from the rocky hillside, its fowls clucking about on the fringe of the small holding, its wood pile, its cabbages and marrows and rhubarb and black currants, all according to the season, its hedge draped with washing—too white ever to have come into touch with that modern improvement the steam laundry. In looking at all this, you are looking for the most part at the total worldly wealth of the cottager, wealth, too, that has often been acquired by the genuine sweat of his (and her) brow. It may not seem much to you when you run your eye over it; but it [54] speaks of home in a way that no city dwelling has ever yet attained to. Here is not merely shelter, or just a place wherein to spend the night; it is the very centre of life to the inmates; the major portion of their food is either growing in, or running about, the garden. The side of bacon on the rack in the kitchen came from their own pigsty; the potatoes, the onions, the swedes in the outhouse grew from their own planting; the big yellow vegetable marrows hanging up in the kitchen, and the pots of black currant and plum jam in the cupboard, originated in their garden. The little plot is endeared to them because it provides them with the necessities of life, and the dwellers in the cottages live very close to the fundamental things that really matter, even though they may lack some of the items that over-civilization has ticketed the refinements of life.

And after a winter in town spent in a stern wrestle for coal, potatoes, butter and milk and bacon and many of the other necessities of life, it is bliss indeed to land in this haven of sufficiency, where queues are unknown, and where the cow and the hen do their duty in life each according to her station, and the garden and the forests do much of the rest!

Even then, one has not gone to the root of the matter. Many of these cottages are the ancestral [55] homes of the people who live in them, homes that were literally wrested from the hillside by the forefathers of those who are now living in them. And in such cases the roots go far deeper than the surface soil. An ancestral home, no matter how small, can mean more to the inmates than the most gorgeous pile that the newly-rich millionaire can raise.

And to my mind, by no means the least of the many hideous sins for which the Germans will ultimately be called to account at the world’s Bar of Justice, will be the violation of the homes, the landmarks, and the ancient birthrights of unoffending peoples, while they themselves sat smug and sanctimonious under their own vines and fig trees, self-complacent in the knowledge that they were protected from deserved retribution by their devil-driven guns.

When at last we reached the little white gate, leading into the cottage garden, we stood for a moment, as we always do, and looked at the peak beyond peak, and the deep lying valleys.

Sloping away from our very feet were our own orchards and coppices, the bright lichen on the twisted old apple trees showing almost a blue-green against the purple of the bare birch tree branches still lower down.

The sun was dropping behind the larches that ridged the opposite hills. Birds everywhere were [56] explaining to each other that they must—they really *must*—set about house-hunting the very first thing in the morning.

Out in the lane, the mountain spring was over-full and singing a riotous song of jubilation as it tumbled out of the little wooden trough into the pool below, and tore away down into the valley.

“It’s a marvellous world,” said Virginia as we gazed at the vast panorama that stretched before us; and then she added, “Do you know, I’ve come to the conclusion that I prefer a spring of water outside the gate to all the stop-cocks and water-mains in the world.”

Next morning a letter from the Head of Affairs skipped airily over the episode of his meeting with the builder, concentrating on the point that I was to stay where I was, as he would join me in a few days. But Ursula supplied the missing details.

“After I saw you off at Paddington,” she wrote, “I hurried back as fast as I could; I felt that I should at least like to see if the four outside walls remained of what was once your happy home. Because, though we didn’t let you know, the builder confided to me, as you were leaving, that he had discovered the whole front of the house was in a most shocking condition, necessitating [57] prompt ‘shoring-up’ (whatever that may mean), and requiring to be underpinned immediately. But by the time I reached the place where your gates ought to have been—but weren’t—I found the Head of Affairs (he’d sent a wire as soon as he landed in England, but it evidently never reached you) bestowing as much gratuitous eloquence on the builder and the Water Company as would have run an election. What did he say? Why, everything that is in the English language,

and in a hundred different keys! Sometimes he singled out some separate ‘official,’ and gave it him, personally, in considerable detail.

“His analysis of the private character of the builder was nothing short of an epic; and as for the turncock!—what he said about turncocks was a revelation to an unsuspecting ratepayer like myself—No, it might be as well not to repeat it; but I feel sure that turncock won’t call, with a long double knock, for a Christmas-box next December. Indeed, his remarks on the mental capacity of every single person employed by the Water Company lead me to think that your family won’t be really popular with the Metropolitan Water Board for some time to come!

“And then, when he had said everything that could possibly be said about each man standing there, and about water and pipes and stop-cocks and gravel and pavement and suchlike things, [58] he announced his intention of going on the roof to inspect where the builder proposed to put the pile of new slates.

“Now it’s a funny thing, but that builder was not nearly so pressing that he should go up and see for himself, as he was when talking to you. But he insisted, and once up, he started all over again, and made such forceful comments on the subject of slates—and more especially the men who put on the slates—that I was afraid they would come through the roof.

“Well, I don’t think I ever saw a more wilted-looking blossom than that builder when he was finally had inside and given his marching orders. Even before the two had descended from the roof, the embroidered men were hurriedly toppling the earth back into the trenches. I believe they’ve had twenty-four hours allowed them to get things put to rights again. And I think they will hurry, for they don’t seem anxious for more of the master’s society than is absolutely necessary. At any rate, he seemed quite able to manage matters without any assistance from me, and so I left it in his hands, and I’m coming down by the next train.”

V

[59]

Just Outside the Back-Door

There is one spot in the Flower-Patch that is loved by grown-ups as well as birds. It is the little grotto that is just outside the cottage back-door. It has made itself by making the best of circumstances. Can I describe it so that you will see it, I wonder?

First there comes a narrow garden bed, full of old-fashioned flowers—Bee-balm, Jacob's Ladder, and Solomon's Seal; then a rough stone wall about two feet high keeps the earth above from tumbling down on to the narrow bed below. The whole of the garden being on a steeply sloping hillside, the earth has to be propped up at intervals by these lovely little ranks of natural rockery, planted by Nature with hart's-tongue and a variety of other little ferns, with mother-of-millions and creeping ivy, with stone-crop and house-leeks. How *do* the things get there? How do they plant themselves? Isn't it marvellous this unending gardening of Nature!

On a level with the top of the low wall is another garden bed. You see the ground is rising, rising up to the clouds all the time at the back of the cottage, just as it is falling, falling down to [60] the river in the valley all the time in front of the cottage. This next terrace bed loses itself entirely in a miniature wild wood and drops down into a tiny dell, just big enough for a couple of small children to give a tea-party to the fairies in.

Here it is that the beauty of the whole place seems to climax. The other side of the dell is bounded by a large grey boulder, about six feet high, flanked by a few smaller ones tumbling about at various angles. The stone was too big for the original gardener to move, so he wisely left it where it was. They often do that on these hills. I know one cottage that has a most substantial stone table in the centre of the kitchen. It is just a huge stone that was too big to move by ordinary methods when they erected the cottage, and so they simply left it, and built the kitchen round it.

But my boulder in the grotto is not so much for use as for beauty. True, it supports a plum tree that springs up from behind it, just outside the orchard rails. But the way Nature has festooned that rock is worth going a long way to study. From the ground at one side springs a wild rose with stout stems that grow fairly straight and erect, considering it is a wild rose, and this sends out long curved and arched sprays, dotted with pink blossoms.

At the other side is a yellow jasmine, evidently a stray from the garden. [61]

The stone itself is thickly covered with moss, small-leaved ivy (and isn't small-leaved ivy lovely in its colouring very often, in the early months of the year, some brown and yellow, some red and green?) and little ferns, till scarcely a trace of the grey stone can be seen, and where it does push through it is splashed with milky-green lichen.

Then wandering over all is a wealth of honeysuckle that catches hold of everything impartially, and twines itself in all directions. At the base of the precipitous boulder the grass is thick and green; violets, the big purple-blue scented sort, cluster all around the corners, and hold up rich-looking blossoms; primroses laugh out in the sunshine; snowdrops dingle their bells to a delightful melody, if only our ears were more delicately tuned to catch the music; daffodils blow their own trumpets above their clumps of blue-green leaves; the ground-ivy creeps and creeps and lights up the green with its lovely blue flowers that have never received half the praise that is their due. And in a damp spot there is a mass of blue forget-me-nots, with one clump that is pure white.

Large ferns send up giant fronds to make cool shadows at one end. Tiny ferns busy themselves with the decoration of odd corners. A hazel bush reaches over and joins hands with the plum tree, [62] to form a fitting roof to so lovely a dell; as I write—in February—it is a mass of fluttering catkins, and the plum tree is talking about shaking out a few flowers. But without these the place is already full of blossoms.

In a month or six weeks the old trees in the orchard behind will be like bouquets of pink and white blossoms.

You approach the grotto by a tiny path, about wide enough for a child; the entrance to the path is marked by a stunted old bush of lavender at one side, and a grey-green clump of sage at the other. They stand, with stems twisted and rugged like gnomes, guarding the entrance to the fairy's playground; but if you rub them the right way they send up a lovely fragrance, and then you know you are admitted to the freedom of the enchanted spot.

It is so sheltered in this corner, and protected from the cold winds by the high hill behind, that even the ferns from last year are green and fresh-looking, you would think there had not been any winter here. And the brambles that clamber over the orchard rail—assuring the world at large that they are a highly respectable orchard-grown fruit tree, and not a wild weed—are still green and crimson and a rich purple with the lovely tints of last autumn.

The birds are fond of this grotto, and other wild things have found it out. Last summer, when [63] the boulder seemed to be dripping with large juicy crimson honeysuckle berries, I watched a big bullfinch gorging to his heart's content, his red waistcoat mingling well with the red of the berries. Mrs. Bullfinch was also there, in her less obtrusive grey and browny-black dress, and she had a couple of youngsters too. But do you think the father had any intention of sharing the

delicacies? Not a bit of it! Every time his wife approached from the rear surreptitiously to snatch a berry, he turned round and drove her off (I really could have pardoned her if she had joined the suffragettes on the spot). She ranged her family along the orchard rail just above, and made various attempts to forage for them. But it was no use. So she took up her position beside the family on the rail and waited patiently, making plaintive sounds the while, till Mr. Bully had stuffed to repletion and flew away. I was glad there were a few hundred berries still left for the family. And didn't they have a good time!

Just now the blue tits are very busy about the fruit trees, and a robin comes out from somewhere in the grotto at unexpected moments and stands motionless on a stone, with a bright eye cocked up inquiringly at the human intruder. I fancy he has chosen it for his summer residence.

A squirrel is very attached to this part of the garden. Sometimes one sees him, when the nuts are ripe, scurrying along the orchard rail in ever such a hurry, his chestnut-red tail bigger than himself. There are specially good nuts on that hazel-tree. [64]

This morning I went out of the back-door, to find a large rabbit sitting and sunning himself at his ease among the snowdrops and violets in the little dell—within a yard of the door.

The weather has been like April to-day, brilliant sunshine and heavy showers. Suddenly the sky behind the cottage was lit up with a rainbow—a glorious span of colour that seemed to be resting on the hill-top. Then it dropped a bit lower at one end, and the big pine trees that stand higher up at the top of the orchard looked most majestic against it. Lower it seemed to drop, and then I distinctly saw the place where it touched the ground. You know they say there is a pot of gold buried at the end of the rainbow—where do you think that rainbow pointed? Why, straight at my fairy dell! So I know there is gold buried under that boulder, and that is why there is always sunshine peeping through the green; first it comes out in the yellow jasmine, then it flares in the daffodils, later you find it in the dancing buttercups and in the lovely honeysuckle, finally it waves to you a bright "Good-bye, Summer," in the clump of golden-rod that is near the entrance.

VI

Dwellers in the Flower-Patch

[65]

February on our hills may be anything—from September round to May. Sometimes it is mild and sunny and sweet with the scent of newly-turned earth; or it may be bitingly cold, and very bleak in the exposed parts, with a shivery-ness even in the valleys. You just take your chance, sure, at least, of fresh air, peace—and the birds.

That is one of the perennial joys of the place; summer or winter you know there will be a host of little fluttering things all ready to welcome you as a friend, if you will but show the least bit of friendliness towards them.

Not that their greeting is entirely cordial when you arrive. The starlings are probably the first to see you; they are arrant busybodies, and seem to spend most of their time retailing gossip from the ridge of the red-tiled roof. No wonder their nests are the lazy make-shifts they are!

A perfect scandal to the bird world, Mrs. Missel-Thrush has told me; it's a wonder the sanitary authorities don't insist on their being pulled down and rebuilt! Anything, stuffed in anywhere; a [66] handful of straw in the chimney; dried grass and oddments of rubbish collected in a corner under the tiles; you wouldn't think any self-respecting egg would consent to be hatched out in such a nest!—certainly no young thrush would put up with so disreputable a nursery. But then, as we all know, the thrushes come of very good family; whereas the starlings!—well—not that one would say a word against one's neighbours, but since everyone can see and hear it for themselves, the starlings are simply "impossible."

But the starlings don't seem to be the least bit worried by the cold shoulder of the more exclusive residents; they gabble and bawl the whole day long, from the top of the roof, while the one who has managed to secure the apex of the weathercock is positively insulting. And the moment we turn into the little white gate, they begin.

"See who's down there? I say, everybody, look! There's that wretched white dog again! Remember what a perfect nuisance he was last August, when we'd just got the youngsters out of the nest? We were afraid every moment lest he would start to climb the trees like their old cat used to. Hi! there, you on the barn-roof! Have you heard the news?" Shriek, shriek! chatter, chatter, chatter! So they go on for hours at a time.

Then policeman-robin arrives. "What's all this noise about?" he demands, from the post of the [67] gate leading into the upper orchard. "Oh, good gracious! it's that horrid white dog again! Nearly shoved his nose right into our nest in the woodruff bank last year! Chit! chit! chit! But don't you worry, my dear" (this to the lady he has just married); "I'll drive him away; you can trust to me," and he flicks his conceited little tail, and flies to the top of a tree stump near by, still calling out his "Chit! chit! chit!" in severe reprimand.

Next the blackbird, hunting for a little fresh meat among the grey, mossed-over stones that edge the garden beds, raises his head and cranes his neck above the overhanging heart's-ease trails, and the foliage of the pinks, to see what the commotion is all about.

"I say, Martha!" (to the demure body in brown, who has been meekly tracking along behind him), "there's that terror of a dog again! Recollect when he was here last year? Never a chance to enjoy a snail in peace; before you'd given the shell more than one tap on the stone, down he'd rush. Here he comes now! Slip along quick to the laurels. I say, that was a near shave! Chut! chut! chut! Go away! What business have you to come here disturbing respectable old inhabitants like us?"

And so the hubbub continues, while the small white dog with the brown ears trots in a [68] business-like manner all over the place, making sure that every corner-stone, and bush, and gate-post is just where he left it last time. And having ascertained that the universe is still intact, he sets off to a particular spot in the lower orchard, sniffs about till he finds the identical tuft of grass he is searching for; whereupon he eats, and eats, at the long green blades, much in the same way as we fall on the young lettuces, or the black currants, or whatever else may be in season when we come down. Though why this particular tuft of grass should be the only one he selects out of the acres and acres at his disposal, is always a mystery to us. Yet he never forgets it; straight for that small patch in the middle of the big orchard he makes, once he has done his tour of inspection round the estate.

Before I have been in the house half-an-hour, I start making overtures to the birds, and they immediately respond. I proceed by way of the bird-board.

This may need explanation.

Outside one of the living-room windows I have established a board that projects about a foot beyond the wide window-ledge. At first I had it resting on the window-ledge, but I found that the birds were down out of sight, when they came up to feed, hidden by the sash and window-frame. [69] Therefore I had it raised to bring it exactly on a level with the glass. It is fixed securely on supports, so that it won't blow away, neither would a flock of jays and wood-pigeons overbalance it. A couple of stout bits of tree branches have been fixed upright at the sides; these are very popular, as they make the board look less bare, more tree-like and familiar to the birds. They love

to alight on a branch, before going down to feed, and they often return to the branch when they have eaten their fill, saucing their relations and daring them to touch a morsel of the food, which each bird seems to consider its own exclusive property! Strips of narrow lath have been nailed to the outside edges of the board, projecting about an inch above the level of the board. This wooden rim saves the food from rolling off, or blowing away too easily; it also gives the birds a little perch that they love to stand on while they run their eyes over the menu.

On this board—in times of plenty—go crumbs, seed, rolled oats, maize, peas, little bits of fat or suet, anything in fact that birds will eat; and if the weather be cold, a lump of suet will be lashed to each branch, for the tits to peck at, with occasional bunches of bacon rind, hanging like tassels.

In war-time the birds just have to take what they can get.

Within twenty-four hours of our arrival, the birds have re-discovered their food board, and over [70] they come, from garden and adjoining orchards and woods, with such a whirring of wings, directly they hear the window being opened. In the apple tree, in the laburnum tree, in the damson tree they wait, and the moment I move away from the window, down they pounce, and such a squabbling and chatter and succession of arguments takes place. In a few days' time, as they get more used to me, they flutter down before I have even spread out their meal, perching on the edge of the board and eyeing me with the most audacious nerve. The robin is positively impudent in his demand that I should hurry up!

And it is not longer than a week before they come hopping right into the room, hunting all over the breakfast table if the window be left open, and I have not been down sufficiently early to meet their requirements. If the days are cold, and outside food scarce, they tap the window sharply with their beaks, to call attention to their needs, while plaintive, appealing little faces look anxiously at me.

And oh, they are such a pretty little crowd. One has no idea what clear, beautifully bright colour our British birds can show, unless one has seen them right away from the taint of smoke [71] and grime. Town environments, be they ever so rural, are always reminiscent of the chimneys in the distance, or the railways that cut them up. But on these hills, where cottage chimneys are very few and far between, and what smoke there is, is usually wood smoke, some of the birds are exceedingly lovely.

There is the great-tit, brilliantly yellow as a daffodil, with an admixture of black velvet and pure white; he and his wife quite take your breath away as they splash down, out of space, and flitter about among the sober thrushes and darker blackbirds. And when, in the summer, they bring their babies along with them, I don't think there is a prettier sight in creation than the little bluey-grey balls of fluff, that peck daintily at the bits of suet, and then hiss vigorously and scold at the big wasps that come and steal it from under their very beaks! So tame and innocent of fear they are, that they come into the room whenever the window is left open; and mother and father follow them, quite as trustfully.

Then again, we all think we know the blue-tit; but when you see him in the wilds he is a very different-looking morsel from the dirty-blue apology you meet nearer town. On the bird-board, he is almost metallic in the brightness of his blue-green feathers, and the lovely tint of yellow. He raises his crest feathers, with pleasure, when he sees the suet on the branch; and over the little [72] acrobat goes, hanging head downwards or clinging with one tiny claw to a piece of twig; it is all one to him, he swings about like a bright enamel pendant.

The male chaffinch is another very gay little fellow, with his warm red and pretty blue and yellow. He calls "Spink, spink," in clear penetrating notes, as he lands on the board; and up comes his wife—one of the most shapely and elegant of all the small birds, with the dearest little face!

Mr. and Mrs. Bullfinch invariably come together, unless she is detained at home with the family. They perch on the edge of the drinking saucer, side by side, like a pair of solemn paroquets; he, very beautiful in crimson and black velvet; she, decidedly more homely and nondescript.

But I can't go through the whole list, there is such a crowd—including a little flock of eight goldfinches that for two winters have always been about the garden together.

Jays, with their handsome wing feathers and ugly, very ugly, mouths, swoop down continually, scaring the small birds to vanishing point, and gobbling up the food by the shovelful! Magpies in plenty perch on the garden rails, but only once has one come to the board when I have been there, and then he got his tail so mixed up with the decorative branches, that he had the fright of [73] his life, and never repeated the adventure.

Wood pigeons are regular in their attendance, when other food is scarce. Oh, certainly, I know all that is to be said on the subject of encouraging wood pigeons! But—have you ever studied the peacock and wine-colour gleam on their necks, when unsmirched by smoke or grime? If so, you will understand my admiration for them. And, in any case, ours isn't a farming area; there is no corn here for them to squander, and although they sigh all summer long, in the fir trees, "Take *two* pears, Tommy! Take *two* pears, Tommy!—*do!*" there are very few pears available that Tommy would even look at; most that grow in the orchards around are the harsh, bitter variety, used for

making the drink known as “perry” (the pear equivalent of apple cider).

The wood pigeons have helped me back to health and strength many a time, with their soft crooning in the larches, and their quiet talk of things above the petty strife and noisy clamour of the struggling market place. Therefore, I don’t say them nay, in times of plenty, if I have a little to spare, and they chance to need it.

Of all the bird family, however, I think the coal-tits are our favourites—and there are *such* a [74]
quantity of them. Coal-tits always abound in the neighbourhood of larch woods and birches, which accounts for the numbers that dart about my garden; there are birch woods lower down the hill below the cottage, as well as the larch woods up above; and both birch and larch cluster thick down one side of the house to shield it from the cold winds.

Though the coal-tit is not brightly-coloured, like its relations, there is something very delightful about his soft grey garb, and his black head with its light grey or nearly white streak down the back. Like the robin, he always looks well-tailored, not a feather out of place, not a draggled filament anywhere. And he is so extraordinarily alert; he doesn’t seem to give himself time to fly, he darts and dives and flits all over the place, and seems to have an appetite proportionately equal to that of the proverbial alderman.

Down he dives the minute the food appears. He stands very erect on his slim little legs (no squatting down on his breast bone, as the sparrows and even the chaffinches often do); he cocks his head from side to side, promptly decides on the largest lump of fat he can find; seizes it, and flies up into a big fir tree, where, apparently, he bolts the whole lump instantaneously! At any rate, before you have time to see where he alighted, down he dives, seizes another big piece, and [75]
off he goes again. He seems to eat twice his own size in suet in a few minutes! But I conclude he must drop some of it, though I’ve never been able to prove it. And the theory of a nestful of hungry beaks doesn’t always explain his voraciousness; for he disposes of just as much in the winter as in nesting time.

Yet, in spite of his appetite, we love him, for he is so tiny and so wonderfully alert; one marvels how so much energy can be boxed up in such a small body.

Visitors who have never had much to do with birds at close quarters—and the birds may be said to be part of the family at this cottage, for they live with us and meal with us—are usually surprised at the differences and the distinctiveness of their various personalities.

The robin not only adopts you at once, but he proceeds to supervise your every action, and instals himself as your personal attendant. Probably this is all the more emphasized by the fact that he will not allow any rival to encroach on his particular territory. Most birds seem to peg out a claim at the beginning of the season, and to resent, more or less, the intrusion of any other of its own kind. Swallows and sparrows and rooks, and a few others, build in colonies, but the majority of birds seem to prefer a little domain each to himself, wife and family, and you will find [76]
one pair of blackbirds driving another from the laurel bush they have chosen, or chasing strangers from the particular garden path they call their own.

Though starlings feed—and chatter—in flocks, one particular pair of starlings make it their business to oust any other starling that they find on the bird board.

But the robin can be a perfect terror in the way he seeks to domineer over the whole earth. It is a very large area that he marks off for his individual own, and woe betide any other robin who tries to defy him—unless he be the stronger of the two. One of our robins killed his own wife (we conclude, as she disappeared, after a series of thrashings he gave her daily!), and then he injured the wing of one of his own youngsters, because we had petted them, and given them food inside the living room.

The father used to hide behind a stone down on the garden bed, and watch as his family—the mother and two babies—nervously and timidly approached the bird-board, looking round anxiously lest father should see! Then, when they started to feed, he would hiss out the dreadfullest of wicked words at them, and fling himself on them, bashing them with his beak—a positive little fury.

So one day I put some food on the table inside the room, and the down-trodden ones hopped in. [77]
I shut the window before the irate father could follow them. He seemed demented with rage, when he saw them feeding and couldn’t get at them; he literally stamped his foot, and viciously tossed off all the pieces of food that were on the board, flinging them to the ground in a most highly-glazed specimen of temper!

I let the family out by a side window, instead of the bird-board window, and they evaded their loving and affectionate relative for a little while. But he found them at last; and went for his wife, while the children cheeped forlornly among the pansies in the border. We never saw her again, poor, plucky little soul; and one of the youngsters dragged a broken wing along the path next day, explaining to me, pitifully, that he couldn’t possibly get up to the bird-board now, neither could he find mother anywhere.

I took him in, and tried to save his life—but it was no use. With all our knowledge and skill and discoveries and training, what clumsy, inadequate creatures we are in comparison with a little

mother bird!

Less harrowing was the incident of a robin who, on one occasion, came inside, in order to get more than his share of provender if possible, when he was suddenly startled by the dog running into the room. Instead of flying through the window that was open, he made for a closed one, banging his head with such force against the glass that the blow stunned him, and he fell senseless to the ground. [78]

I picked him up, and tried all the restoratives I could think of, a drop of water on his beak, a cold splash on his head, but to no purpose; he lay, just a tiny handful of beautiful feathers, in my hand; so light, so helpless, so altogether pathetic—it hurt me badly to gaze at the small mite that only the minute before had been talking to me, and cheeking me, and liking me (yes, I am sure he did), and I unable now to do a thing to bring back the gaiety and life and sparkle to the poor still body.

I felt sure he was dead, yet to give him every chance, I placed him in a nest of soft flannel out on the window-ledge; the day was warm, but there was a breeze that might perhaps revive him. And as a last offering—one does so try to do all one can!—I put a tempting piece of suet near his inanimate beak. And how unnatural it seemed to see that suet remain untouched in his vicinity!

I took my work and sat where I could see if he so much as stirred a claw. But for a quarter of an hour there wasn't the slightest sign of movement, except when the wind gently ruffled his feathers—and how exquisite they were, the blue so unlike the ordinary blue, the red much more red than the London robins, and the bronze-brown so glinting. [79]

At last I decided it was useless to watch any longer, for his eyelids had never so much as flickered.

I was folding up my work, when a big yellow tit flew on to the window ledge, hopped over inquiringly to the suet, and started to sample it. In an instant up jumped the corpse, and with an angry "Chit! chit!" hurled himself at the interloper; and the last I saw of him was chasing the yellow tit all across the garden.

Don't ask me to explain; I am only telling you what happened under my own eyes.

Yes, robin *père* can be a villain; he also can be the extreme reverse. Like the majority of the rest of us, he shows to the most amiable advantage when there is no rival to distract public admiration. So long as he is the centre, as well as the beginning and the end, of the bird universe, he is sweetness itself.

No other bird is so keenly alive to all my comings and goings. It doesn't matter how fully occupied he may be with the settlement of every other bird's affairs, I have but to go up the garden with fork or spade or broom, and before I have turned half-a-dozen clods, or pulled out a handful of weeds, I am conscious of a soft streak through the air, though I hardly see it; there he sits on a low branch of a currant bush close to my hand, or stands motionless on an edging stone at my very feet. If I take no notice of him, in all probability he starts a Whisper Song to call attention to himself. [80]

Have you ever heard this? It suggests nothing so much as elf-land music; I know no song exactly like it. You seem to hear a bird warbling most delightfully, but it is far, far away. You raise your eyes, and scan the trees around, but no singing bird can you discover; you decide it must be farther off—but what a haunting charm there is about it.

Then it ceases. Mr. Robin is hoping that you have understood what he has been saying. But no, the obtuse human just goes on weeding the path as before; so the Whisper Song starts again. This time you think it resembles a very mellow musical box shut up in some distant room.

Suddenly you see him, singing straight at you, so close to your hand that it gives you quite an uncanny feeling for the moment; and you wonder: Who is he—what is he—that he should be saying all this to me, obviously to me, and to no one else but me?

Robin doesn't encourage you in daydreams, however, he means business; and once he sees that he has secured your undivided attention, he discards the Whisper Song and comes to the point. Down on to the path he drops, seizes an unwary worm that your energy has brought to light; then tosses it over scornfully and flirts a contemptuous tail, which says as plainly as any tale that was ever told, "Is *that* the best worm you can offer a gentleman? Pouf!" [81]

He eats it nevertheless.

And so he follows me round the place; I never garden alone. If at first I cannot see him, I whistle a quiet call; invariably I hear the Whisper Song in response, and there he is—waiting, watching, missing nothing, with his tiny throat feathers vibrating and quivering as he strives to let me into bird-land secrets, and tells me lots and lots of wonderful things that as yet I am too dull-witted to understand.

Then there are the blackbirds—for individuality they are hard to beat; though I admit they are always reproving someone or something, with their "Chutter, chut, chut!"

I never knew a bird with as many grudges and grievances as Augustus seems to have. He “chut-chuts” at me if I’m late with his breakfast, at Abigail when she ventures to gather a few raspberries, at the dog whenever he sees him, at the little colt for scampering down the meadow, at the cuckoo when his voice breaks—I’ve heard him get up after all the family had gone to bed, [82] and roundly abuse a poor July cuckoo who had developed a bad stutter—and every night about sundown he admonishes the world in general, from his pulpit in a pine, despite the fact that Martha has put the children to bed and is trying to get them to sleep, and that every other masculine blackbird for acres round is discoursing on the same subject.

But the poor thing has had his troubles. The first time we really distinguished Augustus and Martha (who monopolise my bedroom window ledge, and the pinks and pansy border) from Claude and Juliet (who patronise the biggest mountain ash, and consider the white and red currants and the snails in the snapdragon bed their particular perquisites) was when the former (that means Augustus and Martha, you know) built in the old plum tree that hangs partly over the green and gold grotto. Though it has plenty of snowy-white flowers on its dark stems in the spring, it has been too neglected to produce much fruit; but it makes up in flowering ivy and heavenly-scented honeysuckle for any other deficiencies. And it was in this tangled mass of loveliness that Augustus and Martha first set up housekeeping. (Augustus being always recognizable by reason of one grey feather.)

They chose it with much circumspection—Martha with an eye to the easy building facilities [83] offered by strands of tough woodbine, and sturdy ivy cables, combined with stout plum branches; Augustus with his main eye focussed on the bird-board, and the other on the accessibility of the bird-bath (originally a sheep-trough hollowed out of a block of rough stone, over which moss and small ivy are now trailing).

Altogether it was a most desirable site for a young couple. They were in full view of the side window in the living room, and we watched them flying in and out, to and fro, with beaks laden with grass and straw and similar materials for household decorations.

Later on, when two youngsters were hatched, there were the same endless journeyings, the same loaded beaks. But here Augustus’s perspicacity stood him in good stead; it was a very short flight from the plum tree down to the bird-board, and the pair must have nearly worn the air out, judging by the number of times they made the trip!

The tragedy happened when the youngsters were nearly ready to leave the nest. And the sad part of it was that we saw it all enacted before our eyes, and yet were powerless to prevent it.

We had just sat down to our mid-day meal; the day seemed all blue sky and bright flowers and gladdening sunshine—the very last day one ought to have met trouble.

Augustus had gone off to give Claude a piece of his mind that must have been owing for some [84] time, judging by the heat and length of his harangue; Martha was gathering up the biggest mouthful she could manage (and it is astonishing how they will collect several pieces of bread, a piece of fat and a flake of oatmeal, packing it up securely in their beak, in order to carry it safely).

I saw a big bird swoop down on to the branch beside the nest; but big birds are so plentiful with us, it conveyed nothing out of the ordinary to me. It looked like a shrike, but I couldn’t be certain. Everything happened so quickly. It seized one of the little ones, killed it outright with one vicious toss, while the other baby called out in wild terror.

In far less time than it takes me to write this, the whole air seemed teeming with screaming blackbirds, dozens of them. They went for the murderer, trying to attack him with their beaks; but he flew off into the woods, followed by a crowd of threatening and bewailing birds; one could hear them in the distance when they were no longer in sight.

Of course we had all rushed out into the garden; but we could do nothing; the nest was too high up to be reached without a ladder.

Then an unusual silence fell over the garden; the majority of the birds having joined the crowd [85] of pursuers. It is strange how we all bury our hatchets in face of a common danger!

It seemed almost death-like for the moment, till, from the top of a larch, a chaffinch bubbled forth. At least there was one happy bird left. Then I bethought me about baby-blackbird No. 2. The villain had only carried off one. We got a ladder, but no bird was in the nest!

We decided it must have fallen out in the scrimmage, and searched carefully. After a while we found it, helpless and terrified, among the ferns, just where it had fallen, in the grotto.

As it didn’t seem able to walk or fly, we left it there, and sat down to watch events. Back came poor Martha presently. She looked in the nest, then flew distractedly about. But I suppose the baby was too dazed with fright to do a thing, at any rate it never uttered a sound or call; and the distressed mother flew off again to the woods on her hopeless quest.

We remained on watch the whole afternoon and evening; but neither parent returned. Then I began to get anxious. I put a little food near the frightened crouching thing, but it took no notice. Only once it gave a piteous cry; how I wished it would keep it up! That at least would surely reach the mother in time. But it didn’t repeat the call.

At last we had to go in, because it was getting dark, and every bird but our poor little baby was safely in bed. We tried to console ourselves by saying that it would probably be all right, and it was wonderful how birds survived all sorts of dangers. But, all the same, we none of us believed we should ever see him again; and we shook our heads silently next morning, when we found an empty space under the ferns, where we had left him overnight. [86]

During the day, my suspicions were aroused by the fact that Augustus returned again and again to the bird-board and stuffed his beak full of provender, which he carried off in the good old way. But the moment I tried to follow him, he merely went into a near-by tree, and tried to say “Chut! chut!” with his mouth full!

It took me all the afternoon, and used up all the stealth and cautiousness I possess, to track him. He would not fly any more than he could help; he kept right down on the ground, running along with his head slightly lowered, keeping close to the shadow of the wall, slipping under hedges and low growths, always looking about from side to side, standing stock still when he scented danger—in this way he got up the hill, and right across a field, to where a big Wellingtonia stands like a pyramid, against a stone wall, its outspreading branches drooping protectingly, and hiding all sorts of secrets in its dark green depths.

Behold, there was Martha, anxiously waiting on the doorstep, so to speak, for Augustus to return. She was as cautious in her movements as he was, but she couldn’t help uttering a low “Chut! chut!” of pleasure when she saw his beak so crammed with good things. Both slipped in under the lowest branch. [87]

I bided my time. I didn’t want to add one single extra anxiety to the little mother heart that was already so burdened with care. But when at length I saw both birds slink off in search of food, I parted the branches and looked in. For some time I could see nothing, it was so dark and mysterious under the heavily plumed boughs, but the little one had learnt to use its voice by now; “Cheep” came vigorously from within; and then I saw our baby comfortably ensconced on a drift of pine needles against the wall.

I slipped away quietly, wondering and wondering how in the world those little birds had managed to get that fat youngster up that hill and into the tree that was fully three minutes’ walk, even for me, from the old nest!

The baby flourished apace, and before we returned to town, it was brought along to the pansy border, and told to stay there quite still for a moment, while mother got it something to eat. But it didn’t do anything of the sort; directly her back was turned, it hopped into the bird’s bath, and splashed joyously till its expostulating parents returned, alarmed out of their senses lest it should be drowned! [88]

After thinking it over, I fancy that for all-round serviceability you cannot do better than the blackbird. He starts singing in January, as a rule, and keeps at it till August, always a beautiful song, but not always the same song.

It is a clear-blue message of hope, as it rings out on a cold winter’s day.

As the spring progresses, it becomes a cascade that overflows with bubbling sound and ends with a challenge: “Let any blackbird dare to say he can sing that cadenza as brilliantly as I can, and I’ll know the reason why!”

Later on, when the nestlings keep up a constant demand for “more,” he only manages to get in an occasional stanza; and that, I am inclined to think, is when he has a difference of opinion with another of his kind; though sometimes he sings a rippling, pulsating song to the setting sun.

But best of all I love him when the summer has run well on into July. He is getting tired then; two families—possibly with four in the nest at a time—are something of a handful to cater for. He has become draggled and weary in appearance. His yellow-ringed eyes do not seem as sparkling as they were. But he still tries to do his best, and towards sundown you may hear him singing; one of those in my garden seems to have a preference for an underbough on a tall pine, where he stands almost hidden from sight, and whistles gently and softly—though not to me personally, as the robin does; apparently he is talking to himself. [89]

Gone is the buoyancy of his early spring song; gone the self-assertiveness, the boastfulness and dominating clamour of his early married life. Now, his song is much subdued, gentler, and strangely suggestive of a quiet, almost saddened reminiscence.

Is it that his family have failed to come up to his expectations? Is his song tinged with regret for the lost happiness of those first glad days of spring? Or is it the reflection of the tranquillity that comes to those who bravely shouldered life’s responsibility when the time came for leaving behind the things of youth?

Who knows what that subdued but exquisite little song means, as it falls, like a rain of soft, gentle sounds from the branches above?

I cannot tell, but it stirs something strangely responsive in my own heart; I sense far-back things that I cannot take hold of, or put into tangible shape, and for the moment I feel mysteriously akin to the unseen singer in the blue-green depths of the old and rugged pine.

VII

Only Small Talk

[90]

I SEEM to have wandered a long way from Eileen, but it was really she who brought the birds to my mind.

I got up early the morning after our arrival, in order to show her the way about, and because it is not one of my daily duties to be the first down in the morning, I noticed all the more how the opening of the doors and windows, to let in the day, is something much more than the mere undoing of locks and latches. There is nothing to compare with the inrush of sweet morning air that greets you on the threshold, as you take your first look-out on a dew-sparkling garden, probably all alive with the songs and chirps and twitters of the birds, and teeming with the scents of things seen and unseen, each pouring forth its gratitude in its own way for the ever-new miracle of the sun's return.

This letting in of light and clean air, sunshine, song and scent, after the inanimate darkness of the night, is so wonderfully symbolic that it seems a mistake that it has come to be regarded as one of the inferior domestic tasks, relegated to the minor members of the household. And though I am not one of those exceptionally virtuous people who habitually rise at six o'clock, waking [91] every one else within earshot and taking vain pride in their performances, whenever I chance to be the first one to welcome the morning and let in the day, I feel there are decided compensations for the wrench of getting out of bed minus a cup of tea.

I also realize how easy it is, in the flush of exhilaration produced by the early morning air, to make oneself a nuisance to all who are less energetic. For some unaccountable reason, when I am down extra early, I always want to bustle about, and do all sorts of rackety things that never occur to me on the days when I do not put in an appearance till breakfast is ready.

I had opened the windows in the living-room, and had set Eileen to make the fire, and was seeing to things in the kitchen, when she followed me with an excited squawk: "Oh, ma'am, there's somebody has lost their canary! It was on the window ledge just now, and it's flown into a tree. Have you got a bird-cage handy? I expect I could catch it. There it is again"—pointing to a handsome yellow and black tit who was pecking eagerly at some bacon rind I had just hung up outside the window.

I explained.

"Wild, is he? *Wild?*" she exclaimed; "and don't they charge you nothing for them?" [92]

She finished the room with one eye perpetually on the windows.

Having a healthy appetite, that had been touched up a little extra with the hill-top air, she was more than willing to help me get the meal ready. I made the usual preliminary inquiries as to her experience in regard to cooking, and was surprised to hear that she had actually won a silver medal at a Cookery Exhibition.

Surely this was unexpected good fortune, and I asked myself if I really deserved such a heaven-sent boon as a silver-medalled cook! I decided, however, that in view of all I had undergone in the past at the hands of those who were not so decorated, it was nothing more than my due that I should be so blessed in my declining years. My only regret was that war-time would allow so little scope for her genius!

Feeling very light-hearted, and wondering how she would get on with Abigail when cook gave one of her periodical notices and I placed Eileen on the permanent staff, I said: "Then I needn't bother about the breakfast! We will have poached eggs on toast. I'll lay the cloth while you get them ready."

But she looked at me doubtfully. "We didn't ever have *poached* eggs at the boarding-house," [93] she began. "But I think I know how to do 'em. You just break them on the gridiron over the top of the fire, don't you?"

After all, it was I who poached the eggs, while Eileen explained that the medal had been awarded to the cookery class at the orphanage *en bloc*, for making a Swiss roll. . . . No, unfortunately, she didn't know how to make Swiss roll either, as she had been down with scarlet fever that term. Still, it was her class that got the medal, so of course she had as much right to it as anyone else.

I trust I bore the disappointment complacently. I'm fairly hardened to such sudden drops in the kitchen thermometer.

The great thing about Eileen was her willingness, and her anxiety to learn.

When I was seeking to impart knowledge, however, she seemed to think it was for her also to contribute some general information. Hence our duologues often ran on these lines:—

"When you make the tea or coffee, be sure that the water is *quite* boiling; or else——"

"Yes, ma'am. Do you know, one of the young gentlemen where I used to live, couldn't help being bald, no matter if he used a whole bottle of hair restorer every day. It ran in his fambly."

"Really! Well, now we'll fry some bacon. You put a little of the bacon fat from this jar into the pan first of all to get hot. Like this." [94]

"Yes, ma'am. Isn't it strange, grandmother won't never have red roses in her bonnet. Can't bear red."

She also excelled in asking questions; from morn till eve life seemed one long series of conundrums which I was expected to answer. I never realized before how many queries country life presents; hitherto it had seemed to me such a simple, straightforward state of existence.

An old man had been secured to do an occasional odd day's work (at highest London prices). He described some misfortune that, last autumn, had befallen "Hussy," the cow who comes for change of air into my orchard at intervals—an apple she had eaten (one of mine, of course) being blamed for the fact that her milk turned off, "like vinegar 'twas."

Eileen—in common with every other young human under twenty years of age—thrilled at the word apple, and inquired if "Hussy" had stolen it off a tree?

"Stolen it off a tree!" scoffed the man; "and why should she bother to creek her neck up'ards when they was lying by the thousand as thick on the ground in that thur orchard as—as—well, as apples!"

Eileen looked incredulous.

"Yes, by the thousand they was, and not wuth picking up, no one wanted 'em; no men to make cider; no sugar to jam 'em; child'un all got colic a'ready as bad as bad could be, couldn't swaller no more; too damp to keep. Ay, and we that short o' cider as we be!" And the aged one—who had been coining money hand over fist, with letter carrying, and the sale of eggs and poultry, and a couple of pigs, and the hay in his paddock, to say nothing of gilt-edged easy little jobs waiting for him all about the place at any price per hour he cared to charge, and old age pensions paid regularly to himself and wife—paused to shake his head and sigh over the misfortunes of the times. [95]

Eileen was likewise moved. To think of it—unwanted apples! And no one to eat them! She reverted to the phenomenon several times that day, with such queries as these:—If eating one apple turns the cow's milk to vinegar, would eating fifty turn it to cider? If so, wouldn't it be cheaper to make the cow grow cider, as the old man said cider had riz to 7*d.* a quart, and milk was only 6*d.* You would then make a penny a quart profit that you could put into the Savings Bank to help the War.

After watching some vegecultural operations she inquired: "Why is it, when he puts potatoes in the ground and beans in the ground all the same way, the beans come out at the top of the plant and the potatoes come out at the bottom?"

Another time it was: "What do they use the sting of the nettle for?" And when she had enlarged her garden vocabulary, she inquired: "Is a spider an annual or a perennial?" [96]

"I can't find a tap out there to turn off the water," and she indicated the spring outside the gate, tumbling out of a little wooden trough wedged in among the rocks, into a pool below. "I suppose they stop it at the main. What time do they turn it off? . . . *Never?* It runs like that always! Then how long is it before the whole lot runs away and it's all dried up? And don't they ever come down on you for wasting the water?"

Yet more accomplished people than Eileen have often surprised one by their ignorance. An experienced and supposed-to-be-highly-qualified cook came to me one day with the sad news that we couldn't have any stuffing with the duck for dinner that day as there wasn't a single bottle of herbs in the house. I reminded her that there was an almost unlimited amount of everything in the garden, including a sage bush growing on a wall that now measures 15 feet by 6 feet. "In the garden?" she repeated in surprise. "But I didn't know it was good unless it was bottled! You don't mean that country people use those things raw?"

I felt such an apologetic cannibal as I explained! [97]

She it was who split up the chopping board to light the fire, the first morning after her arrival, because she couldn't find a bundle of firewood anywhere. On being referred to the stack of dry kindling wood in the coal shed—she had never heard of lighting fires with trees before; never thought, indeed, to live with a family that expected you to do such things!

On one occasion, when I was in one of the largest and poorest of the London Elementary Schools, where the children looked as pitifully sordid and poverty-stricken as I have ever seen them, I asked a few questions of one small girl in the front row of a class. Her outside dress consisted of an old dilapidated waistcoat worn over a dingy flannelette nightgown, while a ragged piece of serge fastened around the waist with a safety-pin did duty for a skirt. But she was only one among a classful of rags and tatters.

"What is your name?" I asked, by way of starting conversation.

"Victorine," the forlorn-looking little thing replied.

“And what is your lesson about?” I then inquired.

“Therdelfykorrickul,” she informed me.

Seeing the bewildered look on my face, the head mistress, who was showing me round, said, [98]
“Enunciate your words more carefully, Victorine, and speak slowly.”

Victorine understood what “speak slowly” meant, and so she said very deliberately, “The—Delphic—Horricul.”

“So you are learning about the Delphic Oracle. And what are you going to do when you grow up?” was my next query.

“I’m going to work in the laundry like muvver!”

We went into another classroom; here more ragged unwashed clothes greeted me on every hand. I had no need to ask the subject of the lesson, for the girls were facing a blackboard on which was written “The Characteristics of Shelley’s Poetry.”

After I had seen more tatters in a third room, where a lesson was being given on “Infinitive Verbs,” I said to the head mistress, “If I had this school, do you know what I should do? I should take a class at a time, and give out needles and cotton, and tell them to do the best they could to sew up the rags in their dresses and their pinafores. I would not mind if they did not put on patches even to a thread in the regulation way, so long as they made some attempt to run together those rents and slits and yawning gaps. I would let the other lessons go till this was [99]
done. And I would not let a girl take her place in a class in the morning till she had mended as well as she could any rents she had worn to school.”

The head mistress shook her head. “That would not be practical; you see, it isn’t in the Syllabus.”

I don’t pretend to understand the inwardness of syllabuses, but I couldn’t help wondering if there wasn’t an opening here for a new one. While so much unpractical stuff is taught to the poorer classes in elementary schools, is it any wonder that the children know so little of the things appertaining to daily life?

Eileen didn’t exactly suffer from rags. She was as neat and patched and wholesome as her clean, sensible grandmother could make her; but she was forlorn-looking to the last degree. One of the first things I tried to do was to get her to take a little pride in her personal appearance. And it was wonderful how she responded. With her hair released from the uncompromising, tight screw that had been kept in place by three big iron-looking hair-pins, and done higher up, and more loosely over the forehead, and a pretty collar and blue bow for her Sunday blouse, she looked a different being.

“Poor little thing, she has never had a soul take any interest in how she looks,” Ursula remarked to me. “And even though we’re not allowed to cast our bread upon the waters, [100]
nowadays, they haven’t said anything officially about ribbons.” And so we searched our drawers for suitable finery that might bring a little colour into Eileen’s hitherto drab outlook. Virginia followed suit, remarking that she liked to scatter little seeds of kindness by the wayside, since you never know what may result.

True! She didn’t!

Meanwhile, Eileen gloated over the odds and ends, fixing weird and crazy-looking bows to her black sailor hat, draping her shoulders with bits of lace to see if they would make a collar, and standing in front of the kitchen glass trying the effect of pinks and purples under her chin.

For a time, the questions ceased.

VIII

A Cold Snap

[101]

For a couple of days the sun was radiant, and the air actually warm. We agreed with each other that Italy and the South of France weren't in it.

We started gardening with all the zest of backwoods-women, who know that the only vegetables they can hope for are those they themselves grow. Unlike the majority of Londoners, the War had not added much to our knowledge in this direction. I had not owned a house in the country many months before I learnt the value of first-hand home production. Hence, when the allotment fever set in, we were quite able to keep pace with the rest of the world despite our failing intellects. The only thing that differentiated us from the remainder of our fellow-citizens in the Metropolis, was the fact that we appeared to be the only ones who did not feel themselves competent to bestow unlimited information and advice, in season and out of season, to all and sundry, on every imaginable and unimaginable point connected with the raising of food crops.

[102] One of the many reasons for the charm that envelops our life at the hillside cottage lies in the fact that it brings us much closer to the fundamental principle of keeping alive than is ever possible in town with its over-civilization. Of course, it isn't desirable that our mental and spiritual interests should centre in the question of what we shall eat and what we shall drink, and wherewithal shall we keep warm and comfortable, but I think a woman suffers a distinct loss when she eliminates these matters entirely from her horizon.

I know, from personal experience, that there comes a period in our lives when we women feel that there are much higher enterprises beckoning us, that we (individually, not collectively) are called to do some work in the world that is far greater than seeing to meals, and keeping the household machinery moving unobtrusively and with regularity; but it is fortunate that there eventually returns to us (if we are properly balanced) a realization that some of our very best work can be put into the making of a home, and that far from it being narrow and sordid and selfish to devote a large part of ourselves to household administration, it is in reality one of the widest spheres that a woman can choose, and one that will give her the biggest scope for bringing happiness and strength and health to others—and, after all, isn't that the avowed aim of the most advanced of modern feminists?

[103] Still, I admit that our cramped surroundings and jaded, strained existence in cities do not always make a round of domestic duties seem alluring to the woman who has to cram her belongings and her aspirations into a small modern flat, or who has to do her cooking in one of the unhealthy, sunless basements that prevail in the older houses in towns. A woman needs fresh air, sunshine and a garden if the best is to be brought out of her. Oh, yes, I know some few women have done great things without one or another of these items—but probably they would have done still more if they had had the opportunity to come to their full development under more favourable circumstances.

I'm not surprised that women, whose existence is limited by the narrow environment of towns, so continually beat the air with a longing to do something more than seems possible in the flat or dull suburban villa. Civilization has taken out of their hands so many of the useful occupations that formerly kept women busy—and worthily busy too; and it is not to be wondered at that they cry out for something to do, and invent Causes on which to expend their zeal and energy. The preparation of food, the laundry work, and indeed most household duties are now done for us in cities on the "penny-in-the-slot" principle (only we have to put a shilling in the slot, as a rule, for the pennyworth of result that we receive); and it is small wonder that so few of us can work up [104] any interest in the process.

But how are matters to be altered? you ask me. I don't know! Pray don't think I'm proposing to find solutions for grave problems in these stories! I'm only giving you a record of facts, just simple everyday little happenings "of no value to anyone save the owner." And we'll leave it at that, if you don't mind, and return to the garden.

Before the War labour was not so scarce, and there was no need for us to plant the vegetables ourselves, unless we desired to do so. Now, however, one's own personal work was a valuable asset, and we put our backs into it—at least Ursula and I did; Virginia was engaged most of the time in describing the sort of tools she would make, if she were in that line of business, to obviate the grave spinal trouble she was certain she was developing.

I don't mean to imply that Virginia isn't a good gardener; she can be an excellent one when she likes, for she knows what gardening really stands for in the way of hard work. Whereas some of my would-be assistant gardeners seem to think the chief requisites are a comfortable hammock and a book; or, at most, a "picture" muslin frock and a pretty basket and a pair of baby scissors. [105] Such girls remind me of many who write and inquire if I have a vacancy for a sub-editor in my office, the chief qualification stated in their letters being that they "do so love to browse among books."

Virginia isn't like that; she puts on a business-like garb, and knows—and annexes—a good tool when she sees it. But it is her bright ideas that are the hindrance to progress. She wasted ten minutes that morning explaining to me that she was sure, if I would only have turnips planted in the mint bed, it would be another war economy, as the mint flavour might permeate the turnips,

and thus save double expense with lamb.

And then another ten minutes went in enlarging on the grasping nature of the makers of gardening gloves in not supplying four pairs of extra thumbs with each pair, since any intelligent gardener could wear out eight thumbs with one pair in the simplest day's gardening. She offered to let me use the idea free of charge in my magazine, if I would undertake to keep her supplied with gardening gloves for the rest of her natural life; but she stipulated that they must be proper leather ones, not the four-and-sixpenny war variety she was then wearing, composed of unbleached calico, with merely a chamois postage-stamp stuck on the front of each finger and thumb.

In the intervals of conversation she aided us with our digging, yet, in spite of the National Call [106] to spend as much on seed potatoes as would keep the family in vegetables for a couple of years, we continually found ourselves drifting away from the ground we were trenching, for the violets were already out, also some early primroses, and little white stars were showing on the wild strawberry trails in sheltered corners under walls that faced south.

And the garden is full of sheltered nooks, despite its being so high up. As the ground slopes towards the south, every wall that props up the garden—and there are so many, like giant steps down the steep hillside—gives protection from the cold winds to the little growing things that nestle in every crevice and on the ground below. Everywhere the pennywort was sending out clear green disks from the mysterious depths of crannies in the wall. Crocuses were showing orange buds in the garden beds. One precocious pansy held up a white flower, streaked and splashed with purple.

"Spring has really come," we all chorused. And oh, how good it seemed to be done with the winter; such a winter too! Surely the longest and most awful winter humanity has ever known!

With spring and summer immediately before us, as it seemed, we decided to leave the [107] trenching just for that day, and explore the lanes and woods. The lichens and mosses were at the height of their beauty—a beauty that would fade once the sun got any power. The wall-stones were splashed with browns and greys, rust-colour and orange, black and olive, and one particular lichen that is our especial joy tints the stone a milky pea-green shade that is unlike any other colour I can recall.

Last year's bramble leaves were purple and scarlet and crimson and yellow. Where the small ivy creeping up the walls had been touched by the frost, it had turned a vivid yellow mottled with warm brown and crimson. And it is surprising, once you take note of it, how much crimson is used by Nature where you would expect to find only green; and not merely a dull red, it is a brilliant, vivid carmine that is dropped about in quiet, unsuspected places, lighting up dark patches, emphasizing sombre details that one might otherwise overlook.

We were turning over a handful of brown leaves under an oak tree in the wood; there we found the streak of crimson showing inside an acorn that had just burst to let out a young shoot that was seeking about for roothold below and light up above. Not only one, but hundreds of similar brilliant touches were scattered about where the fertile acorns lay among the moss and last year's fern.

In one secluded spot, where the cold had not been severe enough to wither last year's foliage [108] on the undergrowth, long sprays of ground ivy, climbing over a fallen branch, had turned to deep wine colour, stems and all, and lay, as Eileen said, "beautiful enough for one of them lovely wreaths of leaves they put round best hats." Certainly it looked more artificial than natural, if one didn't happen to know that ground ivy often takes on this tint in its declining days.

Thanks to Tennyson, we all know that rosy plumelets tuft the larch; but it doesn't matter how many times you see them, they are always worth looking at—and marvelling at—again.

And there seems no limit to the crimson splashes. Is there anything anywhere that can compare with the Herb Robert, its leaves far more radiant than its blossoms; or the leaves of the evening primrose when they start to fade at the bottom of the stem; or the waning foliage of the sorrel?

To make a list of the crimson touches (as distinct from the reddish-brown) that one finds on stems and foliage any day in the country, would be a revelation to most of us.

Though the sun had been so bright when we started, it doesn't do to trust too much in an [109] English spring, and we presently noticed a very decided change; the temperature dropped with great rapidity, as clouds came up and hid the sun, and the hills that towered about us suddenly loomed gloomy and forbidding. The wind veered round from south-west to north-east; and by evening it was piercingly, bitterly cold.

Taking a last look round with the lantern before we locked up for the night, not a sound could be heard; everything was absolutely still, with that unearthly silence of a land suddenly gripped by overpowering cold. I glanced at the thermometer hanging on the outside wall; it already registered three degrees below freezing; it would probably be ten before morning.

We bolted the door and shut out the cold, hoping no one was wandering lost on the hills that night (not that anyone ever is, but it is pleasant to have kind charitable thoughts like that, on a bleak night, as you put yet another log on the fire).

Next morning, as it was colder and more perishing than ever, I decided to cope with several days' arrears of office work, piling itself up in all directions. Virginia said it was just as well the weather necessitated our remaining indoors, as she could now get on with *her* work. Of course we asked: What work?

She informed us that she was engaged upon an anthology, "Shakespeare and the Great War." [110]
She felt that "Shakespeare and Everything Else" had been done pretty thoroughly—by less competent people than herself, it is true; but, all the same, the poet had been dealt with exhaustively from every point of view but that of the War. Also, the War had been dealt with, *in extenso*, from every point of view but Shakespeare's. Hence, her present literary effort.

And would I kindly give her any quotations I could think of, that had any bearing on this world-crisis.

All my brain was equal to was—

"Tell me, where is fancy bred?"

which undoubtedly indicated that the War Loaf was known to pall on the public taste even in Shakespeare's time.

She said she had expected me to say that, it was so obvious. Nevertheless, I noticed she hurriedly jotted it down.

We asked her to read her MS. so far as she had gone; it seemed a pity for us to overlap.

"I've made a fair start," she explained, "but the trouble is they all turn out so awkwardly. For instance, the first quotation I have down is—

'She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household'

—anyone can see Daylight Saving there——"

Naturally, I opened my mouth to speak, but she cut me short, testily: [111]

"Of course I know as well as you that it isn't Shakespeare—at least I wasn't reared a heathen!—but that's just the tiresome part of it. Every quotation I think of isn't Shakespeare at all. Here's another that would do beautifully (and take up a nice bit of space on the page too),

'The upper air burst into life!
And a hundred fire-flags' sheen,
To and fro they were hurried about!
And to and fro, and in and out,
The wan stars danced between.'

"Even a child could tell you they were the searchlights trying to spot a Zepp.—only it isn't Shakespeare! It's very worrying. Yet I know if only I could get the book done, there would be a fortune in it. W. S. always sells, and he's so respectable too!"

I said I was sorry my office duties had prior claim on my time, and I urged Ursula to do her sisterly part. But she said she couldn't be bothered just then; her mind was more than fully occupied in trying to lay the blame for everything on the right person.

So I took Virginia's MS. and read it down.

"How full of briars is this working-day world."

This proves that barbed wire entanglements were known in the seventeenth century.

"How far that little candle throws his beams!" [112]

This indicates clearly that Shakespeare was fined for failing to comply with the Lighting Restrictions.

That he was compelled to pay War Profits out of the "royalties" on his plays is evidenced by these poignant words in *Macbeth:*—

"Nought's had, all's spent,"

and doubtless there was a subtle reference to War taxation in

"Age cannot wither nor custom stale her infinite variety."

The unfailing hold of Shakespeare on humanity is the fact that he touched upon all phases of life. (This sentence was Virginia's own literary contribution to the "Anthology.") For example (she went on), even a sugar shortage was known in his day. To what else could he have been referring when he wrote

"Sweet are the uses of adversity,"

and can anyone doubt that

“Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn and cauldron bubble,”

points to meatless days?

Here we were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was Miss Primkins, an elderly lady who lives by herself (or at least with Rehoboam, her cat) in a pretty little cottage further down the hill. Miss Primkins has been hard hit by the War, but no matter how she has to skimp and save in other ways, she never relaxes her work for the wounded.

And it was about her contribution to Queen Mary’s Needlework Guild that she came up to consult me. Not that we started there straight away—of course not. We talked about the shortage of sugar, and the high cost of boots, and the scarcity of chicken food, and the price of meat, and the difficulty of knowing how to feed Rehoboam adequately and yet in strict accordance with official regulations, and the colour of the bread, and “what are we coming to,” and other topical matters like that. Then, when I had pressed Miss Primkins several times to stay to our midday meal, and she had as many times assured me that she must not stay another minute, grateful though she was for my kind invitation, as she had put on the potatoes to boil before she came out, she produced (in an undertone) a paper parcel from her bag, and with much hesitation explained that she wanted advice on a private matter. [113]

I was all attention.

Undoing the paper, she displayed what looked like a round bolster case made of pink and blue striped flannelette. As she held it up for inspection, it “flared” at the top (to use a dressmaker’s term) with merely a small round opening at the bottom.

I glanced it over as intelligently as I knew how, and then inquired what it was.

“It’s a pyjama for a soldier,” she murmured modestly, in a very low voice. “I’ve cut it exactly by the paper pattern, yet Miss Judson, who saw it yesterday, says she doesn’t believe it’s right. We’ve neither of us ever made one before, so I thought I would run up to you with it; you would be *sure* to know.” [114]

“Er—h’m—ah—yes,” I said, as light dawned. “It’s all right so far as it goes; but where’s the other leg?”

“The other leg?” she echoed, “there was only one in the pattern.”

“Of course; but you should have cut it out in double material; the garment requires two legs, you know.”

“Does it!” she exclaimed in genuine surprise. “Why, I thought it must be intended for a soldier who had had his other leg amputated!”

Before Virginia put away her “Anthology,” preparatory to having lunch, she added another quotation to her list—

“For never anything can be amiss
When simpleness and duty tender it,”

and against this she scribbled, “one-legged pyjamas”—doubtless for elucidation and amplification at a later date. I hope I haven’t forestalled her.

IX

Snowdrifts

[115]

It was later in the day, and the zest for Shakespeare had waned. Virginia had moved from beside the fire and was sitting nearer the window, in order to get what light there was from the sun just disappearing behind the opposite hills. She was very busy with some crochet edging she had lately started. It was the first time within the memory of living woman that Virginia had been seen with a crochet-hook in her hand—fancy-work had never been her strong point—hence the inordinate pride with which she patted out the short fragment on any available surface at frequent intervals, surveying it from different points of view with her head cricked at various angles, and calling upon all and sundry to admire.

After moving nearer the window she again patted out the seven small scallops on her knee, as usual, and then became meditative. No one paid much attention to her, however. I was sitting on the settle, with a heaped-up table before me, absorbed in MSS., which I was reading, and then sorting into various piles—for printer, for reserve, for return—and arranging these on the seat beside me; important work, which accounted for my preoccupation.

[116]

Ursula was busily engaged in the laudable endeavour to construct a pair of child's knickers out of two pairs of stocking legs. Someone had told her this could be done. It had appealed to her as a serviceable way to use up done-with stockings (and she assured me the problem of what to do with these "done-withs" had been a long-standing mental burden), while at the same time one might be conferring a benefit upon the poor. The fact that the modern "poor" would have scorned anything so economical did not worry her.

At last Virginia broke the silence. "It's really quite remarkable! I don't know that I've met with a more extraordinary crochet pattern than this," she said thoughtfully.

"Where did you get it from?" I asked rather absently, as I went on with my work.

"From one of the magazines you are supposed to edit," she said blandly.

"What is there extraordinary about it?" I inquired, now thoroughly roused up to give the matter all my attention, while Ursula laid down the dislocated stocking leg she had been wrestling with.

"Well, it's like this. There is the pattern, you see," pointing to a picture I had seen before, "and there are the directions. When you've worked them through once, that makes one scallop. Do you see?"

[117]

We said we saw it quite plainly.

"Then, you notice it says at the very end, 'go back and repeat from the first row'? Now this is the extraordinary part of the affair; every time I go back and repeat from the first row it makes an entirely different scallop. The last time but one, you see, the scallop came on the opposite side of the sewing-on edge; I thought *that* was interesting enough! But now I find this last scallop has *turned a corner*. Funny, isn't it?"

For the first time we gave Virginia's bit of edging serious attention. What she had done with those directions it was impossible to say, but the result was certainly peculiar.

"That will be a valuable piece of lace by the time it's finished," I said. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm making it as a Christmas present for you," she replied sweetly. "I think it may help to promote conversation if you display it at your social functions. I know you're going to say how unselfish it is of me. I think, myself, I mellow as I age."

"Not at all," I replied politely, and suggested that we should go for a walk, lest such concentrated thinking should be too much for her.

[118]

"If you'd been a properly-minded hostess you would have proposed that long ago. I've been waiting anxiously for it, only there is Ursula absorbed in that outfit that no masculine infant anywhere would recognise——"

"Oh, I've given up the knicker idea long ago," interrupted Ursula. "I've turned them into chest-protectors for the old people in the infirmary. And now, as a war economy, I'm going to enlarge your vests (I neither ask for, nor expect, gratitude!). The laundry having shrunk them to waistbands, I shall add an upper and a lower storey."

"—and *you* sit hour after hour reading MSS. What are they all about? What's that one in your hand, for instance?"

"This one," holding up some sheets of violently-written paper that almost burst through the envelope, "is an anonymous letter from some irate lady who objects to something or someone appearing in our pages. I haven't time to read it, but if you care to wade through it——"

"Anonymous letters are so futile."

"Anything but," I told her. "It is always a pleasant thing, at the end of the day, to feel that you

have, even in a slight way, contributed to anyone's happiness. And I'm sure the lady who dug her pen into that anonymous letter was very happy when she posted it. Glad am I, therefore, to be the unworthy instrument permitted to promote her joy!"

Virginia merely snorted. "What's the next MS. about?"

"This is a very long poem on the War, and the writer explains that she has made all the lines [119]
run straight on in order to save paper, but doubtless I can find out where it rhymes. It begins 'Hail, proud mother of nations who dwell in these sea-girt islands for centuries past and centuries yet to be——'"

Virginia said she'd skip the rest, please, and wasn't there a little light fiction anywhere in the chaos before me?

"This is a story of a beautiful Russian princess who was doomed to live in a lonely castle, with no one but her aged and decrepit nurse, in the very centre of a pathless Siberian forest, hundreds of miles from everybody, until the spell should be broken——"

"What spell?" inquired Ursula.

"(I don't know—the writer doesn't say)—until the spell should be broken, when she would be free. She was the most exquisite vision that ever burst upon human sight. Not only were her features perfect, and her hair a rippling cascade of gold, but her dress was grace and beauty combined."

"Then it wasn't one of *this* season's models!" ejaculated Ursula, "hence it must have been out-of-date. All the same, I'd like to know who was her dressmaker. Did they think to mention the name?"

("No, that is not stated.)—She used to spend her days listening to the wolves who congregated [120]
all around the castle howling and gnashing their horrid fangs, till one day an honest, sturdy forester approached, and with one fell swoop slew dozens of them. Whereupon the Princess Elizabeth—for such was her name—opened the door and cried, 'Welcome, deliverer!' and in less time than it takes me to tell you, that aged and decrepit nurse had prepared, all unaided, a sumptuous wedding banquet, while gorgeously apparelled guests arrived in battalions from nowhere. Then, just as they were about to be married, the honest, sturdy forester, no longer able to conceal his identity, confessed that he was indeed the Prince."

"What Prince?" inquired the interrupter again.

"I don't know, and the writer doesn't say, and I wish you would remember, Ursula, that in the larger proportion of MSS. sent to editors it is customary for the writers to omit the essential details!"

"Then I'd just as soon go for a walk as hear any more," she said with decision.

Whereupon we got into big coats and thick gloves and tied on our hats with motor scarfs, I don't mean the filmy wisps one wears when motoring in the park, but those large, solid, thick, brown, woollen scarves that look as though they had been made from a horse-blanket—the sort [121]
that the West End window dresser in desperation labels "dainty!" But the air was bitingly cold, and we were so high up among the hills, that no wraps would have been too warm that day. Then we started off, after I had said a final word to Eileen about the necessity for keeping the kettle boiling, as we shouldn't be gone long. She had assured me many times already that she wasn't the least bit nervous about being left alone—rather liked it, in fact. She was blissfully engaged at the moment in trying to construct a "dainty evening camisole" (as per some penny weekly she had bought coming down) out of the satin ribbon and lace from Virginia's last year's hat.

The small white dog with the brown ears accompanied us to the gate, but decided that, with the thermometer just where it was at that moment, home-keeping hearts were happiest; so he promptly returned to the hearthrug.

The sun had disappeared, but there was still light on the hill-tops, though the valley below was fast settling down to darkness. Virginia suggested the lantern, but I thought we should not need it, more especially as a moon was due immediately. So we set off at a swinging pace.

Already, owing to the severity of the frost, the roads rang like iron to our tread. Every stalk and twig was glistening with rime and feathered with hoar-frost. No sign of life did we see in all [122]
that walk. Where were the birds, and squirrels, and rabbits, and pheasants, and all the hundreds of timid wild things we were accustomed to meet on our summer rambles? We hoped they were safely tucked away in barns or burrows, or sleeping in warm hayricks, for nothing else above ground would give them any shelter. I thought of the row of twittering swallows that always perch themselves along the ridge of the cottage roof on hot summer afternoons, and felt glad they had gone off to a warmer climate.

But for ourselves, we would not have exchanged the weather that moment for any other, no matter how balmy. There is something remarkably exhilarating in the clear cold air of such a day on the hilltops, and as we mounted up and up our spirits rose with us—even though the roads were rough and terribly hard on war-time leather.

I once remarked to a local resident that I found our stony hillside roads a bit trying, to say nothing of the side paths.

“Well now, I do be s’prised to hear ’ee a-say that,” he replied. “For the on’y time I were up to Lunnon—I went for a day scursion—d’you know my legs did that *hake* when I got back, I were a week getting over it. It were all along o’ they flat stones what they do have up there; why, if you believe me, I was a-near toppling over every other minute. There weren’t ne’er a blessed thing to [123] catch holt onter with your toes! I felt as though the pavemint was a-coming up to knock my head. Now on these here roads o’ ourn you can’t slip far, because there’s always summat of a rock or big stone to trip up agin.”

For myself, however, I sometimes think I would prefer the said rocks and stones if they were boiled a bit, and then mangled.

At last we reached the crest of the hill, and paused to get our breath. The silence was awe-inspiring. At all other times there is a persistent hum of insects, or cheep of birds, or the rustling of leaves and swaying grasses—movement and sound somewhere, night as well as day. But when the earth has been swept by the magic of frost, then there is silence indeed. From where we stood, we might have been alone on the very edge of the world. No house was visible, and although we knew that the little village lay in the valley below us, we could see nothing of it.

All was grey, merging into indigo in the depths of the coombes. Grey were the trees on the farther hills, grey unrelieved by the lights and shadows that gaily chase each other over the steeps in sunny weather, as the white clouds sail across the sky above them.

Near at hand the trees took on more individuality. The straight columns of the larches were [124] mysterious-looking and awe-inspiring, suggesting regiments of soldiers suddenly called to a halt. Pale grey beeches, that in damp weather show a vivid emerald green down the north side of their huge trunks, where moss flourishes undisturbed, were now stretching out strong bare arms over the carpet of many years’ leaves lying thickly beneath them. Silver birch stems gleamed in contrast to the glossy dark green of innumerable aged yews that dotted the woods—ancient inhabitants, indeed, standing hoary and heroic like some dark-visaged guardians of the forest, among a host of newcomers of a far younger generation.

But while we were standing there, a sound suddenly broke the stillness, a sound I have heard hundreds of times on those hills, yet never without an eerie feeling. It begins far away, a low undertone murmur; gradually it comes nearer and nearer, getting louder and louder, till it becomes almost a roar, and then—*diminuendo*—it passes on and is finally lost in the far distance.

It is only the wind as it suddenly rushes through the river gorge; but as it tears at the forests on the hillsides, and lashes the branches together, it produces a strangely uncanny sound, more [125] especially when the trees are bare and extremely vibrant.

Hearing this, one can understand the origin of the old-time legends about headless horsemen galloping past on windy nights, and similar hair-raising stories. As a child, when I often visited at another house in this region (for four generations of us have climbed these hills and explored the valleys), I heard these same “headless horsemen” gallop along the slopes on many stormy nights; and despite my years and my common sense, I still feel the same creepy shiver in the back of my neck when they have a particularly mad stampede past my cottage door, for then they always pause to give the weirdest of howls through the keyholes!

“How dark it is getting!” exclaimed Ursula. “Where is your moon? And just hear the wind coming up the valley!”

It had not reached us as yet, but the words had scarcely left her lips before it came—swish—full upon us. We had to grip each other and plant our walking-sticks firmly on the ground to keep our feet. And then we knew what the sudden change meant, for next moment down came the snow—snow such as the town-dweller knows nothing about, for in cities there are buildings to break the force of the elements; but on these heights there is nothing to impede the fury of the storm as it gallops over the upper regions, crashing and smashing as it goes. [126]

The snow dashed in our eyes; it got inside our coat-collars; it clogged up our hair; it swirled and “druv” (as they say locally) till it made our heads dizzy, and our eyes smarted with trying to see through the whirling mass.

Owing to our exposed position we felt the full force of the storm, and it was a difficult matter to make headway in the blinding flakes and stinging wind.

“There is a short cut through the wood, further along the road; let us get home as soon as we can,” I said, leading the way, and we staggered on against the blizzard, till we came to the wood, and plunged from the road into its recesses. But I soon found it is one thing to know the way through a dense mass of trees in bright sunshine with a path clearly defined, and quite another thing to find one’s way in the twilight, with a gale blowing in one’s teeth and every landmark obliterated by the rapidly falling snow.

We stumbled along for some time, over the rough stones and great boulders, lovely enough in summer with their coverings of ivy, moss, and fern, but very painful and cold for the shins when you tumble over them in the snow. Before long it was quite evident to me that we were merely wandering at large among the trees, and scrambling among the undergrowth of stalks and [127] bracken, our hats catching in the hanging branches, our skirts being clutched at by the all-

pervading bramble—path there was none. I had to admit I had lost my bearings, though as we were going steadily downhill, I knew we should arrive at the other side presently, as downhill was our destination. What little conversation we indulged in—beyond the usual exclamations every time we tripped over something—had to be done in shouts, so high was the wind.

In this way we tumbled on for about half an hour. Just as Virginia was confiding to me —*fortissimo* above the blizzard—how she wished she had been nicer to her family when she had the opportunity, and how sweet and forgiving she would have been to them all had she but known that I was going to take her out to an arctic grave, the snow ceased, the clouds broke, the moon appeared, and at the same time we cleared the wood and struck a familiar lane—"Agag's Path" we had named it, on account of the need for walking delicately.

By way of keeping up our spirits, Ursula began to chant, to some lilting, sprightly tune, that most lugubrious poem, "Lucy Gray."

"The storm came up before its time,
She wandered up and down;
And many a hill did Lucy climb,
But never reached the town."

When she got to the verse— [128]

"They followed from the snowy bank
Those footmarks, one by one,
Into the middle of the plank,
And farther there were none!"—

Virginia exclaimed, "For mercy sake, if you *must* wail, do wail something cheerful and lively. 'The Boy stood on the Burning Deck,' for instance, would warm one up a bit, instead of that other shivery thing."

By the time we reached our gate the storm was over, though the wind was still sweeping restlessly over the hills. A dog belonging to a neighbouring farmer jumped over the garden wall. He had evidently called in the hope of getting a chance to settle a long-standing score he had against my own innocent-looking animal, who was ever a terrible fighter! We paid no attention to the dog, however, but hurried up the path, only too thankful to see the lights of home, and glad that Eileen had forgotten to pull down the dark blinds. Nevertheless, I wondered that she did not open the door so soon as she heard the gate. I put my hand on the latch, but to my surprise the door was locked! I rattled the latch and knocked. The dog whined inside and gave impatient little short barks which always mean a summons to someone to open the door and let me in. But the door remained locked.

Then Eileen's voice within— [129]

"Are you quite by yourselves? Has the wolf gone?"

"Open the door at once, and don't talk nonsense," I said firmly, trying not to sound as irritated as I felt.

"Oh, but it isn't nonsense. I've seen them out there! One was there just now. And I'm not going to risk my life by opening the door if he's there still."

Evidently *our* lives were unimportant! "If you don't open the door this very instant," I said, "I'll get in through the window. You must be out of your senses, and you have always professed to be so brave!"

The key grated in the lock, and the door opened half an inch, while Eileen's nose peeped at the crack, to make sure we were not the wolf. Then she explained, "If you'd been here for hours and hours, as I have"—(we had actually been gone an hour and a half, though I could understand the sudden storm, and our delay, had made her nervous)—"hearing those wolves outside a-howling and howling and gnashing their horrid fangs, you wouldn't wonder I was afraid to open the door. I saw one skulking off just before you came in."

I understood the situation immediately. "Eileen," I said severely, "what have you been reading?"

"I couldn't help just seeing what it was all about when I spread the sheets on the dresser. You said I must have fresh papers for the dresser and shelves——" [130]

"Fresh paper on the dresser?" I exclaimed, and went hurriedly into the kitchen. Sure enough, the dresser, the pantry and scullery shelves, and all other available surfaces, including the deep window-sill and the tops of the safes, had been carefully covered with white paper; prompt investigation proved them to be pages from some of the various MSS. I had left in piles on the settle when I went out. Of course the writing was face downwards. I lifted things and examined what was beneath. The vegetable dishes on the dresser were reposing on portions of a serial story; canisters, saltbox and biscuit-tins shared the back of one of a series of Nature Study articles; the Siberian wolves were gnashing their horrid fangs beneath the knife-machine. I left the anonymous letter to an amiable if inglorious end, laid along the saucepan shelf, but I hurriedly collected the rest to the accompaniment of Eileen's plaintive tones—

"I thought you had put them there for waste paper. And the back of every sheet was so

beautifully clean, and I had made my kitchen look *so* nice with them."

All of which goes to illustrate the risk one runs in sending MSS. to editors, more especially to feminine editors possessed of kitchens. [131]

Though the fall of snow did not last very long, the wind howled and moaned around the house all the evening, and roared in the wide chimneys like a 32-feet open diapason pedal pipe. Virginia suggested to Eileen that she should go out and put a little salt on the wolves' tails to see if that would quiet them.

I thoroughly enjoy the moaning of the wind if I am surrounded by creature comforts—a big fire, a good cup of tea, or something interesting in that line. I never feel a desire for intellectual or introspective pursuits when the moan is most robust. When a raw nor'wester or a bullying sou'wester howls outside the door and windows, making the pine trees creak and groan like the wheels of an old timber waggon, and the evergreen firs wildly wave their branches like long dark plumes, I want to be able to hug myself to myself in the midst of warmth and good cheer, and in the company of some congenial fellow being. Then I give the fire a further poke and another log, remarking contentedly: "Just *hark* at the wind! *What* a night! Isn't it cosy indoors!" And the brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece, and the plates and jugs and dishes on the dresser blink acquiescence.

Under such circumstances I love the howlers on these hills. But if I were a studious ascetic, burning the midnight oil—and very little else—I'm afraid that the sound of the wailing up and down the scale in minor sixths, coupled with the lack of comforting food and blazing fire and sympathetic companionship, would make me desperately melancholy indeed. [132]

Now we were indoors we could defy the weather, and here at least firewood was plentiful—not the "five sticks a penny, take it or leave it," that had been our portion in town, but as much as ever one wanted, and plenty more where the last came from. We soon had crackling blazes all over the house, and you should have seen Eileen's almost awestruck countenance when she was told to make herself a fire in her own bedroom! "*Now* I know what it's like to be the Queen!" she exclaimed.

I had been literally fire-starved, owing to the need for economizing on fuel in town; and now I was loose among my own woods again, with snapped branches lying in all directions among the undergrowth, I went in for an orgy of warmth. Large chunks of apple wood and stubby bits the wind had tossed down from the creaking fir-trees, made crackling glowing fires in the big open grates. An absurd butterfly unthawed itself from some crevice among the ceiling beams and came walking deliberately down the window curtain, evidently under the impression that he was in for a sultry summer. [133]

For some time we sat and watched the splendour of it all.

When you are burning logs from old, sea-going ships, you see again the blue and saffron of the sky, and the green and peacock tints of the ocean; and in like manner you can see leaping from our forest logs the crimson and yellow and gold that once blazed in the autumn glory of the tree-covered hills, and the glow of the fire gives back the warmth and the sunshine that the trees caught in their leaves and cherished in their rugged branches.

I dropped off to sleep that night with the flickering fire-glow whispering of comfort and rest for body and brain. Yes, despite the soothing balm of it all, and the certainty of safety from "the terror that walks by night" so that one could sleep without that sense of constant listening that has become second nature with those of us who live in town, I could not enjoy it with the old-time zest. Who could, with the thought ever on one's heart: what about this lad, and that one? where are *they* lying this bitter night?

Physical sense becomes numbed when one lives perpetually in the shadow of possible tragedy. [134]

Probably it was the after-effect of our struggle with the wind and weather that caused us all to sleep very soundly that night; at any rate, it was broad daylight before anyone stirred in the cottage next morning, and we missed the doings of the storm king in the interval. When I first opened my eyes I wondered what the white light could be that was reflected on the ceiling. Then I looked out of the window, and what a scene it was! The whole earth, so far as the eye could see, was one vast fairyland of snow; moreover, the face of creation appeared to have risen three or four feet nearer the bedroom window since last I had looked out, though the full import of this did not occur to me at the moment. I could merely look and look at the wonderful transformation that had been effected so rapidly and so silently while we slept. All trace of the garden had disappeared; shrubs and trees alike were bowed down with billows of snow. In the more exposed places, the wind had blown some of the snow from the firs and larches, but for the most part the trees on the hillside were as laden with snow as those in the garden. We might have been high up in the Alps. The sun was trying to shine, and bringing a gleam and glint out of every snow crystal, but the sky still looked leaden in the north. [135]

Eileen, bringing the morning tea, imparted the thrilling intelligence that the snow was several

feet deep outside the doors, the outhouses inaccessible.

"Then we must clear the snow from the path ourselves," I said. "There is nothing else for it." The handy man was laid up with influenza in his home several fields away. And there was small likelihood of any other man coming our way. But the question of a few shovels of snow did not seem a serious matter; we were quite lighthearted about it.

When we made our first survey of the situation, however, we found that the snow was far higher outside the door than we had at first imagined. Owing to the position of the house, and the way it nestles back in a little hollow that has been cut out of the hillside to give it level standing room, special inducement had been offered to the snow to pile itself up in drifts and block each door in a most effectual manner. Still—that snow had to be cleared away somehow, and we stood in the doorway and discussed methods.

Hitherto I had always held the idea that people who allowed themselves to remain "snowed up" were very dull-witted and lacking in enterprise. Why not start clearing from the inside, [136] beginning with the spadeful nearest the doorstep, and so go on clearing, space after space, until they had got through to the outer world? To me it seemed quite an easy thing to do if you went about it systematically. But one slight detail had never occurred to me, viz., what should be done with the first spadeful of snow when you shovelled it up from beside the doorstep, to say nothing of the next and the next! That was one of the questions that bothered us now, though it was not the first difficulty we encountered.

At the very outset, of course, we all said, "Just get a spade!" But, alas, the spade was locked up in one of the inaccessible outhouses! Next we called for a broom, but all brooms were in the same building. Then I said, "Well, bring some shovels."

"Here's the kitchen shovel," said Eileen (Ursula pounced on that at once), "and here's the scoop from the coal-scuttle, and here's one of the small brass shovels from upstairs."

"But where is the big iron shovel?" I asked.

"That's in the coal-shed" (likewise inaccessible!). Virginia turned a deaf ear on the bedroom shovel, and possessed herself of the scoop. I had no alternative but to start work with the small brass affair that was about as effective as a fish-slice would have been!

We each shovelled up a mass (most of it tumbling off the shovel again before we got it into [137] mid-air), and then we looked at each other and enquired what we were to do with it. It did not seem advisable to carry it inside the house; and the only alternative was to toss it a foot or two away from us; but then, that only meant adding to the pile already there, which in any case we should have to clear away before we could get anywhere! It *was* a problem.

In the end we managed to clear about a square foot, and make a few small burrows in the mound around us, by throwing the snow as far away as we could each time. But what was that foot! We were still yards away from the coal-shed and the wood-house, with only a limited supply indoors, and still further away from the water. We had been working for a solid hour, and seemed to have raised a haystack of snow a little way off, where we had tossed our meagre shovelfuls. And then—as though to mock our feeble attempts—down came the snow again, and covered up the space we had cleared with such effort!

We looked at it in absolute despair.

"Why was I born an unmarried spinster?" exclaimed Ursula. "Oh, that a man would hove in sight—or whatever the present tense of 'hove' may be."

But no man obligingly hove in response!

X

Footprints

[138]

The snow was meaning to have a good time of it; there was no question about that. Further work in the clearing line was obviously impossible.

Virginia tilted up her coal-scoop in the porch, beside the pathetic remains of small brass shovel No. 1 (which broke in half quite early in the proceedings), and small brass shovel No. 2 (which also was giving wobbly indications of impending collapse). Ursula, possessing the only serviceable tool in the whole collection, had with unusual forethought carried in the kitchen shovel, and hidden it surreptitiously—realising that it was a much-coveted treasure at that moment.

But she did suggest that if we just took the ladder upstairs and let it down out of the end bedroom window she could climb down, and that would bring her close to the wood shed; she could get from the roof of that on to a low wall, and walk along the wall to the gate, which she would then climb over (as it was blocked each side with snow), and in this way she could get out into the lane to the spring of water, and bring back a can of water by the same route. This she [139] would tie to a cord let down from the bedroom window, which could then be hauled up. Then she would get into the wood shed—which would not be difficult, as the door opened inwards, and would not be blocked by the snow on the inside; getting together some logs, she would next lash them up so that they also could be hauled up like the water; finally, she would herself return, *viâ* the roof and the ladder and the bedroom window, to the bosom of the family.

This suggestion was received with gratitude, only everyone else wanted to take Ursula's place, and make the tour instead of her. We pointed out to her that, as she had already meanly annexed the only workable shovel, she ought at least to relinquish the rôle of leading lady in this expedition. We might have wasted much time in arguing with her had not Eileen reminded us that the ladder—like everything else we needed—was up the garden safely snowed up under the laurel hedge. So that project fell through.

"We may as well leave that collection of old metal in the porch," said Virginia, "since there is no fear of callers arriving and putting us to the blush this afternoon." Then there was nothing left to do but to stamp off the snow, and shed rubbers, and ulsters, and scarfs, and woollen gloves, and possess our souls in patience indoors, till such time as the snow should give over.

"And to think how I've always prided myself on going away from home prepared for *every* [140] emergency!" sighed Virginia. "My dressing-case is simply crammed with such valuable data as a bandage for a possible sprained ankle, court plaster, a pocket-knife with a corkscrew on it, a specially strong smelling-bottle for fainty ones, a nightlight, a box of matches, ammoniated quinine, wedges for rattling windows, a box of tin-tacks—no, not a hammer, I always use the heel of my shoe—a two-foot rule—what should I want that for? I'm sure I don't know, but then you never can tell! But with all my precautions, it never occurred to me to pack a spade and broom in with my luggage. This snowstorm has shown me the weak points in my outfit."

"It has shown *me* the weak points in my joints," groaned Ursula. "And, moreover, I never knew before how many parts of us there were that could ache. I'm just painful from head to foot. I never realised what a noble, self-sacrificing calling snow-shovelling is. And when I think of the men who come round in town, offering to sweep the snow from the path—and a good long path too—for a few pence, it seems a positive scandal that they should get so little. I'm sure there is quite ten shillings' worth of me used up already!"

We certainly did ache. And only those who have been suddenly called upon to attack a bank of [141] snow, with inexperience and feeble tools, can know the extent of our stiffness. We were content to let it snow, without the slightest desire to crick our backs any further. And after all there is something exceedingly restful and soothing to over-worked brain and over-strained nerves, in merely sitting in a low chair by a roaring fire, taking only such exercise as is required to put on an extra log, secure in the knowledge that neither telegram, nor visitor, nor any communication whatsoever from the outside world can possibly break in upon the quiet and peace. You need to spend your life in the heart of the great metropolis, amid the never-ceasing turmoil of London streets, with your days one long maddening distraction of callers, telephone bells, endless queries and perpetual noise, to appreciate the joy of the solitude in that snowed-up cottage among the hills.

For long months and months the guns in Flanders had sent a muffled boom over my London garden every hour of the day, and had shaken my windows violently every hour of the night; and there is no need to set down in writing the ache and the anxiety that each dull thud brought to the heart. Every one who has husband or brother or son out yonder knows what question comes [142] wafted over each time the guns send out their deadly roll.

But our craving for quiet was not a desire to get out of earshot of the guns. It dated farther back than the War; it was the inevitable outcome of the over-wrought hurry of the twentieth century, when one's nerves get so frazzled in the vain attempt to do everything, and do it all at once, that at last life is simply one intense longing for that "nest in the wilderness" out of reach of the clamour of the market-place and the vain, foolish, soul-wearing struggle for material things.

In that enchanted period of life, known as “before the War,” we used often to discuss the desirability of moving to an uninhabited island and spending the rest of our days there in unalloyed peace. It had been an absorbing dream with me, ever since I first read Sarah Orne Jewett’s book, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. I dare say it was selfish to think of being *quite* out of reach of the noise and dirt and bustle and din of cities, and where there would be no next-door piano, and no gramophone in the house the other side, and no soots floating in the windows—but it was a very pleasant one, and I used to add to it occasionally by imagining what it would be like to wake up one morning and find that some unknown but generous friend had left me an uninhabited island as a legacy; one not far from the mainland, and somewhere around the British [143]
Isles, of course.

When such a thing happens, it will find me quite prepared, for we have built the house there, and furnished it, and mapped out our life there many and many a time; all I am waiting for is—the island! That seems hard to come by! I’ve had one or two offered me (not as gifts, but to purchase), like Lundy, for instance, but they cost too much and are not uninhabited. So we have still to content ourselves with plans only.

We were recalled to The Island (we always refer to it in capital letters) as we sat round the fire, by Virginia inquiring what books I should take with me when I moved there. She said she concluded that, being a booky sort of a person, a library would be an essential.

But I set my face firmly against taking unnecessary literature. My house gets choked with books, ninety per cent. of which I never open a second time. I am for ever turning them out, and yet they go on accumulating. Virginia has a perfect mania for hoarding impossible books, that she could never find time to read through again if she lived to be the age of Methuselah; yet she keeps them all, on the chance that some day she may require to refer to a solitary sentence in one of them. Her cupboards are full, and her shelves are packed behind and before, and she has had sets of drawers made just to hold “papers”; which means hundredweights of abstruse [144]
pamphlets, and learned magazines, and cuttings—well, I dare say you know the sort of girl she is, and what it’s like when their flat gets spring-cleaned, and she insists that no one must lay a finger on *her* books!

Ursula isn’t much better; but at least she is more practical, and believes in spring cleaning; hence, in *her* case, she does have a turn-out occasionally, and just throws away indiscriminately whole shelf-loads of books in a fit of desperation, when she has managed to get every article in the flat jumbled up in a heap in the room it has no business in, and no one can find anything. I believe at such time she surreptitiously disposes of some of Virginia’s tomes, too; but this I only suspect. At any rate, Virginia is always bewailing a number of “*most* important books” that never can be found after one of Ursula’s domestic upheavals.

Knowing all this, I said that only a definite number of books would be allowed on The Island. Both girls said it would be impossible to fix any limit that would meet the case. I said I was quite sure humanity, more especially the intellectual feminine portion of it, could do with far less books than they thought they could.

Vehement protests!

Then I suggested, to prove my words, that we should each start to make out a list of the books [145]
we couldn’t possibly do without on The Island—*only* those we couldn’t possibly do without—and see what it amounted to. “Jot down any book or author that occurs to us as being essential, irrespective of any sort of classification,” I said. “And we had better compare notes every ten books, as we go along.”

Forthwith, we each scribbled down our first ten *absolutely indispensable* books (they were to be exclusive of religious and devotional works). When we compared notes in a few minutes’ time, these were our lists:—

VIRGINIA.

Encyclopædia.
A Dictionary.
Jane Austen’s Novels.
“The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain.”
A Time Table.
Franklin’s “Voyages.”
“Punch” (regularly).
A good Atlas.
“The Spectator” (regularly).
“A Child’s Garden of Verse.” R. L. Stevenson.

URSULA.

A good Guide to London.
A large selection of Needlework and Crochet Books. [146]
My old Scrapbook.
Mudie’s Catalogue.
An Almanac giving the changes of the moon.

"The Old Red Sandstone." Hugh Miller.
The Stores Price List.
Mrs. Hemans' Poems.
The Scottish Student's Song Book.
Kipling's "Kim."

SELF.

All Ruskin's Works.
"The Wide, Wide World."
"The Country of the Pointed Firs." S. O. Jewett.
All my Gardening Books and Florists' Seed Catalogues.
All my Wild Flower Books.
"A Little Book of Western Verse." Eugene Field.
Poems by Ann and Jane Taylor.
All my Cookery Books.
All the Board of Agriculture's Leaflets.
A Book on Deer Culture.

Of course, we each gazed in profound surprise and contempt on the others' lists, and asked why this and that had been put down. Why did Ursula want a guide to London, when the object of going to The Island was to get away from London?

She said she thought you ought to keep in touch with things even if you were away; and if it came to that, why did I want a Deer book, since I couldn't look at venison? [147]

I said I felt it in me that I should start keeping deer as soon as I landed, and there was more sense in doing that than in reading a Time Table, for instance!

Virginia protested a Time Table was absolutely essential, else how would you ever be able to get away when you wanted to? And you never knew *when* you might be summoned to anyone's funeral in a hurry, and was she supposed to be cut off from *all* human enjoyment? Whereas no one could possibly want a Student's Song Book, when they couldn't sing two notes in tune; and, also, why Mrs. Hemans, might she venture to ask?

"Yes, who would dream of carting around a Mrs. Hemans in these days?" I scoffed.

"The frontispiece engraving of Mrs. Hemans always reminded me of mother's Aunt Matilda," said Ursula impressively. "I only saw her twice, but on the first occasion she gave me a doll, and on the second a blue and white bead necklace; I've got three of the beads left, in my workbox. And I've always loved beads, and I loved her in consequence, and I wouldn't dream of being parted from Mrs. Hemans. And, in any case, why bring a Dictionary?"

"Because I may require to look up a more expressive word occasionally, or enlarge my flow of vocabulary," Virginia explained. "And I conclude I'm not expected to be absolutely dumb when we get there!" [148]

Of course, I don't mean to imply that these are necessarily the books we should have named had we sat down thoughtfully to compile a list most representative of our tastes and needs; but whatever list I had made, I'm sure I should have included the volumes I named; and it goes to show that the books that make an individual appeal to us are not necessarily those that our friends expect us to name.

The library catalogue was never completed, for, before we had time further to criticize each other's preferences, we were pulled up short by a sound.

We all stopped our chatter on an instant, for surely and certainly there could be no mistaking it, there was the ring of an iron spade chinking on stone! When last we had looked out, just after breakfast, not a stone had been visible for a spade to chink against in the whole vicinity. We flew to the door, and there, touching his hat with a smiling "Good morning, ma'am," stood the elderly handy man who ought to have been in bed with his bad cold; and behold, a clear path to the lane. He had worked from the gate inwards, and we had been so busy with our discussions indoors, we had not heard him till he reached the porch. [149]

"I was only able to get down downstairs yesterday," the invalid explained. "But in any case it wasn't no good coming over till that spell o' snow was down, even if I'd been fit to come out." Then, after a detailed description of symptoms and sufferings and so forth—"Yes, I think there's a good bit more to come down yet. Nothing won't be able to be got up from the village yet awhile; they tell me the drifts is eight feet deep in places. Maybe in a few days I'll be able to get down. I'll be wanting some sharps soon myself for the fowls, so I'll have to try and get down by the end of the week. And the butcher's killing himself this week, I could bring you up a j'int. I've knocked up a good bit of kindling wood in the wood shed, so you'll be all right now."

Yes, we were all right now, from one point of view; but I devoutly hoped he would not wait till the end of the week before he went for those "sharps," for I had discovered that we had *only one loaf in the house!* And as they only bake twice a week in our village, and everyone knows how long war bread won't keep, I need only add that already we had to cut off all the outside before bringing it to table, and by to-morrow it would be quite gorgonzola-ish right through!

As soon as he had gone, Ursula burst forth, “Don’t talk to me any more of the rights of [150]
women”—no one had been, but we let it pass—“don’t tell me they are the equals of men, and that all they want is a good education and scope for their energies. Look at us, haven’t *we* all had good educations?” (Ursula and her sister are thoroughly acquainted with the literature of several European countries; they read Plato in the original; and can give you reliable information on such points as the similarity between the tribes on the borders of Tibet and the Patagonians—if any exists. They can certainly be called well educated.) “And wasn’t there scope enough for our energies out there? And then consider what we accomplished! While a man like that comes along —says he never went to school in his life, just risen from a sick bed, too, so none too strong—yet in an hour or so he’s done what *we* should not have got through in a month. And look at the neat job he’s made of it, with the snow banked up trimly on each side; why, we were about as effective and as artistic as three fowls scratching on the surface of things. And then look at the stack of wood he got ready in no time. I’m sure I blushed to see him gazing at that collection of decrepit shovels standing in the porch——”

“And well you might blush,” edged in Virginia, “remembering how you selfishly stuck to the [151]
only decent shovel there was, with never so much as an offer to either of us to have a turn.”

“—Yes, we ought to have votes, we’re so—capable!” Ursula went on, but I begged her not to worry her head about votes just now, as the question of food was of greater national importance.

At the word “food” of course everyone was all attention, and we made ourselves into a Privy Council, and they appointed me Food Controller, because it would give them the right to do all the grumbling. But the matter was not quite as much of a joke as they thought. For so long they had been accustomed to a pantry stocked with bottles and tins and stores of all descriptions (and Virginia once remarked that to read the labels alone—if you had lost the tin-opener—was quite as good as a seven-course meal at a fashionable restaurant), that they forgot things were not like that now! In the dairy, too (which we use as a larder), it was the usual pre-war thing to see large open jam tarts in deep dishes, with a fancy trellis work over the top of the jam, and large pies with lovely water-lilies, made from the scraps of paste, on top, and spicy brown cakes, with a delicious odour, standing on the stone slabs—Abigail being a capital hand at pastry and cakes. The dairy is built on the north side, close under the hill, and the great stone wall that keeps the hill from tumbling down on top of the dairy is packed with hart’s-tongue and the British maiden- [152]
hair fern, and rosettes of the pretty little scaly spleenwort, and lacy tufts of wall rue, and practically every other kind of fern that loves damp shade and the English climate. And ivy runs over the lot right up to the top, where wild roses and honeysuckle and blackberry ramp about in the sunshine, and often peep down to see how it fares with their comrades in the cool ravine below. The long fronds of the fern wave in at the dairy window, and the ivy sends out little fingers, catching hold wherever it can, and creeping in, very much at home, through the wire-netting that does duty for a window. My guests always like to go into the dairy to see the wonderful array of ferns; but I sometimes suspect it is also to gaze on the appetizing-looking things that appeal irresistibly to all who have spent an hour or two in our hungry air!

But war had made a considerable difference alike to pantry and store-cupboard and larder, and we had to trust to the promise of Miss Jarvis, the lady at the village shop—and one of the most valuable members of the community—that we should not actually starve! As the stocks had been used, they had not been replenished. Cinnamon buns, lemon-curd cheese cakes, fruit cakes with a nice crack in the top, were no longer piled up in the larder. No home-cured ham, sewn up in [153]
white muslin, hung from the big hook in the kitchen ceiling. No large, dried, golden-coloured vegetable marrows hung up beside it for winter use.

We had plenty of potatoes, fortunately (and never had we valued potatoes as we did this year!), and we had the usual “remains” that are in the larder, when the butcher has not called for a few days and a family lives from hand to mouth, as one has had to do recently, lest one should be suspected of hoarding!

There was a tin of lunch biscuits, some cheese, and cereals; but the rest of the store cupboard seemed exasperatingly useless when it came to sustaining life in a snow-bound household. What good was a tin of linseed, for instance, or a bottle of cayenne, or a bottle of evaporated horse-radish (with the sirloin presumably still gambolling about somewhere in the valley)? Why had I ever laid in a bottle of tarragon vinegar, a bottle of salad dressing, a box of rennet tablets, a tin of curry powder, desiccated cocoanut, a bottle of chutney? Even the tin of baking powder and the nutmegs and capers seemed extravagant and superfluous. Oh, for a simple glass of tongue—but we had opened our only one the day we arrived!

One thing was certain: while the snow remained at its present depth, to say nothing of an increase, no provisions could be got up from the village. The steep roads were like glass the last [154]
time we were out; now they would be impassable for horses or vehicles, even though a man might manage to get over them somehow. Milk we could obtain from a neighbouring farm, perhaps a few eggs, possibly a fowl as a very special favour, now that our path was cleared; but that was the utmost we could hope to raise locally. The point to be considered was: How long could we hold out?

“Well, there is only one other thing I can think of,” said Virginia; “you must fly signals of distress, and hoist a flag up at the top of the chimney—they always do in books. . . . How are you to get the flag up the chimney? I’m sure *I* don’t know if you don’t! What’s the good of being an editor if you don’t know a simple little thing like that?”

But the problem was solved for me by a tap at the door, and then one realised the superiority of the servants of the Crown over all ordinary individuals. It was the postman. He said “Good morning” with the modest air of one who knows he has accomplished a great deed, but leaves it for others to extol.

“I’ve brought up the letters,” he said; “but I couldn’t get up the parcels to-day. There are a good many.” I knew what that meant. My post is necessarily a very heavy one, more especially when I am away from town, and great packages of things are sent down daily. “Is there anything [155] I can take back with me?” he inquired.

I hastily scribbled some telegrams on urgent matters, glad of this chance to get them sent off; and I knew the Head of Affairs would be glad to hear we were all well. As I handed them to the man, he rather hesitatingly produced a bulky newspaper parcel that had been hidden under his big mackintosh cape, with an apologetic look, as it were, to the Crown, that the garment should have been put to so unofficial an use. Then in an undertone, lest the Postmaster-General in London might overhear, he said—

“Miss Jarvis was afraid you might be running short of things.” The thoughtful Lady of the Village Shop had sent up a loaf, a piece of bacon and a pound of sugar. How I blessed her!

Next day he managed to get up some of the small postal packages. The first one I opened was from one of the Assistant Editors in town.

“I see in the papers that you’ve had a heavy fall of snow,” she wrote, “and as there was not a solitary line from you this morning, I’m wondering if you are isolated? At any rate, I’m sending you a home-made cake and a box of smoked sausages by this post (instead of MSS.) in case you may be cut off from supplies.”

“If that isn’t bed-rock common sense,” said Ursula. “Most intelligent girls would have improved [156] the occasion by sending you newspaper cuttings with statistics of the latest submarine sinkings, to keep your spirits up.”

Another slight fall of snow was all the late afternoon brought us, not enough to spoil the newly cleared path, but sufficient to reveal the fact next morning that someone with large masculine boots had been promenading round the cottage, for there were the footprints, a clear track that even a detective could not have failed to see, leading from the gate to the outhouses, from the outhouses to the scullery door, from the scullery door to the best door (it’s absurd to call it the front door, because each side is as much the front as the other excepting the part that backs into the hill!), from the best door to the door with the porch, and so on, out of the gate again.

As none of us knew anything about them, we concluded the handy man must have returned, bent on some new errand of mercy. But he disowned them; had not been near the place since the previous forenoon, and the snow had not fallen till five o’clock. It looked exceedingly queer, not to say uncanny, and we recalled the fact that the dog had barked violently after we were in bed. So far as I knew, there was no resident on those hills who would think of wandering round the [157] house after dark; and no tramp or odd wayfarer would ever scale those heights unless he had some very urgent reason for so doing, and had a definite destination. It is too stiff a climb to take on a casual chance of picking up anything; moreover, unless a man knew his way, he would soon lose himself. Though the footprints really perplexed me, I did not say very much about them; but Eileen did.

When Mr. Jones from a neighbouring farm arrived with milk, I heard the full description being given him at the kitchen door. He expressed due interest, and described a mysterious case he had just read about, in the weekly paper, of a servant who had disappeared from a house in London where she had been in service for years, and no trace of her had been found since. Eileen and he agreed as to the many points of similarity between the two cases.

When the lad from the butcher’s came to know what portion I wished to bespeak of the sheep they would be killing, come Friday, I heard Eileen once more going through the story of the footprints, combined with details of the missing domestic. He, in turn, told her how a burglar had been one morning in a house next door to his grandmother’s in Bristol, and how, when they chased him, he jumped right over the garden wall, into the very dish of potatoes his aunt was [158] peeling for his dinner. (The pronouns were confusing, but I don’t think it was for the burglar’s dinner the potatoes were intended.)

The farmer’s daughter who came to inquire if I would like a fowl, after hearing the story, offered to lend Eileen a novelette she had just been reading, where there were footprints exactly like these; and in the last chapter it turns out that the footprints were those of—I forget who or what, but it was very enthralling, and Eileen gratefully jumped at the offer of the loan.

The old man who came to say that they couldn’t deliver any coals till the weather broke, remarked that he didn’t like the look of it at all, and said he should be quite nervous if he were she, and asked her if she had heard about the old woman who had been found dead in her bed in Yorkshire, died of cold, and fifty golden sovereigns tied up in the middle of her pillow? Eileen had not heard of it. The old man said it was as well to keep your eyes open, as there were funny people in the world, and this seemed to him just such another affair.

And much more to the same effect.

That night I was suddenly awakened by a sound, though at first I could not tell what it was. I lay wide awake, holding my breath: then it came again, a gentle rasp, rasp, as though someone were scraping something with a metal tool. At the same moment I heard Virginia and Ursula [159] stirring in the next room. I stole in to them; they too were listening. And then we realised that the burglar had really come! From the direction of the sound we knew he was scraping away the putty, or something of the sort, from a pane of glass that was let into the scullery door. If he managed to get through that, he could undo the bolt, and would be free of the place.

What were we to do, we asked each other in whispers? Of course, previously, I had always known what I should do if a burglar ever came to my house. I should go downstairs, throw open the door and confront him unafraid, asking him in a firm but most melodious voice what had brought him to such a low moral depth, and urging him to better things. He would be so undone by the sight of me and the sound of the music of my voice, that he would crumple up at my feet and confess all his past burglaries. Whereupon, I should motion him to come in and take a seat, while I hastily prepared a cup of Bovril, and cut him a large plate of cold roast beef; and on his observing that I had passed him the mustard pot without first removing the silver spoon, he would be so overcome by my confidence in him that he would voluntarily vow to turn over a new leaf. He would leave with half-a-crown in his pocket. And years afterwards a prosperous man [160] would knock at my door, bearing in his hand half-a-crown, etc.

But this particular case did not seem to fit in with my previous programme for the reception of burglars. In the first place there was no Bovril in the house; and secondly, there was no beef, only a tiny piece of cold mutton in the larder—and you can't do anything heroic with only cold mutton.

Meanwhile the man was scraping away downstairs, and we did not know but what he would be in upon us any moment.

"Shall we let the dog loose?" said Virginia.

"The dog!" I repeated. "Why, where *is* the dog? Why isn't he barking?" Until that moment we had forgotten him entirely. There was no sound of him below; and he is a ferocious little thing if strangers come anywhere near the place.

"Oh, then they've poisoned him!" gasped Ursula, almost in tears. "They've got some poisoned meat in to him somehow, under the door perhaps, and he'll be lying there a corpse, and we never thinking of him." We all three crept as silently as we could downstairs, to find "the corpse" remarkably cheerful, with his nose at the crack of an outer door, every hair of his body on end with tension, his ears cocked up, and every muscle of him on the alert—but not a ghost of a bark did he give, only a perfunctory waggle of his tail, just as an acknowledgment of our presence, and [161] an apology that he was too much engaged at the moment to give us more attention. There was not much poison about that dog! As the scraping got louder, and my teeth were chattering violently (but only with the cold, as I explained to the other two), I fled upstairs again, and they followed.

"What *do* you usually do when burglars come?" whispered Virginia.

"I don't know. I've never had one before," I moaned.

"Didn't you once tell me you had a bell, or something of the sort?" said Ursula.

"Why, yes; I had forgotten that." I keep a huge bell under the bed at the head, and I always intended to ring it violently out of the window if a burglar ever came. (Scrape, scrape, scrape, continued down below.) "I don't suppose anyone on these hills would wake up to listen; but, at any rate, it might worry the burglar and send him off."

"Let's ring it now," said Virginia eagerly, "and then, when he is well *outside* the gate, of course, we'll let the dog run out after him."

"Yes," I agreed. "But first I want to go into Eileen's room, and peep out of her window and see *who* is below. Her window is just over the scullery door, and is always open at night. If it is anyone from the district—though I don't believe it is—I should recognise him." [162]

So we tip-toed into Eileen's room, where she lay sound asleep.

"When I give the signal, you ring," I said.

Cautiously, slowly, silently, I got my head a little further and further out of the window, shaking with ague from head to foot. And there I saw the burglar—he was Farmer Jones's dog (alias the wolf, you remember), and he had got hold of a sardine tin that had been emptied that day. He was having a lovely time, licking that tin out, and as he licked, so it scraped and scraped on the stones. No wonder my own dog did not bark; he knew it was his ancient enemy without, and the instinct of the dog of war was to wait stealthily till the foe should get within his reach.

"Don't ring the bell!" I whispered hoarsely, and we crept out of the room.

"I think it's just as well Eileen did not wake," I said, as we made ourselves a midnight cup of tea before turning in again, "for I've no desire to hear *this* episode being related all day long at the kitchen door!"

Have you ever sat by the fire indoors, when the ground has been covered with snow, and the

sky grey and heavy, till you have been “absolutely *perished* with the cold,” and then someone has [163]
come and dragged you out (or, if you have wonderfully uncommon sense, you have dragged yourself out), and plunged right into it—a shrivelled-up martyr! After ten minutes spent in trying to sweep the snow from the path, what have you felt like?

I plunged right out into it—simply because the two girls were bragging such a deal about their own heroic fortitude in forsaking the fireside at the call of life’s stern duties, or something like that. But first of all I put on a knitted hug-me-tight; then my leather motoring undercoat; then my big cloth coat; and finally, my mackintosh. I tied on a woollen sports cap with a winter motor scarf; I turned up my coat collar, and put on a fur necklet; and, of course, I didn’t forget gaiters and warm gloves.

Then I stood on the doorstep and looked out—if you believe me, the cold went right through me, and fairly rattled my bones inside.

Still, I wasn’t going to be outdone in misery by the other two, and noticing that the bushes were actually breaking down under the load of snow, I seized a broom and sallied forth. After all, if one has to die a martyr’s death, one may as well occupy the final moments in doing useful kindnesses for one’s family.

It is some sort of solace to picture how they will eventually say, “To think of her doing all that, when——”; or, “To the last she never gave in; why only the very day——!”; or, “Ah! how often [164]
have I seen the poor dear——!” etc.

So I made for the pink rhododendron, that was suffering badly; being evergreen, its large rosettes of leaves, surrounding each flower-bud of the future, had caught and held great masses of snow; the lower branches were literally buried beneath the heavy drifts.

But as I found I couldn’t get at it without clearing a way through a three-foot bank of snow, I set to work with a spade. It sounds simple enough, I know; but unless you’ve been getting your living at snow-clearing, you would never believe what a lot there is to it, when you start to make a nice serviceable path through a drift from two to three feet deep, and six feet long.

I reached the pink rhododendron at last. Getting my broom against a main stem, I shook it gently. What a lovely shower came down! I don’t know that I needed it all over me, personally; nor was it necessary to choke up half the cutting I had just made. Still, down it came, white billows and a rain of silver powder. I never knew what snow was really like, till I shook it all over me, and the sun suddenly came out and turned the cascade to a gleaming white radiance.

Having got well smothered to start with, I decided I might just as well go on; and that I could [165]
dispense with the motor undercoat, which I left hanging on the bush. Lower down the garden I could hear the clink and scrape of shovel and spade against the stones, as the other two cleared the snow from the various little flights of rough stone steps that take you up or down, from one level of the garden to another. But I didn’t feel like clearing steps just then; it was too niggly. I wanted something bigger than that, and I somehow had a desire to work alone, so I struck a path that went up the garden, and began to work my way towards the top gate, clearing as I went.

As I bent over the smooth glistening surface, I was amazed to see the number of messages written there for those who know the language of the wilds well enough to read them! What a scurrying to and fro of little feet had been going on since the snowfall, all on the one quest—food and water! Birds innumerable had left their signatures; some I knew, some I could not identify, save that they were birds. Rabbits I could trace; stoats, too, might have made some of the writing in the snow; and there were bigger tracks—perhaps a fox.

Everywhere there were tidings of other wayfarers, other workers, other seekers—the many other dwellers who have their homes somewhere between the larch-woods and the weir. The [166]
moment before the place had seemed a frost-locked, deserted, uninhabitable waste of snow; now I saw it was teeming with life, brave, persistent, not-to-be-daunted life, that in spite of cold and hardship and privation and a universal stoppage of supplies, still set out, with unquenchable faith, on the quest for the food which they have learnt to know is invariably forthcoming, “in due season.”

The surprising thing to me is the fact that such small bodies can ever survive such a welter of snow. Aren’t they afraid they will sink down and be swallowed up in it? Have they no fear lest they lose their way, with the old landmarks obliterated? Doesn’t it strike terror to the heart when they find their doorway blocked, and themselves snowed up in burrow or hole? Yet, judging by outside evidence, it would seem that none of these things daunt them; an obstacle is merely something to be surmounted.

To my mind the most pathetic thing about it all is the fact that their chief fear seems to be fear of human beings, a dread of the very ones who could, and ought to, befriend them.

In my clearing I moved a small wooden box that had been used for seedlings, and since had lain unnoticed beside a hedge. Underneath a tiny field mouse had taken refuge. It seemed almost paralysed with terror when I suddenly lifted the box, and escape was blocked on every side by [167]
banks of snow. The poor little thing just sat up on its hind legs and looked at me most pitifully. I can’t say that I exactly cultivate mice, in an ordinary way, but—here was a fellow-creature in distress, such a little one too; I couldn’t have refused its appeal. I quickly put the box over it again, and clearing a space by the hole it had used as a door, I put down some bird-seed—I

always carry something in my coat pocket for the birds—and I went away. Ten minutes later, every bit was gone.

Working my way round to another thicket of rhododendrons, that is a bank of purple and creamy white in June, once more I sent the silver-dust flying with my trusty broom. As one great mass came hurtling down, it so deluged me that for the moment I had to hold my breath, shut my eyes, and clutch on to a branch to keep myself from being buried under it. And then I heard a tragic whimper.

Turning round, I saw the small white dog, shaking himself out of the mass—and such a dingy-dirty object his *passé* white coat looked against the snow! I had left him indoors, a melancholy little figure, very sorry for himself, by reason of a swelled face. He will persist in lying with his nose to the bottom crack of the back door, irrespective of wind or weather, ever hopeful that a hare or a fox may come trailing by; and then—oh joy! what a turmoil there is within (he quite [168] fancies he is “baying”), and what a scurrying of fur and feet without!

Having got him in, and rubbed him down, and wrapped him up in his favourite bit of old blanket, and given him a bone (which he couldn’t eat, poor little chap, but he had it in his basket with him, against such times as his mouth was in working order again), I returned to the garden —you couldn’t have kept me out of it now! I found I didn’t need the hug-me-tight, however, and I left it on the orchard gate.

What a work it was, tumbling over stone edgings one forgot were there, tripping over tree trunks and logs—the whole place seemed strewn with obstacles one never noticed until the snow covered them over.

I picked myself up continually, and worked on with my broom. Virginia came up once to point out to me my appalling lack of scientific method; but as I have never had any illusions on this point, it didn’t worry me. Ursula volunteered the information that I looked like Don Quixote tilting at a windmill, each time I attacked a bush or tree. I knew she was merely jealous of my ability. I’m not one to let a little thing like that deter me from my course of well-doing. I merely took off my fur necklet and thick motor scarf, and left them on a stile, so sunburnt was I getting beneath them.

And how grateful even the dry cracking twigs of the rose bushes seemed to be for the lifting of [169] the load that bowed down one and all. The hollies had been trying bravely to hold up their heads, but it was hard work; every leaf had held out a little curved hand to catch a few snowflakes as they fell, and the total result was a mound that threatened to break the trees to pieces. They, too, shook themselves cheerfully, when I relieved them of their burden.

I could not do much to help the lesser plants; they were mostly buried beneath the snow, and I hoped they were the warmer in consequence. The poor wallflowers, that had been so sprightly with opening yellow buds when we arrived, now showed only shrivelled branches above the snow.

As I broomed my way towards the vegetable garden, I noticed that the birds were gathering near—they had kept away before, while the dog was about. But now the starlings began to shriek from the roof of the big barn. “Look at her! Look at her! What’s the use of wasting time on rose trees! No grub’s there! Look at her! Shaking snow down! Just as though there wasn’t enough on the ground before!”

“Oh, do be quiet!” shouted back a rook. “Just look at our nest! It would have been such an up-to-date affair, too; wife built it on the new war-economy lines—clever bird my wife is—only three [170] sticks, you know; saves waste; and *now* look at it! Wife can’t even find the sticks!”

“Serves her right,” cawed a neighbour (a lady, I feel sure). “She shouldn’t have started so early —always trying to get ahead of everyone else with her spring cleaning!”

The sun had got the better of the clouds, and had changed the whole earth from grey to gold, from dead white to a gleaming brilliance, yellow in the sunlight, blue—undiluted blue—in the shade. I had seen blue snow in pictures, and had hitherto regarded it as an artistic exaggeration. But now I saw the blue with my own eyes on the north side of the walls and barns, and where long shadows were cast by the Wellingtonia, the hollies, and the evergreen firs. The mist still hovered over the valleys, and shut us off from the lower lands, but it was no longer cold and sombre; indeed, it was no longer mist at all; it seemed just light enmeshed, a liquid golden atmosphere.

The snow gleamed and scintillated with its diamond-dusted surface; the trunks of the Scots firs surprised one with the sudden warmth of red they showed when struck by the sunbeams, and the lovely colour still left in their blue-green foliage.

Far and wide the birds answered the call of the sun. Big pinions flew across the sky, casting [171] shadows on the snow-scape as they passed; small birds darted in and out of holes in tree trunks, or crannies under the eaves; there was a cheeping and a chattering all over the garden and the orchard; while up and down the larches flitted the tits—the blue-tits swinging upside down, almost turning somersaults, as the notion chanced to take them; the coal-tits, any number of them, skipping about from branch to branch, never still a moment, always talking in their brisk

little twitter; while over all there rang incessantly the “Pinker, pinker, peter, peter,” of the great-tit.

Near at hand, robin, my little garden companion, was having a good deal to say. At first I think he was reiterating what he had often said before: that he considered the dog a nuisance that ought to be banished from any properly conducted garden, since his habit of chasing every moving object within sight was disturbing, to say the least of it, to a conscientious worm-hunter.

Having finished on this subject, he began to talk about other things; but try as I would, I could not understand what he said; yet I knew he was trying to tell me *something*. He kept taking short flights over to the wall, and then back to some branch near at hand. “Twitter, twitter,” he kept on saying; yet he never even noticed the path I was clearing, back he would fly to the wall. [172]

At last, as he impatiently fluffed out his feathers, perched on a white currant bush, till he looked like a ball, saying a lot more the while, I made my way through the snow to the wall. He darted after me, and stood on top of a mound of leaves that had been swept together last autumn, and left to stand till the spring digging should start. Being on the south side of the wall, and sheltered a little by the wide-spreading branches of a big Spanish chestnut, it had escaped a good deal of the snow, though it was frozen hard on the surface.

Here robin stood, and when he saw I was looking at him, he pecked several times with his beak at the solid mass. Then he flicked his tail and gazed at me. “Surely you understand what I want?” he said with his beady eyes. “No? Oh! how stupid human beings are! Well, watch me again!” Dab, dab, dab, went the small beak once more, without making the slightest impression on the ice-bound lumps.

Then I grew intelligent.

“Out of the way,” I said to him, and he flew to a low branch of the tree and watched me critically, while I drove the spade well into the mass.

“That’s right,” he chirped out excitedly, as I turned it over and got down to the softer portion, [173] spreading the leaves about. “Why on earth couldn’t you have done that sooner!” as he swooped down to my very feet and seized something wriggly—gulp! I looked away.

What ninety-ninth sense is it, I wonder, that tells birds when food is about? One moment robin and I had the chestnut tree and its environment to ourselves. Next moment, directly I turned away, down came thrushes, and blackbirds, and starlings; and though robin put his foot down firmly, said it was all his, every worm of it, and dared anyone else to touch so much as a caterpillar-egg, or he’d know the reason why, he was outdone by numbers, and finally lost what he might have had because he considered it his duty to chastise Mr. Over-the-wall-robin, who had presumed to say that the leaf-heap belonged to him!

At last I got to the top gate, which is about one hundred feet higher than the lower part of the garden. What a wonderful world I gazed upon, so weird, so immensely mysterious it looked under the great snow covering. The valleys where the sun did not penetrate were entirely blotted out by soft mist. One seemed to be alone, high up in space, girdled about by white and grey, gold and mauve and steely-blue; I wanted to push on and on, to walk miles and miles, to fly if I could. The fact was, the exhilaration of the keen pure atmosphere was already beginning to tell on me, and [174] was fast mounting to my head.

One thing I caught sight of on the opposite hills gave me pause for thought: it was a larch-wood in which every tree was blown so far over to one side, that there would be but little chance of their ever recovering or getting into the upright. I remembered that the handy man had told us trees were lying in all directions out in the main road. I decided to climb still higher up the hill and see what my own woods looked like. First, however, I took off the big coat, and left it hanging on the under bough of a larch inside the gate.

Out of the top gate I went, and along the lane that now showed a moderately hard path along the centre, where one and another had trampled it down. A few yards brought me to a field that in June is one dazzling, waving mass of moon daisies, mauve pyramidal orchises, rich purple orchises, quaking grass, and a hundred other flowers besides. Not a first class hay-crop, I admit; still, a fair-sized rick stands in one corner. And although it may not possess strong feeding qualities for cattle, this field has wonderful feeding qualities for mind and soul; I’ve lived on it many and many a day through dreary London fogs and amid dirty City pavements and sordid-looking bricks and mortar. And when town has seemed unendurable, with its noise and its hustle [175] and its brain-and-body-wearying chase after the unnecessary, I’ve thought of the brook that slips out from among a great mass of Hard Fern in the birch and hazel coppice up above, and wanders across the orchis field, with ragged robins fluttering their tattered pink petals beside the sterner browns and greens of flowering reeds, and broad masses of marsh mint—that is a mass of bluey-mauve in August—spreading in big clumps and bosses wherever it can find a bit of damp earth.

I’ve shut my eyes in the noisy City train, and in a moment I’ve gathered a big bunch of the quaking grass, brown, with a tinge of purple, and the yellow stamens dangling from each little tuft. And the comfort that the brook and the orchises and the reeds and the under carpet of tiny flowers have brought me, has been worth more to me, personally, than the money that twenty haystacks might have realised.

But to-day the field was just one white sheet, like all the rest of the landscape. Along the south side of the wall the snow was not so heavy, and using the broom as an alpenstock, I plodded up the field—giving a wide berth to the place where the brook was down below—till at last I reached the woods, first a coppice of birch and hazel and oak, and adjoining it a larch-wood.

Once under the trees, the going was “all according”! It depended on whether the snow was [176] still on the branches, or had come down in small avalanches to the ground beneath. But I determined to struggle on. I was warmer than I had been since the previous summer, and more pleased with life than I had been since before the War started. The larch-wood offered the easier travelling, since there are not the down-drooping, low-lying branches of sundries that are always catching at one’s hat and hair in the mixed woods. With the larches you know just what to expect and where to find it. The needles make a fairly soft carpet, brambles are rare, and all you have to do is to gauge the level of the lowest of the bare brown branches, and pitch your head accordingly.

I looked at the wood before I ventured in. Everything seemed as usual. The outside trees that border the field are mixed firs, pines, and Wellingtonia. These do not shed their leaves as the larches do, and they stood up strong and erect, save where the heaviest laden boughs were bending under their weight of snow.

For the first few yards the trees were normal, standing in orderly ranks, much like the aisles of an old ruined cathedral, wherein the snow has freedom of entry. Every twig, every cone, had its glistening decoration. When a gust of wind shook tree or branches, down came the snow, in [177] powder for the most part, for the under branches broke the masses as they fell, and sent them flying in all directions.

Suddenly I emerged from the sombre half light of the wood, into brilliant sunshine, with clear space above. Yet—I wasn’t through the wood; what did it mean? And what were these great white masses that blocked all further progress? I had never seen this spot before, though I know every tree in that wood; to me they are like individual children.

Then I saw that what lay before me was a piled-up mass of trees, torn bodily up by the roots and lying in all directions one on top of each other. For a moment something almost akin to fear seized me, the awesomeness that comes over one when in the presence of a force that is utterly beyond one’s puny power to compass or restrain. Here was a footprint, indeed, of the storm that had done this stupendous thing.

The fringe of the wood all round was intact; the blizzard seemingly having swirled down, a veritable whirlwind, into the very centre of the plantation, tearing the trees out of the ground, and flinging them about in uncontrolled fury.

It was an impressive sight—even with the kindly snow covering up the wounds and the gashes, and doing its best to obliterate the harsh look of devastation that lay over the scene.

Retracing my steps, I ran into another explorer who was likewise trying to dodge a snow-bath [178] round a tree trunk.

It was Virginia.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your meditations,” she said politely, “and I won’t detain you a moment. I’ve merely come to ask if you would mind lending me your rubbers—not your best ones you have on, but the second best with the seven holes in the soles and one heel gone—in order that I may go to the neighbours and borrow a slice of bread. ‘We ain’t like them as asks,’” she went on, quoting a favourite expression of a well-known whiner in the village, whose practice is to take without asking, “‘but it do seem hard when you see yer own flesh and blood a-crying for vittels.’ Not that I would presume to interfere with your household arrangements and upset your meals, but what with Ursula in a dead faint making her will, and Eileen packing up to return to her grandmother in order to get something to eat——”

“What’s the time?” I cut her short.

“It was two when last I saw the clock, but I’ve wandered miles since then in search of you, hence the fact that my own rubbers are worn out.”

Then I remembered that I had never mentioned the matter of meals to Eileen that morning; though, in any case, there wasn’t much that could be cooked till that sheep was killed, come [179] Friday: we had naught but the remains of a shoulder of mutton.

“How did you find where I was?” I enquired, as we ploughed our way back.

“Footprints, oh, blessed word!” she said. “In any case, you shed your garments wherever you went, and thoughtfully left your coat hanging in the larch avenue; Eileen saw it in the distance and came shrieking to us that the burglar had evidently hung himself from a tree by the top gate!”

As there proved to be nothing at all on the mutton bone, we decided to reckon it a meatless day, and we sat down to a lunch of bread and cheese and coffee—each reading a cookery book the while. The Food Authorities surely couldn’t object to *that!*—and you’ve no idea what a fillip it gives to a war-meal, if you’ve never tried it.

Collecting cookery books, ancient and modern, being one of my hobbies, there was a fine

assortment to choose from. I selected “Ten Minutes with my Chafing Dish,” and what that author did in the time you would never credit! My bread and cheese became, in turn, braised terrapin, crayfish omelette, creamed oysters with Spanish onions, escalloped chicken with mushrooms, and fricaseed trout with paprika sauce.

I had it all at the one meal, no questions asked about the number of courses and the ounces of flour, and it only cost me about sixpence including the coffee. [180]

Ursula, who had annexed a 1724 volume, ate her frugalities to the accompaniment of Double Rum Shrub; but, as I told her, I was thankful I had been better brought up.

Virginia chose “The Scientific Adjustment of Food Values”; and, before she had got through the first chapter, started to blame me for giving them cheese *and* butter, when I might know that both contained a sweeping majority of proteids. Whereas, what she found she really needed was cheese and water-melon (though cantaloupe might take its place), and why wasn’t there water-melon (or cantaloupe) on the table? She had known all her life long that she needed it—always had an undefinable longing steal o’er her about twelve o’clock midday and again at four-thirty—but her want had never been made articulate before, simply because she wasn’t sure of the name of the missing link. Now, however, if I expected to retain my hold on their affections, she must really ask me to see that water-melon——

But I was too deep in the enjoyment of a dish of anchovy and caviare canapes at the moment to interfere. I left her at it.

In the afternoon, as we were short of milk, I suggested that we should go ourselves to the Jones’s farm in search of more. There was a beaten track along the lanes now, so we took the tin milk-can and started off uphill, thereby just missing the Head of Affairs, who came swinging up the road from the village. Having seen the finally departing back of the very last workman, he had caught the next train and arrived unannounced. [181]

The wind was keen when he got up out of the valley, so he turned up his coat collar and rammed his cap well on his head. Finding the cottage door locked, he knocked briskly and started to inquire for me, when Eileen (whom he had never seen before, remember) opened the door in response to his knock. But, to his amazement, before he got a couple of words out, the door was banged to, in his face, and he was informed through the large keyhole—

“The lady is not—I mean—she *is* at home, but she is engaged; she is—er—she is entertaining friends and can’t see anyone.”

Exceedingly bewildered, the caller waited a minute, trying in vain to catch sounds of hilarity within, and then rapped again; and, as the keyhole seemed the correct channel of communication, he said through the aperture—

“Kindly tell your mistress that her husband is here.”

There was a pause, then the voice within said—

“The lady is sorry she can’t see *anyone* to-day, as she is ill in bed.” [182]

The mystery thickened. Going round to the back door, which was also locked, the caller rapped more vigorously still. This time an agitated voice wailed from the inside—

“Are you still there? Oh, *please* go away!”

But, though he was exceedingly astonished at this curious reception, he had no intention of going, and he said so. Eileen’s next question was unexpected.

“What is your Christian name?” she began. He told her. “What is the colour of your hair?”

He proceeded to describe himself, and added—

“If you have any doubt about me, let the dog out, he’ll soon tell you if I’m a genuine case or an impostor.”

The dog was whining inside, and trying frantically to get out. The girl debated, and then said—

“All right; but you won’t mind waiting a minute?”

“Oh, not at all!” he replied, with sweet sarcasm. “I don’t mind in the least how long I stand here in the cold. I quite enjoy it.”

Then suddenly the door was flung open, and Eileen, holding a photo of the Head of Affairs in her hand, which she had fetched down from my bedroom, started to compare it carefully with the original. [183]

“Yes,” she sighed; “you are something like it.”

But the visitor had walked in unceremoniously, with the joyful dog leaping around.

“Now,” he said severely, as he took off his coat. “Where is your mistress?”

Eileen looked mournful. “If you please, sir, I’m *very* sorry, but I told you a *wicked* story just now. The mistress isn’t entertaining friends”—that was self-evident, as the cottage living-rooms

were empty, and it was hardly the kind of day one would choose to entertain friends in the garden—"and she isn't ill in bed neither. She isn't here at all. But I didn't like to say so at first. I was afraid, not knowing who you were, and coming after the shock. Have you heard the awful news?"

"No!" exclaimed the harassed, hungry man, jumping to his feet again in alarm. "What's happened?"

"Haven't you heard?" and Eileen lowered her voice to an hysterical whisper. "*We've discovered footprints!*"

By this time the Head of Affairs was quite convinced in his mind that either the girl was not in the full possession of her senses, or else she had been to see a Robinson Crusoe pantomime, and it had turned her brain, so he merely said—

"Well, perhaps you'll now try if you can discover some coffee, and that as quickly as possible." [184]
And he dismissed her when he had ascertained where we had gone, as he was rather weary of the whole performance.

Meanwhile my guests and I were making a few neighbourly calls in passing. In a scattered community that is often cut off by the weather from intercourse with its fellow-kind, a little gossip is always welcome. Not idle gossip, I would have you understand; but talk on things of serious import. For instance, I was naturally very glad to learn from one of my neighbours that old Mrs. Blossom had not been secretly harbouring a German spy after all, as it turned out that the masculine under-vests that had been hung out each week lately with the wash really belonged to her late husband; and after cherishing them for five years, she had decided it was more patriotic to wear them herself at a time like this, than to buy herself new ones when wool was so badly needed for the troops.

It was a real satisfaction to get this mystery cleared up at last, as her clothes-line each Monday morning (when the weather was fine) had worried us greatly. When I say "us" I don't mean myself necessarily, because I fear I hadn't kept track of her washing as I ought to have done if I called myself a friend and neighbour. Most remiss of me, of course. Still, there it was; and I had [185]
no need now to creep along beside the hedge and take an inventory of her garments; neither need I fear for the safety of our hill.

Fortunately, with us time is of no importance, the clock really doesn't signify, even if it goes, which isn't guaranteed; we divide the day into three meals, which are regulated by the three trains that puff up the valley, week-days only. Sunday is more of a problem, if you have children to be got off to Sunday-school; but as Mrs. Jasper has the one reliable clock up in our corner of the hills, her children set the pace; and when Maudie Jasper's starched China silk Sunday frock is seen to be coming along the lane, accompanied by other little Jaspers in Lord Fauntleroy blue velvet suits and a bunch of everlasting pea, blush roses and southernwood for teacher, then the two or three other cottages in the vicinity hurry up and add their quota to the little procession that walks decorously (so long as it is in sight of maternal eyes) down the hillside trail to the Sunday-school in the valley.

Of course awkward mistakes sometimes happen, as they do in the best of well-regulated families. It was so on the occasion of the first introduction of Daylight Saving. Naturally the weekly newspaper and the vicar and the schoolmaster, and everybody, had explained to [186]
everybody else that on a certain Saturday night the clock must be put forward one hour, etc. We are anything but behind the times on our hills, and no clocks in the whole of the British Isles were set forward an hour more eagerly than ours were; only, obviously, if you haven't a clock that goes, you can't set it forward; therefore our little corner looked feverishly in the direction of the Jasper clock, and frequently reminded the Jaspers of their national duty.

To make quite sure that the important rite wasn't overlooked, Mrs. Jasper put the hands of the clock on an hour when first she got up on the Saturday morning, instead of last thing at night, as the authorities had decreed. An hour more or less made no difference to the family, seeing that it was Saturday and no school to be thought of. Meals came as a matter of course, and quite irrespective of clocks. Mrs. Jasper knew that if she didn't see to the thing no one else would. So she got it off her mind nice and early.

Later in the day Mr. Jasper thought of the new official regulations *re* Daylight Saving; and knowing the uselessness of ever hoping to get a brain that was merely feminine to grasp any great truth as set forth in newspapers, he himself put the clock on an hour; as master of the house he regarded it as his peculiar office to see that the law was duly enforced. He didn't [187]
mention the matter to his wife; what would be the good? And it wasn't her concern anyhow; but as he shut the door of the clock, he wondered where indeed the household would be if it were not for him and his thoughtful habits!

Then there was Maudie Jasper. Being a bright child of twelve, brought up on modern educational lines, naturally she had no very high opinion of her parents' intellects. Since it was she who illumined the home with the torch of learning, she felt it devolved on her to see that the clock kept abreast of current events. Besides, she was a shining example in the matter of Sunday-school tickets; she didn't intend to be late next morning. So she, too, put on the hands an hour.

It was just as Mrs. Jasper was going upstairs to bed at night, tired out with the Saturday night

bathing of the children, that the clock stared her in the face, and the question arose: Had she, or had she not, put on that clock an hour as she had meant to? Her memory isn't good at the best of times, and she was especially done up with a day that somehow had not seemed *nearly* long enough for its accustomed duties, though she couldn't make out why. But to make quite sure, she gave the hands a flick round; better be quite certain than have Maudie late for Sunday-school. Only she did wish they didn't leave *everything* for her to do!

Next morning, when the Vicar drew up his blind at 7 A.M., as is his unfailing wont, he saw a [188] small group of children standing forlornly outside the Sunday-school door, waiting for the 10 o'clock opening!

Mrs. Jasper's was the next cottage we called at, to inquire after her husband, who was now at the front. Mrs. Jasper was delighted to see us, and of course asked if we had further news of the burglar, the fame of our footprints having spread far and wide. She told us all about the neuralgia in her head, and seemed much relieved when we assured her that it was not at all likely to turn to appendicitis.

She had had a lurking fear that if it became appendicitis, she would have to go to a hospital, and she hadn't much belief in hospitals. There was her sister's little boy Tommy, up in London, just four years old, and all nerves, as you may say; screamed and kicked like anything if you didn't give him what he wanted the moment he asked for it. They couldn't do nothing with him.

At last they decided to take him to a hospital; so her sister-in-law and "his" mother went with her. And what do you think the doctor said, after they'd told him the symptoms? "Temper," he says; "just bad temper. Take him home, and spank him next time it comes on." And that was all [189] they got!—cost them fivepence each for car-fares too!

We asked after her own family. Maudie was getting on splendidly at school, "really a first-class scholard she is, although it's I that say it. Can read the Bible beautifully now—or at any rate the Testament" (with a desire to be absolutely truthful). "And when I'm writing to her father, and can't quite rec'lect how to spell a word, she can tell me two or three different ways of spelling it, right off pat!"

At the next cottage we stopped to inquire after a man who had met with an accident, which necessitated the amputation of one leg below the knee. Having given him all our own "Surgical Aid" letters, and fleeced our friends of theirs, I naturally asked why he wasn't wearing the artificial limb that had been procured? (it was reposing artistically on the top of the chest of drawers in the kitchen, a stuffed sea-gull under a glass shade on one side, balanced by a wedding-cake-top-ornament under glass on the other). Wasn't it comfortable? I asked. Didn't it fit?

"Oh, yes'm, thank you; it fits beautiful. But that's my *best* leg; and the missus likes me to keep it there where she can show it to everyone, and I only uses it for Sundays and Bank 'Ollerdis."

Then we looked in on Mrs. Granger, a happy-go-lucky widow who is always passing round the [190] hat. When we knocked at the kitchen door, she was pouring down the sink the liquor in which she had just boiled a piece of bacon. I couldn't help asking mildly and deferentially: "Have you ever tried using the liquor of boiled bacon for making pea-soup? It's very nourishing, as well as tasty."

Mrs. Granger smiled at me indulgently. "Well, ma'am, seeing that I've buried two husbands and three children, no one, I fancy, can give *me* points about feeding a family!"

At Mrs. Jones's we made a longer call; we simply had to, as we were wanting milk, and she made no move to get it, but merely stood talking. There was the mirror over the parlour mantelpiece, she particularly wanted us to see that. Arundel Jones (aged eleven) had smashed a hole right through the glass when practising bomb-throwing in there. But would you ever know it, the way Patricia (aged seventeen) had decorated it? And as we couldn't think what to say, we looked long and earnestly at the bunch of artificial and rather faded roses from Patricia's hat that had been stuck in the hole, with some green paint daubed around on the glass to represent leaves. Fortunately, Mrs. Jones didn't wait for our opinion—took it for granted, indeed, since there could only be one opinion about such a masterpiece—and proceeded to ask what I thought could be done with so artistic a girl.

And that reminded her, could I tell her where she could write to in London for some Loop [191] Canvas at a penny a yard? Patricia wanted to make some slippers for a young man friend of hers who was at the front, and sweetly pretty too, with forget-me-nots all over; but it said you must have penny Loop Canvas. She had asked for it in Chepstow, but they had never heard of it, the cheapest they had was 1*s.* 4¾*d.*, and no loops in it at that. But, of course, you could get everything in London.

I had never heard of the canvas myself (and I thought I knew most that was going!), but in any case, she wouldn't get any canvas at 1*d.* a yard now, I told her; she had evidently got hold of some very old directions.

No, she hadn't; it was in last week's *Home Snippets*, and she got the periodical out from among an assortment of similar data under the horse-hair sofa squab, to show me.

There, under the heading—

it described how to make a pair of wool-work slippers, commencing with “Get a yard of Penelope canvas.”

Then Mrs. Jones was uneasy about her step-daughter, Kathleen, who was in service near Chepstow. “The food’s all right; but the lady isn’t what I call a good wife—never thinks of [192] brushing her husband’s best clothes and putting them away for him of a Monday morning, and yet I’ve never once missed doing that since I married Jones. And I assure you, when I married him, he hadn’t a darned sock to his back. I’m sorry Kathleen hasn’t a better example before her, for she’s inclined to be flighty. She’s got a week’s holiday next month, and nothing will do but she must go and visit her cousin, who is working at munitions in Cardiff. I say to her, ‘Cardiff’s a nasty noisy place; why don’t you go and visit your Aunt Lizzie at Penglyn, she’s so worried she can hardly hold her head up some days, and cries from morning till night; and would be thankful to have someone to talk things over with; or your father’s Cousin Ann at Caerleon, they’ve had a sight of trouble there, and never see a soul nor go out of the house from week end to week end; they’d love to have you.’ But no, it’s Cardiff she wants,” and Mrs. Jones sighed at the unaccountable taste of one-and-twenty!

“Ah, no one knows what an anxiety that girl’s been to me,” went on the buxom, good-natured woman, who in reality never makes a trouble of anything, and has been a real mother to Kathleen. “I sometimes wonder why I married her father! But there, I will say it looks better on your tombstone to have ‘The beloved wife of,’ rather than plain Martha Miggins (as I was), all [193] unbelongst to no one, as it were.”

Don’t imagine for a moment that this implied matrimonial divergence on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Jones, for a more contented couple you couldn’t find in the village. It is merely the polite way we have, locally, of discounting our blessings, lest we should seem to be flaunting our happiness in the face of less fortunate people.

“By the way,” she said, as we were going out of the door, “have you heard who it was walked around your place the other night? Well, now, to think I should have forgotten to mention it, but it was no one, after all, but the policeman! My husband was over to the police-station this morning about that mare we’ve lost, and he mentioned it; and, sure enough, the policeman had got it down in his book that he crossed the hill by our road that night, and had looked over your house.”

And then I remembered that there was a police-station in the next village, that did duty for a very wide area of miles. And it was usual for the policeman to patrol from one village to another, by various routes, last thing at night, ascertaining if the inhabitants’ doors *en route* were all duly locked. We were much relieved in our minds, and started for home discussing the situation, when Virginia suddenly said—

“Surely that is our dog barking further along the lane?”

We paused to listen. [194]

“Yes, it is,” I said in surprise. “Whatever can he be doing out here?” and we hurried on; for the dog is a valuable one, and is never let out without an escort. A turn in the lane brought us face to face with a tall, familiar masculine figure.

“Why, wherever have you come from?” I exclaimed.

“I’ve just made my escape from the tame lunatic who seems to be in charge of the cottage,” said the Head of Affairs cheerfully, as he relieved Ursula of the quart of milk. “And I would suggest, my dear, that the next time you propose to turn your house into a sanatorium for ‘Mentally Deficients,’ you might give your family due notice. A shock like that isn’t good for one after climbing such a hill.”

And he might not have been particularly mollified when, later in the evening, Eileen offered the following apology:—

“I’m very sorry, sir, that I kept you waiting outside all that time in the cold; only how was I to know you were a gentleman, sir, when you looked so *exactly* like a burglar?”

But, fortunately, in the interval he had discovered, in his dressing-room, a new-but-forgotten pair of boots, and a not-at-all-bad-considering-it’s-war-time overcoat; and, naturally, he was inclined to take a roseate view of life.

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[195]

XI

Exit Eileen

It was six months later, and about as broiling a Sunday afternoon as London can produce. Virginia and I were reading in the coolest spot in the garden, when Abigail came out and announced, with slight acidity, “That young person wants to know if she can see you, madam. I told her you were engaged, but she said she would wait.”

“What is her name?” I queried; there are so many young persons in the world.

“That Eileen!” she answered, this time with a definite sniff.

“She can come out here,” I said, and forthwith there sailed across the lawn a vision such as never before had graced my garden.

Eileen was wearing a white Jap silk skirt; a transparent rose pink blouse, that revealed the satin ribbon and lace camisole beneath; pink cotton open-work stockings; white shoes; one of those long stoles made of metallic-looking, lustre-brown fur, so beloved of the laundry girl; a big white hat, trimmed with the most violent of tangerine-coloured velvet, said velvet hanging in festoons down the back, and loops of it caught round the front and fastened to the fur stole—on [196] one side with a large would-be-diamond lizard, about four inches long, and on the other with a crescent of similar make. Her hair, which was done in a wild imitation of the latest eccentricity of fashion, was radiant with more crescents and a sparkling three-tiered back comb. A string of large pearls adorned her neck.

To say I was taken aback at the sight, is to put it mildly; I was fairly dumb with astonishment. Where in the world had that demure, mouse-like orphan been to pick up such ideas! Even though I knew she had gone to work in a munition factory, I wasn’t prepared for such developments. She soon enlightened us.

After mutual polite inquiries about each other’s health, and a few more relative to the grandmother, she folded her hands in her lap, sat as though posing for a photograph, and then said: “And please, how do you think I look?”

“You are certainly very bright,” I stammered, striving valiantly after truth.

“Yes, I look very nice, don’t I?” she went on; “and I felt I ought to come round and show you, because, as I tell everybody, it’s all entirely due to *you*, ma’am, that I’m so stylish. I shouldn’t never have *thought* to dress like this, if you hadn’t taught me how. And now I’m going round to show myself to Mrs. Griggles.”

XII

The Old Wood-House

[197]

The old wood-house stands on the lee-side of a belt of trees, part of the Squirrels' Highway, as we call it, that runs down one side of the Flower-patch, sheltering it from the bleak north winds.

Picture to yourself a building rather smaller than a very small church, built of great blocks of grey stone, with walls nearly two feet thick in places, a red-tiled pointed roof, a door at one end; and in case the walls should prove too flimsy to stand the winter gales, huge stone buttresses prop it up on the "off" side (i.e. the side where the ground goes on running downhill), lest the structure should take it into its head to run down-hill too!

In place of a spire, above the door, a weathercock swings its arrow to the winds—at least, it would swing it on any well-conducted apex, but being merely mine it permanently points south. Not that it is particular where it points; all it asks is to be left in peace to close its eyes in meditative contemplation of the landscape. We occasionally get a ladder and then a long stick, and move it round, trying to urge it to deeds of derring-do, but it falls asleep the moment our ministrations cease.

[198] The last time, it was a neighbouring farmer who climbed the ladder to reason with it, after I had assured him there was no penalty under the Defence of the Realm Act for regulating weathercocks. He was a bit reluctant to touch it at first; as he said, what with clocks not being allowed to tick as they pleased, and the time being jiggered with anyhow, you didn't know where you was with nothing. But once I had taken full responsibility for the affair, he went up with right goodwill, and—forgetting that it was the arrow alone that needed to move—he gave a sturdy tug to the north, south, east, and west arrangement, and sent the arms of that in all directions.

Then when we wanted to fix it up again, the question arose, which was the north? A local light supposed to know everything, who chanced to be passing, was summoned for consultation. After carefully surveying the various corners of heaven, as though looking for enemy air-craft, he said he didn't know as he could say ezackly which wur the north, unless he had summat to tell him (we all felt like that, too!); but if we would a-float a needle on the top of a basin of water, then either the point of the needle—or—le's see? maybe 'twas the heye, he wasn't quite certain which—would point to the north, for sure.

[199] Well, all hands rushed for basins and needles, as you may suppose; because, whether it was the point or the eye didn't matter much, since we knew the direction in which the north lay; all we wanted was the precise angle. But alas, every needle promptly sank to the bottom of the basin, without so much as a kick!

Eventually we refixed the north pole approximately, pending such time as the Head of Affairs should arrive, when I knew we could rely on the small compass at the end of his watch chain. But Virginia, who uses the weathercock more than most of us, as she sees it from her bedroom window, and says it is so useful to dress by, was lugubriously certain his watch would be stolen on the next journey down, and begged me to place the arrow—still asleep—pointing south; even an approximate south, she said, might at least help to keep her spirits up, when a northeaster was blowing.

And south it remaineth unto this day, despite all our blandishments, and probably will do so till the end of the War, when the retirement of the Food Controller—who, presumably, supervises weathercocks—may permit of our using a modicum of grease.

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[200] The old wood-house (which, by the way, was originally used for coals, though no trace of this is left upon its clean, lime-washed interior) is the first building you run across as you enter by the top gate, which is the widest entrance we possess. Here you step from the lane right into a tiny larch plantation, and the path to the cottage is arched over with the boughs of the trees, while the brown cones crunch under your boots, or roll away down the steep incline of the path when your foot touches them. It was among these trees that a small clearing was made in the distant past to accommodate this particular out-building; though why the coal-house was considered the most artistic bit of bric-à-brac to greet you as you enter the main gate is not clear.

The actual outline of the building is not remarkable, being merely four walls and a pointed roof, with a door and a window; but at least it looks simple, dignified, and solid, and what it lacks in architectural decoration has been supplied by Nature herself. When we first saw it, we called it the private chapel; but later on I found Abigail & Co. calling it the picture palace.

At any rate, there it stands, shadowed by great oaks seemingly immovable, with their gnarled wide-stretching arms spread as in blessing over the lowlier woodland things; a big Spanish chestnut, though tardy in coming into leaf, scatters worthless burrs around later on, with generous goodwill; a walnut-tree invites the passer-by to rub its aromatic leaves, and is there any [201] treasure-trove quite like the walnuts that one finds in the long wet grass on a windy autumn morning? Larches and firs make shady colonnades, with their straight uprising shafts, and dark drooping branches; silver birches, always graceful, no matter how they may have had to twist their trunks to accommodate themselves to their environment, give lightness and vivacity to the whole.

Incense there is in abundance. The warm resinous odour of the larches is always abroad; mountain-ash-trees load the air with scent in the late spring, and are ablaze with crimson in August. Two or three lichen-covered, twisted old apple-trees hang out bunches of pale-green mistletoe, for all to see during the winter months, and then surprise one with a bride-like flush of white and pink in the spring. Where the sun is brightest, a big hawthorn carpets the ground with white petals in May.

Then there are the lovely limes—and the lime-tree is much more of a stately lady than is realized by those who only know the sad, maimed and distorted stumps that disfigure suburban gardens in London. But see this lime-tree that forms a link in the Squirrels' Highway! Its trunk measures about ten feet round. Under the shadow of its drooping far-sweeping branches you could give a small Sunday-school treat. Though the lowest branches spring from the trunk at [202]
least nine feet from the ground, their far ends touch the grass, forming a complete tent of translucent green and gold as you look upwards, through a multitude of layers of leaves, to a sun you cannot see, but which seems to have turned the whole tree into a rippling mass of molten colour. And when it shakes out its bunches of scented yellow blossoms, and trails them by the thousand down each branch and stem, then indeed the lime-tree is a lovely lady, and the bees and the butterflies come from far and near to pay her homage.

And each tree has a special and distinct winter-beauty of its own in the outline of branches and stems and twigs—a beauty that is lost to us once the leaves appear, but which suggests an exquisite etching in winter when the dark lines are silhouetted against the sky. The most graceful is the birch, with its light tracery of fine filaments, often with tassel-like catkins dangling at the end. The oak and beech give the impression of enormous strength in the ease with which they fling outright their massive arms with seldom any tendency to droop.

And each tree has its special and distinct melody when the wind signals the forest orchestra; there is the sea-surge of the beeches, the swish of the heavily plumed firs, the rain-sound of the twinkling aspen, the soft whisper of the birches, the æolian hum of the pines, and the sibilant [203]
rustle of the dead leaves still clinging to the winter oak.

Outside the wood-house door there is a little clearing adjoining the grove of trees, where a perfect thicket of wild flowers smiles at you for the greater part of the year. First come the early violets clustering about the roots of the trees, and in the shelter of the grey rock fragments; while primroses dot the grass with their crinkly leaves, and then send up pink stems covered with silver sheen, and delicately scented flowers each as big as a penny. Oxlips grow on the bank that borders one side of the clearing.

Later, it is an expanse of moon-daisies—thousands of them swaying the whole day long to the motion of the wind like the ever-restless surface of the sea. And with the moon-daisies are buttercups, crimson clover, rosy-purple knapweed, spikes of pink orchis delicately pencilled with mauve—all trying to grow to the height of the big yellow-eyed daisies; while here and there ruddy spears of sorrel out-top them all.

Tall grasses of every kind are here, some like a fine translucent veil of purple, others grey, or a pinky-green; some shaking out yellow or heliotrope stamens; some ever trembling like the quaking-grass—but all mingling with the tall flowers, softening the surface of the mass of white blossoms that seem in the sunshine almost too dazzling to look upon, were it not for the mist of [204]
the grasses that envelops them.

Underneath the tall flowers there is a wonderful carpet of lesser-growing things—masses of trefoil, the yellow blossoms often touched with fiery orange; patches of heath bed-straw, with its myriads of tiny gleaming white flowers, cling to any spot where the grasses leave it room to breathe, its first cousin, the woodruff, preferring a shadier part of the bank at the side—the bank where the wild strawberries grow to a luscious size, and whortleberry bushes add a touch of wildness to the spot.

The smaller clovers, both yellow and white, seem to thrive under the bigger flowers, where most else would suffocate. Pink-tipped daisies bloom wherever they can find room to hold up a little face. Rosy-pink vetches wander about at pleasure, and pretend they are going to do great things when they start to climb the stems of the moon-daisies.

Where the big fir trees throw a shadow, and the sun only touches the grass when it is getting round to the west, foxgloves send up shafts of colour and the pale-blue spiked veronica carpets the ground.

Still further back, where the sunshine never penetrates, even here something strives to give beauty to barrenness and soften austerity, for the small-leaved ivy starts to climb the hard tree [205]
trunks, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful of the many living things that are neighbour to the old wood-house.

And always in the grass there lie the snapped-off twigs and branches of the larches, with their brown picots up stems that are studded with exquisite cones. We strive hard to better Nature, to make new designs, to evolve fresh beauty; but with all our skill and experiments we have yet to improve on the cone as a design, with its rhythmic re-iteration of the one small motif and the perfection of its proportions. In my mind it ranks with the smoked-silver seed ball of the dandelion, both of them examples of absolute beauty derived from the simplest of outlines.

The walls of the wood-house have their share of green; on the north side an ivy, with a gnarled main stem the size of a fair sized tree trunk, sends evergreen branches over roof as well as walls. Outside the door, which opens to the south, stone-crop has planted itself in masses among the stones, a perfect carpet of it, that in June is a bright yellow. In the “good old times,” before my day, the stone-crop served as a convenient spot on which to dump the coal sacks!

On the western side where the ground drops down—a warm, snug and sheltered bank—in the [206]
long grass white violets bloom by the thousand in the early spring, their sweet little blossoms streaked with mauve, nestling up to the old grey walls with the trustfulness of little children. Add to this long-fronded ferns growing out from among the wall stones, and you have an idea of the geography of the place.

On a hot day the cool shade on the north side is an ideal resting place; on a chilly day the south side gives you a shield from the wind. A pile of tree trunks and old logs lying outside fairly ask you to sit for a moment and take in some of the loveliness of the scene—you can never exhaust the whole of it—and if you sit for a minute you will probably sit there for hours.

Here is absolute quiet of spirit, but never silence. The trees are seldom still; all day and all night the wind upon these hills sways the tall, lithe tops of the larches to and fro, to and fro; the leaves and the catkins of the birches are for ever fluttering; the vibrant branches of the pines hum and sing in the breezes, summer or winter; the music of it all never ceases though it varies in volume according to the season. On the hottest summer days the grasses still sigh; the bees hum all day long in the clover; the blue-tits tweet and twitter as they swing about the birches, and their cousins the coal-tits keep up an endless run of comment in the larches. In May the [207]
nightingale comes into the grove to sing; in June rival chaffinches perch on the top spikes of certain spruce trees—always the same bird on the same spike—and defy each other and the world in general. The stock-dove croons over its nest in the tallest firs, and the reddy-brown squirrel scolds you severely if you are coming too near his own particular chosen tree.

Inside the wood-house you may find many things; some you are prepared for, some you are not. In theory, it is sacred to the use of the Head of Affairs, a sort of play-house and workshop combined, wherein no handy man is supposed to set foot, and no prying eyes are supposed to discover that the owner is working in a jersey, with no qualms over the absence of waistcoat and stiff collar.

But I often go in when I am anxious to be alone and wanting many things that one cannot put down in words. And knowing this, the Head of Affairs doesn’t keep his best saws there!—not the splendid big “Farmer’s Saw,” with its doubly notched teeth, that run through big fir trunks with amazing ease; nor the finer tools that deal with the short snappy branches. No, the saw that is left for such emergencies is a nondescript article that has now a wavy—very wavy—edge, and a few of its teeth doubled over; a saw that seems as though you can never get it well into the wood, [208]
and once you have got it in, it can’t be got out again, much less be made to move with soft purring motion.

You see, I have individuality where sawing is concerned, but it is useless to talk about it, for I’ve come to the conclusion that whatever other moral improvements a woman may manage to effect in the man she marries, it is a lifework to get him to a proper appreciation of her method of goffering a saw!

But I must beg you not to picture the wood-house as the home of the miscellaneous collection of nondescript oddments so indescribably dear to every masculine heart. There is an outhouse elsewhere that accommodates short lengths of chain, pieces of wire netting, old locks, bits of copper wire, staples and hooks, broken hinges (that *might* be made do duty again, if any one ever has a gate that prefers its hinges to be broken), oil cans, a piece of lead pipe, various lengths of iron rods, broom handles, stale putty, old keys, a couple of invalided padlocks, and—well, you know the type of things that every self-respecting man likes to gather around him, and keep handy, in case he might need them at any moment.

Unfortunately one of the many blighting influences of town-life, for ever hindering the full flowering of one’s better nature, is the lack of the necessary space to stock such useful items. But [209]
in the country one is not so hampered, and one’s private marine store grows apace, and differs only according to the temperament of the collector. Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that country air develops in man and woman alike that tendency to hoard, which is so noticeable in early childhood, when the small girl collects buttons and clippings from her mother’s sewing-room, and the small boy bulges the blouse of his sailor suit with string and “conquers” and coloured chalks, and old penknives and young frogs.

In town a woman’s only outlet, as a rule, is the bargain counter or annual sale or remnant day. These dissipations are denied us in the country, but we make up for it in many other directions. My own particular weakness is jam-jars, and the way I pounce on any round pot, be it glass or earthenware, that looks as though it might be made to hold jelly or jam, is quite a study in efficiency. And, like all expert collectors, my collection has sub-divisions, or perhaps you would call them ramifications; cups that have lost their handles, jugs ditto, glasses that once held a rolled tongue, or fish paste, are all included; and friends, as they bring round a portmanteau full of empty jars at Christmas or on my birthday, say, “It is so nice in your case that one knows what you actually want; so much better to give anyone what they really like, and will use, rather than [210]

some useless bit of jewellery." And I quite agree.

There was one moment when I feared my jars would have to go in the general rending asunder of domestic life caused by the War, even though I had determined to stick to them as long as I could. But when that "one clear call" came for jam-pots, naturally I couldn't be a traitor to my country, and I decided the jars at least must go, even though I might perhaps retain the handleless cups and jugs. So I told Abigail to let me know when the grocer called.

I interviewed the young lady wearing high white kid boots and an amethyst pendant on her bare chest, who brought my next large consignment of groceries, that had to be bought in order to secure a little sugar. But when she heard that there were jam-jars to go back, she looked at me coldly from the doorstep, and hurriedly pushing her basket further up her arm (lest I should attempt to force them into it, I presume), the Abyssinian gold bracelets clanking the while, haughtily informed me that her motor was for delivery only, not for the cartage of empties, and suggested that I should write the manager and see if he would consent to receive them.

I'm only human after all, and naturally any woman's temperature would rise in the face of such spurning of her free-will offerings. I didn't write, and I'm using the jam-jars still. The nation [211] doesn't seem any the worse off—though Virginia points out to me that the War *might* have ended sooner had I insisted on handing them over; she says every little helps, as is proved by the fact that the very week she put her first 15*s.* 6*d.* into Exchequer Bonds the Government got the first "tank."

At any rate, as I never eat preserves myself, I can still, even with a restricted sugar allowance, enjoy the peculiar pleasure that arises within a woman's soul when she is occasionally able to say, quite casually as it were, to a friend: "Would you care to have a pot of my new gooseberry and cinnamon jam? They say it's rather good, though of course—etc." And the friend replies: "Oh, I should *love* it, dear; *such* a treat; that jar of ginger marmalade I took home last time was positively *delicious*. Everyone said—etc."

One favourite item for collection among the cottagers is old bottles, and the stock you will see in some of their outhouses is often most extensive and varied. On one occasion an old man who was doing some odd days' work for me about the garden, in the absence of the handyman, was deploring the way the rabbits devastated the cabbages.

"I'll get rid on 'em for 'ee if you'll leave 'em to me!" he assured me. I said I only wished he [212] would, as they are a real plague at times.

Imagine my horror a few days later when I took some friends along to see the vegetables, to discover a legion of empty whisky bottles, labels intact, neck downwards in the soil, and dotted about the vegetable garden in all directions. The old man explained that they were put there to skeer they rabbits, as they was dreadful frit of bottles! But my friends refused to believe that so honest-looking an old Amos could have brought them with him!

The inside of the wood-house is as aloof as are the hills from our machinery-driven, smoke-begrimed, petrol-flavoured twentieth century. Even when work is in progress, here is no hustle; there are no short cuts to the other side of a larch log; the saw must go steadily, patiently, almost slowly, if it hopes to get through the tree at one standing.

To step from the hot noonday glare, on a summer day, into the cool seclusion of these thick stone walls, is to enter a haven of peace and quiet that would seem to belong to the forest primeval rather than to this noise-stricken age.

The window opening to the north excludes the fierce sun, but the yellow-washed walls give light and cheeriness. And the ivy, that ubiquitous plant that scorns all disadvantages, and [213] overcomes every obstacle, has crept in under the red tiles and hangs in festoons from the dark rafters; while in other places its pale green shoots have found for themselves a way clean through the thickness of the wall, pushing along crevices and around the stones, till at last they have come to light on the inner side, where they immediately proceed to drape lopped trunks and big branches standing in the corner.

It is no mere accumulation of timber and sticks that is housed within these rough old walls. The very spirit of the forest seems to permeate the place; everything is part and parcel of the big outside—the stones that pave the floor; the heap of cones in one corner, waiting to brighten up smouldering winter fires and set them all aglow; the solid sections of some sturdy oak, cut to just the right height for seats; the bark stripped from a birch-tree, silver white even now, with grey and pinkish paper-like peelings and black breathing marks; and the great brown branches of larch, a tracery of studded twigs and stems and cones, that have been placed across the end of the wood-house, and sweep the rafters at the top, looking, as you enter the door, like some wonderful rood-screen, dark brown with age, shutting off an ancient, yellow-washed chancel—though such a screen no mortal hand could ever carve!

The larch is always in evidence, and gives a resinous odour to the place, as does the sawdust [214] by the bench, a rich brown pile, for very little of our hillside wood is white; most of it ranges from reddish-brown to mahogany colour. Though here is a small creamy-white gate in course of construction—merely a little wicket to keep the calves out of the orchard—that is made of straight, round branches, slit down the centre, so that one side of each is flat and the other semicircular. The design is simplicity itself, some uprights with a few cross-pieces to hold them

together and suggest a trellis; yet the rich cream colour and the satiny surface of the wood make it a thing of distinct beauty. This is only a branch of the lime-tree, with the bark peeled off.

In an ordinary way we seldom have a chance to notice the intrinsic beauty of wood itself. Of course we see it in its polished perfection when it comes to us in some choice piece of furniture, or panelling; but this is not exactly the beauty to which I refer. Each branch, each tree trunk, has, in its unpolished state, definite characteristics of its own, quite distinct from those we see in the finished product civilization regards as the one end to be aimed for. These characteristics may be rough, and are frequently rugged; but their appeal is often all the stronger for this fact.

Look at the wonderful ribbing on the rind of this Spanish chestnut; what is it that wakes up in [215]
you when you study its lines and formation? You cannot say, yet you respond to it in an indefinable manner. These branches of apple-wood, only gnarled old things, twisted and crooked and all out of shape some people would say; yet you know that they would not have been nearly so lovely had they been straight as a dart. The larches with their strong bark showing grey and red and green, and furrowed like the sea sand—isn't there something in this that calls to you from back recesses of your being, and reminds you of the time when you—no, not you, but your ancestors, centuries ago, lived not so much in cities and houses made with hands, as out of doors, finding mystery in the green-roofed aisles and the cathedral dimness of forests long since felled?

To those of us who spend much time among these hills, each tree within the wood-house comes as a friend, with a definite personality and distinct association, and we regret its individual "going out," even though we know it to be inevitable.

This giant, that leans against the outside wall, with no possibility of ever getting inside the door until it has been sawn in half, is a big fir (where a squirrel nested) that heeled right over in a blizzard. Here is the tall cherry-tree that died of a hollow heart, so beloved of the birds that [216]
they left us never a one if we got up later than half-past four the morning the cherries were ripe. This is the bough from the big plum-tree that broke down last August under its weight of fruit. These branches of old apple-trees are some of the winter wreckage that was strewn about the orchards; see the lichen that covers them, could anything be more satisfying to look upon? And these are some of the birches that seemed so frail as they bent to the wind on the slopes, with purple twigs and green leaves always moving; until you have actually handled them you scarcely realize the strength and toughness of the delicate-looking bark, and you henceforth take a much more personal interest in Hiawatha and his canoe, even though his tree was another member of the family. And that convenient stump you are sitting upon is part of a hoary pear, that used annually to clothe itself in white—and then contribute more gallons of perry than it does to think of in these more sober days!

But no mere catalogue of contents can describe the charm of this little wind-swept place. To realise it you must first of all stand in need of quiet and retreat. When the craving comes upon you that impels us all, at one time or another, to get away from "things" and be alone with ourselves and Nature that we may re-discover our souls, take a book if you will (it matters not [217]
what, for you won't read it, but to some it is essential that a book be in the hand if they are to sit still for a moment!) and climb the hill to that wood-house.

Take a seat on the beech log by the door, and let yourself absorb some of the spirit of your environment. Keep quite still when the squirrel trails his bushy tail down the path, he won't inquire after your National Registration card; neither will the pheasant, even though he raises his head with a suspicious jerk as he is feeding among the grass. Little rabbits will dart in and out of their burrows among the bracken; the woodpecker will mock at you from a tree that waves above the roof; a robin will streak down from nowhere, like a flash, and stand as erect as a drill-sergeant on the corner of the work-bench while he inquires—but, there is an interruption; he excuses himself for a moment while he goes off to thrash his wife who ventured to peep in at the window. Let them all have their way, they are as much a part of the general atmosphere of the place as the sweet scent of the evening dew upon the grass, and the ceaseless soughing of the wind in the branches; moreover, this is home to them.

The little folk of the forests are so companionable when you know them; even the same butterflies will come again and again. I recently spent two hours a day for a fortnight in this spot, [218]
and all the time apparently the same butterfly hovered about the door, resting every few minutes on the warm rock among the stone-crop and fiercely chasing off any other butterfly that came within its evidently marked-out domain. And the little folk never bore you with their boastings, nor weary you with platitudes. They are content to let you think your own thoughts, to take you as you are, if you will but recollect that theirs are ancient privileges that have descended to them as a world-old heritage. It is you who, helpless in the grip of civilisation, sold your forest "hearth-rights" long since, and are now but a stranger, or at best a passing guest, in this out-door world that was man's first home.

Gradually quiet possesses you, and you hear the trees talking of things that have far outstripped the clash and turmoil of modernity. What is it they say, those swaying boughs and branches that throb with every wind, and these that stand around you, silently, waiting their last service to man, each with some final sacrificial offering—the apple-wood giving in incense, the oak giving in strength, and the laurel giving in flame?

Theirs is a blessing rather than a message; a lifting of a load from the over-burdened heart rather than the teaching of stern lessons. And as you shake off some of the dust of earth that has [219]

clogged your soul, you find yourself sending out thoughts in directions long forgotten; the things of earth take on new proportions, the first being often last, and the last becoming first.

The ministry of the forest trees can never be entirely explained; but one remembers with reverence that our Lord Himself worked in some such little wood-house, where He touched the trees and fashioned the timber with His sacred Hands.

Haply He left His Benediction when He passed that way.

XIII

Abigail's "Lonely Sailor"

[220]

I'm sure I didn't start my career of usefulness with any intention of adopting a "lonely sailor." It was Abigail who bestowed him upon me.

So far as I remember, it was something like this.

Abigail had joined "The Domestic Helpers' Branch" of a Guild, organised by some well-meaning souls, for the purpose of befriending those men in the Army and Navy who are supposed to be without feminine kith or kin of any description to take an interest in them.

She had been lured to a Guild meeting by her friend Pamela.

Pamela, it should be explained, was my parlour-maid, originally, but when the national trumpet sounded for the reduction of one's staff of employees, she had moved a little further along the road, to "The Gables," a household that fancied they needed a parlour-maid worse than I did.

We were mutually quite satisfied with the transference; she had recently had a sister enter the service of a ducal family, and I had found the effort necessary to keep pace with the duchess [221] exceedingly wearing. Kind hearts may be more than coronets, but they don't always show to such advantage, since one has to wear them inside.

As we had parted with no recriminations on either side, naturally I begged Pamela to make my house "a home away from home" whenever she pleased, which she accordingly did; and it was on one of her many "runs in" that she had expatiated on the Guild in question, and induced Abigail to sample it.

And thus, Abigail had returned from the meeting moved to the very core of her kind heart by the harrowing details the speaker had related of fine, daring, courageous, and magnificent specimens of British and Colonial manhood, left desolate and uncared for, pining for a word of sympathy and understanding from someone in the home-land—a word that never came, alas!

Abigail said it had quite put her off her supper that night, thinking of all those brave men, defending us and our homes right up to their very last breath—and yet, never a woman to get them a clean pair of socks or a hot meal when all was over; not a letter of sympathy, nor a card with a line on it (here cook told her that funeral cards had quite gone out), not so much as a word of encouragement from any relative under the sun, every woman at home selfishly engaged with [222] her own concerns—— Why, it was a disgrace to the country that our heroes should be neglected and put upon by the women of the land in any such way! And please would I mind her sending off a cake as soon as possible? as of course she had adopted a lonely sailor, wouldn't have it on her conscience not to; and cook was quite willing to make it, there was plenty of dripping, and we still had a fair amount of carraway seeds left, and they wouldn't come as expensive as currants—cook's cousins at the Crystal Palace liked carraways *quite* as well as currants if plenty of spice and peel was put in. The fried potatoes had nearly *choked* her, when she was telling cook about it all . . . no, not because she was talking with her mouth full; she meant that the very thought of those poor lonely men was like eating sawdust. The speaker at the meeting had said he was sure each one present had only to ask her employer, and permission would be given immediately and gladly for a cake or potted meat or some other little delicacy to be sent once a week, as a sign of sympathy and understanding, to one of these grand yet lonely souls.

Of course I immediately and gladly gave permission for the concrete sympathy to be sent once a week, but stipulated that it was to be a cake; five shillings' worth of meat, as per my butcher's [223] charges, goes positively nowhere when "potted." I reckoned that a good dripping cake would give the desolate one a deal more sympathy for the money.

(At the same time, to keep our rations properly balanced I cut off the small plate of spice buns, our only cake luxury, which had been in the habit of adorning our Sunday afternoon tea-table.)

And oh! the care with which we sewed up that first box of sympathy in a remnant of cretonne, carefully putting it on wrong side out (to preserve its beauty), and hoping that when he undid it he would notice what a charming pattern of purple dahlias and blue roses was on the inside, and how the cretonne was just a nice size to make up into a boot bag if he chanced to be needing a new one.

I pass over the next few weeks while we waited anxiously for the "lonely sailor" to materialise. He was engaged on board H.M.S. "The North Sea," and sailors, we know, are subject to wind and weather. Abigail said she almost wished now that she had selected a lonely soldier; she could have had one if she had liked; but she had chosen a sailor because she thought he might wear better. The German sailors didn't seem so pigheadedly bent on fighting as the German soldiers were.

We did our best to keep the time from hanging idly on our hands by devising as much variety [224] as possible for future menus, discussing the respective merits of cinnamon *versus* cocoanut as a flavouring, and wondering whether after all we shouldn't be more likely to buck up his desolate spirits (and more particularly his pen) if we sent a sultana cake next week, rather than

gingerbread.

I never before knew Abigail so prompt in her attendance upon the postman's knock as she was during those blank weeks that accompanied the first half-dozen cakes. And then, when she was in a very slough of dark despondency, and constantly wondering who *had* eaten them, since they had evidently never reached *him*, a letter arrived, and forthwith Abigail trod upon air—figuratively, I mean, not literally; in reality I never heard her so noisy; she went up and down, up and down the stairs past my study door where I was working, as though she had lost a step and was looking for it! Finally, when I heard her singing "Days and moments quickly flying" as she O-cedar-mopped some neighbouring polished boards, I knew something must have happened, and I opened the door and asked if anything was the matter? Whereupon she produced the letter from the bib of her apron—would have brought it before, only knew I liked everything to be perfectly quiet when I was working—and didn't I think it was a lovely letter?

Though the handwriting wasn't much to boast of, and the spelling even worse, it was a straightforward, man-like letter; he was evidently very pleased to have the cakes, and quite touched that the young lady should have been so kind as to think of him. He said his people were too far off to send him anything like that: his father and mother had gone out to Canada when he was ten years old. No one had sent him a *parcel* so far, therefore it was quite a surprise packet when the first one came. It was kind of her to ask if he would like some more; all he could say was—"the more the merrier," if the young lady felt like it. [225]

And he signed himself, her faithful friend, Dick.

After that Dick's name became so all-insistent in our midst that the whole household appeared to exist solely for the purpose of revolving round him. So constantly was it wafted on the four winds of heaven, that I remarked to the Head of Affairs: it seemed for all the world as though we had adopted a pet canary, and were everlastingly wondering if his seed glass had been replenished.

There was only one slight shadow falling athwart the sunshine. Pamela (who was a great authority on "How to tell your character by your handwriting," having had her own delineated by her favourite penny weekly) had declared that Dick was anæmic and delicate; she knew, because his handwriting sloped downwards—a sure sign; it was also cramped and irregular, an unfailing indication of a mean and grasping nature; while the heavy downstrokes and the absence of punctuation proved as plain as plain could be that he was unreliable. [226]

Poor Pamela had had her own disappointments in life, and had been warped a little thereby.

Of course Abigail said she did not believe a word of such rubbish, and she rather liked the funny-shaped letters, and thought the black strokes looked particularly strong and healthy.

Nevertheless, it was surprising how that trifle of seed, carelessly dropped, took root in our minds, and how from that date onwards we all regarded Dick as anæmic and in need of strenuous nourishment; while if more than a month elapsed between his communications, we couldn't help just wondering whether, after all, he might not be a *little* mean and grasping, and six weeks demonstrated with absolute certainty that he was unreliable!

A month after we received his first letter, there came another, and of course we all fluttered with excitement.

Dick still approved of the cakes, I was glad to hear; and since the young lady had asked if there was anything else she could send, he wasn't one to cadge for himself, but there was his mate Mick; he wanted to put in a word for him. Mick, it appeared, was even more lonely, more ignored by the world of women, more in need of sympathetic understanding than he was; and—what was more to the point—was badly in want of a large scarf. Not that Mick would have asked for it himself, very independent Mick was; but since he had so enjoyed half of every cake, and the nights were very cold this time of the year, and he had been his pal for years, why, he felt sure the young lady wouldn't mind his just mentioning it, as he couldn't think of telling her how short he was of socks himself. [227]

Mind! Why, we all regarded Dick as a public benefactor! Abigail discovered that Dick and Mick rhymed, and as she said, you didn't have poetry like that brought to the door *every* day! She suddenly developed the airs of a society belle; she borrowed my copy of "The Modern Knitting Book;" and, might she just run out for an hour in the afternoon to get some wool—you needed thicker wool for scarves than for socks—as the shops were so dark at night?

Cook, with her numerous cousins on H.M.S. "Crystal Palace" (a near neighbour of ours), was given to understand that she could now take a second place! There was no getting away from the fact that Mr. Dick and Mr. Mick were actually engaged in the defence of the realm, while cook's cousins appeared to do nothing more than take joy-rides in motor-lorries to and fro along our road. [228]

Pamela alone was sceptical; she said she should go cautiously, you never knew! But then, she had every reason to be a pessimist; even her "lonely soldier" had been sent out to China, and, naturally, you can't sympathise so understandingly with anyone when it takes a couple of months before you get an answer to your letter (if even he should chance to write by return), as when he

is only across the Straits of Dover. She said she got tired of keeping copies of her letters, so that she might know what he was talking about when he wrote back—only he never did!

Surmising that Abigail would have her hand over-full if she took on the wants of both men, I said to her, "I think *I* had better adopt Mr. Mick, as I am sure you will have enough to do to provide et-ceteras for Mr. Dick! You can take all the credit for it, and write the letters, but I will settle the bills."

And having some socks and a large muffler all ready for dispatch to some needy man, I gave them to her and said I would pay the postage, if she would save me the trouble of doing them up and taking them to the post office. I also added that a cake had better be sent once a week to Mr. [229] Mick in addition to the one sent to Mr. Dick. I know something of the appetite of the Navy—and what is one simple cake between two hearty men!

Abigail was effusively grateful, took it quite as a personal favour; you might have thought I was settling an annuity on her own father! She explained that naturally she felt more interest in Dick, and was more anxious to spend her money on him; at the same time, she should certainly mention my name to Mr. Mick; it wouldn't be fair to take all the credit to herself.

So we left it at that.

I consulted with cook on the subject of securing ample and pleasing variety, combined with unquestionable nourishment; and judging by the amount of information she was able to give me as to what "they" like, you would have thought she had reared a whole family of husbands!

Forthwith, the house was steeped in a perpetual aroma of baking cakes (of course the cousins couldn't be neglected either), till I got nervous lest the Food Controller should make it his business to call. Upstairs we not only went cakeless, but in order to make sugar-ends meet, we drank unsweetened tea and coffee, a trial to all of us! And stewed fruit requiring sugar was also taboo.

On second consideration, I am inclined to think that it was not, first and foremost, my [230] benevolence that led me to adopt Mick: it was primarily a matter of self-interest! Even in war time it is necessary to have a *little* work done, if only occasionally, in the home; and if the household helpers were to take on yet another outside responsibility, in addition to the many already on their hands, I didn't see where my work would come in at all—and I can't do *everything* in the evening, after I get home from town. As it was, we were already knitting morning, noon, and night, for every branch of the Services!

I put the collection of figures and capital letters that represented Mick's address, into my pocket-book with other similar data. Periodically I handed Abigail pairs of socks or mittens, a body-belt, handkerchiefs, and similar utilities; and when any sea-going event, such as a raid on a submarine base, or a "scrap" in the North Sea, or a warship mined, brought the Navy specially to my mind, I would go into the Stores and order a parcel to be sent to Mick, adding one for Dick also, if the occasion happened to be a harrowing one. At such times one feels one cannot do enough for our men; and Dick and Mick little knew how often they benefited by the misfortunes of others.

The first time I received a letter from my devoted friend Michael McBlaggan, I admit I was a [231] trifle bewildered, as I couldn't for the moment "place" any member of the McBlaggan family; but when I read the document through and noted how kind he considered it that my friend Miss Abigail should have introduced us, light dawned, and I sent him a post-card saying I hoped he would always let me know if he wanted anything further in the way of woollens.

And thus the months wore on, punctuated by laboriously written communications from Dick, with an occasional card from Mick, who kept more in the background. The great attraction, undoubtedly, was Dick. He entered into personal details, asked if the young lady had made the cakes herself. Here I understand cook was not too absorbed in her own relations to insist that full credit should be given to the right person; and Abigail wrote explaining that as she was very much occupied, and too busy to attend to the cooking, a friend who lived with her always made the cakes. Whereupon by return post *I* received a sloping, heavy-downstroked letter of thanks from the dutiful Dick!

On another occasion, Dick sent his photo (after being asked for it times out of number, I believe). It was not as satisfactory as it might have been, because it was an amateur snapshot group, and you know how easy it is to decipher the features when the hand camera has stood a quarter of a mile away (so as to include as much of the landscape as possible), and everyone's [232] face is in black shadow under a hat brim that has been tilted forward to exclude the full glare of the sun.

Unfortunately he omitted to put a **X** against himself, and as there were a dozen men in the group all in slouch hats and farm attire (to say nothing of the women and children), there was little to help us!

But he did say that, as Abigail had told him Canada was the one place above all others that she longed to see, and how she was hoping to go there as soon as the war was over, he had sent his picture taken on a Canadian farm. It was just a little gathering photographed on someone's birthday.

Still, as he hadn't given us any help in the matter, we had to decide ourselves which was the lonely sailor (though, as Abigail commented, she couldn't understand how, with such a large collection of friends, he could ever have come to be so alone in the world). We picked out a thin, anæmic-looking young man, who was standing beside a comfortable, matronly woman in a shady hat and a big apron; and as her age might have been anything from thirty to sixty, we decided she was his mother, and I remarked what a nice homely soul she looked in her checked apron, and no wonder he was devoted to her, and how proud she must be of the dear lad—all of which [233] Abigail accepted as a personal compliment.

Winter gave way to spring, and in like rotation mince pies were superseded by Swiss roll (to make which eggs were struck off our breakfast menu), and marmalade replaced the figs and dates in the parcels that went out to some unknown spot on the world's ocean-spaces, all of which our wonderful Navy now controls.

Likewise, cretonne gave place to unbleached calico, my remnants being exhausted.

Existence downstairs fluctuated between heights of excitement and depths of gloom. The Crystal Palace authorities had a most unreasonable way of shipping men off to Mesopotamia, Salonika, Hongkong, Archangel, or anywhere else where they thought the air would prove salubrious, without a single word of inquiry as to whether the transfer met with cook's approval. Hence, there was a series of constantly recurring blanks to mar what would otherwise have been a life of unsullied joyousness; and at such times of depression cook darkly hinted that punching tram tickets and ordering people to "move up a little on that side, please," would be a deliriously exhilarating occupation compared with the monotony of cake-making for nobody-knows-who!

As every gift-giver is aware, there is invariably a grey hiatus between the sending off of the gift [234] and the arrival of the recipient's gratitude; hence, the bustle and excitement of getting off each parcel of eatables and pair of socks and tin of tobacco was always followed by a spell of wistful longing, while the postal authorities, out of sheer perversity (we presumed), held back the letter that would have meant so much to Abigail.

Moreover, Pamela was doing anything but contribute to the gaiety of nations! She was often in with Abigail on her spare evenings; and seemed to devote the time to perpetual croaks, on one occasion ending with the assurance that, for *her* part, she should have nothing to do with a man who was merely a common sailor; self-respect, if nothing else, would make her look for something better than that.

I am glad to say Abigail had sufficient spirit left to retort that if he was good enough to fight for her, he was good enough for the bestowal of a cake. Nevertheless, a decided coolness sprang up between them; and for a week or two after this exchange of confidences, Abigail appeared to be sinking in a rapid "decline" (as they used to call it), and I felt I was positively inhuman to expect her to do a hand's turn in the house.

Yet life was not entirely bereft of purple patches. The gloom consequent upon the Silence of [235] the Navy lifted occasionally. As, for instance, when we had a bomb drop in our road. Yes, in our very road!—or, at any rate, it was only just round the corner; and, as everybody knows, one affectionately appropriates as one's own all neighbouring roads (quite irrespective of the rentals, too) if they chance to possess a bomb. And, in any case, it *would* have dropped in our road if only it had been a hundred yards nearer this way.

Ours was quite an up-to-date bomb, one of the sort that "went clean through the wood pavement to the depth of a couple of feet, and made a hole large enough to bury a man in, and not a sound window within a mile radius." That's the kind of bomb *ours* was! And it was trimmed in the latest fashion, with a policeman, and a cord right round it, and two gentlemen with pickaxes who scratched the surface of the wood blocks occasionally in the intervals of looking important. They were wearing them like that in London at the time.

Of course we, in common with the whole parish, swelled with pride; for a while all social distinction was waived, rich and poor alike took the same interest in the bomb, or at least in the hole it had made; the bomb itself was removed so quickly that no local eye save that of the police and the pickaxe gentlemen ever saw it; though the milkman averred that, as he was driving to the [236] station in the early dawn, he saw a van going in the opposite direction; he couldn't see what was in it, hence it certainly was carrying away the bomb.

For the rest of us, however, we had to be content with a brave effort to get as near to the cord as we could, and crane our heads above our shorter brethren in order to catch a glimpse of the gaping void, while a thrill went down every spine, irrespective of bank balances.

And we might have remained in that splendidly democratic frame of back unto this day (no one being anxious to have any closer acquaintance than his neighbour with the bomb), had it not been that a piece of shrapnel was discovered in the garden next us. Whereupon the owner developed much upliftedness, and his servants bragged amain.

My own staff took it even more to heart than I did; and it was amazing how much time it was necessary for all hands to spend in the garden in order to cut a cabbage or gather three sprigs of parsley. Between them they didn't leave an inch of the garden unexplored, and it is a fair-sized one.

Then the following morning Abigail rushed in excitedly with the news that she had discovered a piece of shrapnel in the bonfire débris. I went down to inspect, and was shown an oblong piece of curved iron, wider at one end than the other, and with a sharp spike at the wider end. I confess [237] that to me it was wonderfully reminiscent of the old trowel that had lost its wooden handle and had lain unhonoured and unsung for a year in the leaf-heap; but I said nothing about *that*. Whatever its origin, it was crumpled up a bit with heat, one could see—not surprising either, as we had had a roaring bonfire two days running and burnt up all the pile of dead leaves.

When I was devising plans for its removal, they said, Hadn't it better wait there till the master came home?

But the Head of Affairs is celebrated for his truthfulness; and he and that old trowel had lived on terms of unalloyed friendship for years (till the split came over the handle), and—well, I merely said I thought we would deal with it at once; no need to add to the master's many worries.

Cook said: Oughtn't it to be immersed in a pail of water? Her cousin at the Crystal Palace had told her that——, etc.

So we got a pail of water; I bade them stand well out of harm's way, while I put it in. Of course they feebly offered to do it for me, but seemed relieved when I insisted on taking all risks; one ran to one side of the garden and one to the other, and then decided they should feel safer if they both stood close together.

Just as I was about to pick it up, cook shrieked out to me not to touch it with my hands, as it [238] might be poisoned. I said I would take it up with a pair of tongs; but she said she thought it ought to be insulated with china. It might be electrified with the shock; you never knew what inventions those fiends were up to, and one of her cousins who was in the electricians' corp (or something like that) had told her that——, etc.

So we compromised with a large china soup ladle and a big wooden spoon, which I used like chop sticks, and at last got the shrapnel into the water. Of course it was disappointing when it dropped heavily to the bottom without so much as a sizzle, much less a bang. Still—we had the comfortable feeling that we were on the safe side now.

Eventually I had it in my study. I said it would be safer there. But though the neighbourhood was thus debarred from seeing and handling it, the fame of it spread with amazing rapidity; and the lady across the road arrived quite early in the afternoon, having heard from her housemaid, who had heard it from her gardener, who had heard it from the road-sweeper, who had heard it from the grocer's man, who had heard it from my cook, that I had a huge shell weighing half-a-hundredweight, covered with venomous spikes, all deadly poison, that had dropped down the [239] chimney right into the centre of the kitchen fire, where it had been found, still hissing, when they went to rake out the ashes in the morning.

I didn't display the fragment to my neighbour, nor to subsequent callers; it is such a pity to rob people of happiness. I merely said I thought it better to keep it well away from all vibration, as so far it hadn't exploded. And one and all assured me I was very wise, and remembered pressing engagements elsewhere.

I reached the zenith of my fame when a police inspector, accompanied by a subordinate, rang the front door bell, and understood that I had in my possession a portion of a Zeppelin that had foundered on my lawn. It appeared that he had been up all night, and had worn out miles of shoe leather, hunting for the missing half of that Zeppelin; and had I the gondola as well? He seemed to suspect that I might be holding that back in order to have it stuffed and put under a glass shade in the drawing-room.

He looked disappointed when I showed him the fragment of iron; said they had plenty of bits that size; but he admitted that none of them had a spike like that at one end, and darkly hinted that it might be just the missing link they were looking for. Then he and the subordinate tenderly carried it away between them.

We all intend to visit the War Museum later on. Personally, I'm very keen to see what they [240] ticket it.

Nevertheless, when each little excitement subsided, reaction set in, and Abigail's spirits promptly dropped to zero. But at length a post card arrived in time to save her (and us) from utter collapse, and the bath-taps were once more polished to the tune of "Days and moments quickly flying."

Thus, as I have already stated, winter merged into spring; and then spring made way for early summer (as I've known it do before), and we racked our brains to find a suitable substitute for pork pie.

Oh, yes, we had departed months ago from the "nothing but cake" rule. We decided that a thin, anæmic-looking young man (as per the photographic group) needed still more feeding up, and there wasn't a sufficiency of body-building material in modern cake, as everyone knows who has sampled war-flour, even with currants *as well* as carraways. So the Head of Affairs and I stoically relinquished the one thin slice of breakfast bacon that we had shared between us each morning, and devoted the proceeds to pork pies for the Navy—in accordance with the highest ideals of the Food Controller.

But, as every good housewife knows, you mustn't feed your family—let alone your friends—on [241]
pork pie when there isn't an R in the month; and with April nearing its end, and May looming, what was to take its place? As cook said, you are so dreadfully handicapped when you have to sew up your parcel in calico; you can't send soused mackerel, or Welsh rabbit with Red Tape tied round you like that!

Abigail suggested potted shrimps; but cook scornfully reminded her that seafaring men, living in the midst of shrimps and salt fish all their days, weren't likely to hanker after it at meal times. We compromised on savoury cheese patties—a come-down after the pork pie, we admitted; only we could think of nothing else equally nutritive and seasonable.

Unfortunately, when I ordered extra cheese to be sent weekly to meet the naval demands (and up to that time I hadn't seen any rules for rationing cheese), the Stores "greatly regretted," etc., but there was a scarcity at the moment; they could let me have a tin of golden syrup, however, or, they had a fair stock of candles.

So we removed cheese from our upstairs dietary, consoling ourselves with the thought that, at best, it was only half a course.

Meanwhile it was pleasant to know that the fleet had voted the cheese patties "A 1," due, so cook said, to the fact that she had told Dick to put the patties into a *slow* oven for ten or twelve [242]
minutes before eating, as "it made all the difference."

I was beginning to get nervy with the strain of it all. You see, if a letter delayed in coming, then the question arose: Did they like the last parcel? or, had we sent, by chance, something they didn't care for? And then my household assistants looked darkly at me; *I* was to blame for ever having suggested lemon curd tartlets. As Abigail said, probably lemon didn't agree with Dick, it didn't always with thin people.

Cook acquiesced, adding that you never can tell! There was her eldest sister's husband, a perfect terror for temper; yet look what he saved her in doctor's bills—he might have had epileptic fits instead!

On the other hand, there was her uncle (no relation to her really, only her aunt's husband, and second husband at that), do what you would, you couldn't rouse him to take an interest in his food or anything else. Her poor aunt had spent a little fortune on medicine; and as bright a house as you could want, not shut off with a whole lot of garden like my house, but nice and close on to the pavement, with heaps of traffic going by. And exactly opposite, the broken railings that the motor-van ran into and killed the driver; heaps of people came to look at the place Sunday [243]
afternoons. But her uncle never took a bit of notice of it.

No, you *never* can tell!

All the same, I felt guilty, and began to wonder how long I should be able to hold out! And then ——

It was a lovely Saturday in May. We had just got up from a late lunch when there came a violent ring at the door bell. The Head of Affairs was in the hall at the moment, and he opened the door—to find two big sailor-men on the doorstep, each carrying a parcel. They inquired for me.

Now, like most other households, khaki and navy blue always find a welcome at our door for the sake of our own who are away, serving their country, and those who have already laid down their lives in the cause of Right and Justice.

So the Head of Affairs walked them straight in upon me, without waiting to ask for their birth certificates.

Did I say they were big? That isn't the word for it! They were more than that, they were massive; tall, broad, well-made, and tough-looking, with beaming, round, red faces; they ought to have been pictured, just as they were, for a naval recruiting poster.

They looked a little confused, for the moment, at finding themselves precipitated into an unexpected drawing room; but they made straight for me, with that large, rolling stride [244]
inseparable from the British sailor. Fortunately the room isn't beset in the orthodox fashion with a multitude of bric-à-brac obstacles in the way of small chairs and tables, for they seemed to sweep the decks fore and aft as they strode over the carpet, and I thought I should never find my hand again after they had both given it a hearty shake.

As I looked at the big, burly fellows, both of them well on to forty I should say, I knew instinctively that these were our two forlorn sailor-lads—our poor anæmic, lonely Dick, and desolate, unsympathised-with Mick. And I must say I never saw two men bear neglect more bravely!

At first, conversation seemed all on my side: they sat stiffly on the extreme edge of their chairs, while Dick answered in monosyllables, Mick seeming permanently tongue-tied! But the Head of Affairs produced cigars warranted to banish all nervous embarrassment and to induce a man to sit comfortably anywhere; and soon they were giving us details of their homes and

relatives—small things, perhaps, that are apparently the same the world over, but mean so much to each individual. It was still Dick who did most of the talking. He was undoubtedly the more attractive of the two.

As they were constantly making wild clutches at their parcels which threatened to tumble off [245] their knees without the slightest provocation, we offered to put them on the table. But Dick explained, with almost child-like confusion, that they were presents for me and the other lady. And would I mind taking them? He made Mick open his bundle first. There came to light an anchor, the like of which I had never seen before, though I had heard of their existence. It was about eighteen inches long, made of red velvet stuffed with sawdust so as to form an immense pin cushion. This was most elaborately decorated with beads—as I thought at first—but it proved to be pins with coloured glass heads. Lengthwise down the anchor was this inscription, carried out in large white-headed pins,

"AFFECTION'S OFFERING."

There were various ribbon bows, and ends and tags finished off with beads, and a cord for hanging it on the wall; altogether, it was a most ornate, glittering creation!

Keeping company with the anchor was a wooden rolling pin, that had been enamelled a delicate pink, with hand-painted sprays of forget-me-nots at intervals. This also had bows and ends and a ribbon to hang it on the wall; it likewise bore an inscription:

"TO GREET YOU."

While I praised the colouring, and the workmanship of both, I promptly chose the rolling pin. [246]

Mick looked a trifle disappointed, and explained that he had really intended the anchor for me; and thought the rolling pin would be nice for the lady who had sent the cakes.

But I clung to the rolling pin; even though it wasn't quite in line with my ideas of decorative art, its sentiment was so non-committal! Besides, I wanted Abigail to have the anchor. Even though it be but a passing incident, it is pleasant to receive an "affection's offering" occasionally, when we are young.

Dick's parcel contained a large box covered with shells, and very pretty it was. In a smaller packet he had a coral necklace. I chose—and praised—the box with a perfectly clear conscience this time. You have to go to a great deal of trouble before you can vulgarise a sea-shell; and, fortunately, the box-maker hadn't taken any trouble at all; he had merely stuck them haphazard over the cardboard lid, with a border of small ones round the edges, and the effect was lovely. I also knew that Abigail would much prefer the necklace. You can't carry a big box about with you, to display it casually to your friends.

My genuine pleasure over the presents thawed them to such an extent, that Dick then explained they had come round with the intention of taking us out to a picture palace; Mick [247] wanted to take me, and he, Dick, would take Miss Abigail. But, he added hesitatingly, that perhaps, after all, that wasn't the sort of thing I would care about; and he looked rather beseechingly at the Head of Affairs, hoping we should understand what he couldn't manage to put very clearly into words.

We did understand. Gratitude is none too plentiful in these days that we could afford to flout it because it chanced to appear in unconventional guise. We appreciated all that they had planned to do by way of saying thank you for what we had done for them—and it was little enough we had done, when one considers our debt to such men as these!

I explained that though *I* was engaged that evening, Abigail was not; and they must now show her those parcels.

She had no knowledge that they were in the house; and you should have seen her face when she answered the bell and I introduced Mr. Dick and Mr. Mick.

In reply to my inquiries as to what she could do in the way of hospitality, she was certain that cook could get a really nice meal ready for them in a few minutes; and if even cook couldn't she, Abigail, could, and Pamela had just come in, and she would help; it wasn't the slightest trouble— [248] and she looked positively radiant as she took the two in tow.

Having told them that we would wait on ourselves for the rest of the day, and no one need stay in, I was not surprised to hear a gay party setting off a little later on; but I *was* surprised to see that it was Pamela, and not cook, who made the fourth in the quartette!

Pamela and Abigail hadn't spoken since the episode previously mentioned. It was curious that she should have chanced to call for the purpose of burying the hatchet, the very afternoon that the "common sailors," as she had called them, should be there!

For the time of the sailors' leave I cut the housework down to the minimum and arranged a week of cold dinners, Spartan-like in their simplicity, for ourselves, so that "evenings out" could be taken as often as my household assistants pleased.

I hoped to find the kitchen radiating sunshine in consequence. Picture my consternation, therefore, when I came upon Abigail weeping her eyes out in their sitting-room one afternoon (when only half of the leave had expired too!), the coral necklace flung into one corner, and

“affection’s offering” lying face downwards under the table.

To give her opportunity to pull herself together, I picked up the coral necklace and inquired what Mr. Dick would be likely to think if he saw it there. She sobbed that she didn’t know and she didn’t care. [249]

“That Pamela——” Then I saw it all in a flash!

Well, to make a long story short, Pamela, whom I had long known to be as unscrupulous as she was good-looking, had stepped in and carried off Dick right from under Abigail’s nose! She had seen the two men arrive on the previous Saturday afternoon, and that accounted for her unexpected call. She had appropriated Dick from the first minute she saw him.

“And now,” said Abigail into her handkerchief, “just ten minutes ago, when I ran out to post some letters, who should I see coming out of The Gables, but Dick and that creature, starting off together for all the world as though they had known each other all their lives. Only last night she had the sauce to say *she* was going out to Canada when the war was over!”

I felt truly sorry for the girl, and it was some satisfaction to me to reflect that Pamela wasn’t quite as successful as she imagined!

“I don’t think she will see much of Dick even if she does go out to Canada,” I said; “I don’t think his wife would have a room to spare to invite her there—with seven children. I daresay Dick told you that the lady in the checked apron was Mrs. Dick?” I stooped to pick up the forlorn anchor, and dusted it most carefully, to give her time to recover. [250]

“No!” she gasped, and then went on bitterly, “he hasn’t had a chance to tell me a *thing*, with Pamela talking to him the whole time! But, of course, I guessed all along he was married.” She meant to take her disappointment bravely. “*I* don’t want to marry anyone; men are all alike. But it does make you wild, when——”

I was facing the window, but Abigail had her back to it. Therefore she did not see what I saw coming along the road—a large bunch of flowers, surmounted by Mick’s round, jovial face.

“I think I should hang this up,” I interrupted her, having thoroughly dusted the anchor; “after all, Mick has no wall of his own to hang it on; he isn’t like Dick, with a home and wife and family —and one doesn’t get ‘affection’s offering’ every day!”

“Oh, but that wasn’t really meant for me,” and Abigail’s grief threatened to break out afresh. “Mick was so taken with the lovely parcels you sent, and he thought as you lived with me you were a widow, and——”

Fortunately, I was spared the rest, for the downstairs door bell rang with a vehemence that was now most familiar, and Abigail, patting her hair and her cap into shape, went smilingly down the passage to answer the side door.

XIV

The Bonfire

[251]

I HAD pointed out, quite nicely and kindly, to Virginia, that she was not clipping the top of the square box-tree table straight and even; and she had pointed out, quite witheringly, to me that she was cutting it by perspective, adding that if I had only been privileged to learn perspective when I was young, I should have known that for a thing to be correct in its outlines and proportions it must necessarily run askew and aslant and out-at-corners, just as the top of the box-tree table was now doing. She assured me, however, that it would appear all right, she thought, if I looked at it from an airship above, with half-closed eyes.

And then she advised me to do a little hoeing.

I ignored her sarcasm, knowing full well that a pair of shears, applied by amateur hands to tough overgrown greenstuff, is apt to provoke cutting remarks when the wielder has got to the moist stage and the hedge is looking like a ploughed field.

You see, there was an inwardness in her last remark; for hoeing looks an easy, graceful, carefree occupation—till you try it. My own method is distinctive; I didn't invent it, it came to me [252] as a natural inspiration. I find I invariably start to hoe with my back, doubling up more and more, and aching more and more, as I proceed with the hacking. Then, as I warm to the work (and it's very much warm as a rule), I likewise hoe with my teeth. By the time I have set and ground these nearly to nothing—my hands all the while getting lower and lower down the handle of my tool—I find myself beginning to hoe quite viciously with my head.

When I have extracted all the motive power I can from this part of me, and have projected it so far in front of the rest of me—hoe included—that I almost lose my balance, the only thing left for me to do, by way of piling up yet more energy and effort, appears to be to go down on all fours, seeing that by this time I am clasping the hoe handle at about a foot from the ground.

Fortunately, it is just here that I usually realize what I am doing, and I straighten my rounded back, and undo my teeth (that doesn't sound polite, but you know what I mean), and return my head to its proper place. I then remind myself that I am not hoeing at all scientifically, that most of the energy I have been putting forth has been waste—because misdirected—force.

Whereupon I stand at ease, and other things like that. Maintaining the upright as far as I can, I [253] take hold of the top end of the long handle of my weapon, and, still keeping quite in the perpendicular, I merely hoe with my arms, thus saving the rest of me quite a considerable number of unclassified aches. So long as I can remember to keep my vertebræ like this, all is well, and I really get through a fair amount of work. But, alas, I soon forget.

One thing I have never yet managed to do is to keep cool and collected, my misfortune being that I boil up so soon. My hat gets out of angle, my hair flattens out where it ought to be wavy, and waves around where it ought to lie flat; and—worst of all—it ceases to worry me that these things are so.

And then I open a periodical wherein some unknown celebrity has been photographed "at home"; and she is sure to be shown "in the garden," where, behold! you see her in the airiest of fashionable nothings in the way of a white frock, accompanied by a ten-guinea hat, a twenty-guinea dog, and a sixpence-halfpenny trowel—all worn with consummate photographic grace, as she artlessly sets to work to transplant a hoary wistaria that has smothered the (photographer's) verandah for fifty years, explaining to the interviewer, meanwhile, how she simply adores gardening, how she gets all her ideas for the dresses she wears in the third act from her pet bed [254] of marigolds, and how she never dreams of taking part in a first night performance without having previously run the lawn-mower twice round the gravel paths.

Clever creature; you don't wonder she is labelled a celebrity; any woman who can keep that hat on while using that trowel, has accomplished something!

I didn't feel like hoeing just then, no matter what the cost of my gardening outfit. The moment seemed to call for non-strenuous occupation that would admit of leisurely movement and unlimited pauses with nothing doing—which is what I find a mind like mine requires.

Of course there was plenty of hoeing waiting to be done, there always is; I never knew a soil so chock-full of weed-seeds as ours seems to be, and I never knew a place where folks are so little worried by them. Where things grow as easily as they do about our hills and valleys (and where the angle of the garden is just what ours is), you will find that the native reduces land-labour to the minimum, and nothing is disturbed unless absolutely necessary. Reasonably, if you have left the hoe at the top of the garden, and the top is a hundred feet above the bottom of the garden where you are standing, you think twice before you climb up and fetch it.

As one result of this universal conservation of energy, our local nettle crop is one of the finest [255] in the kingdom, I verily believe.

"Why are those things left standing in every field corner?" I asked a farmer on one occasion, pointing to the usual grey-green waving jungle of weeds.

“They nettles?” he questioned, in surprise; “well, what’s the good of wasting attention on ’em? They don’t hurt no one!”

Incidentally I may say it is always well to criticize the methods employed on other people’s land rather than those practised on your own, since most right-minded employés resent any implication, no matter how politely you wrap it up, that improvement is possible; and if you question the why and wherefore of anything, it may be mistaken for fault-finding in this imaginative age. Hence, unless the handy man chances to be one of exceptional make up, I go farther afield when gleaning information.

One day I watched a man very leisurely inspecting a thistle in a meadow by the weir, and then, with a deliberation that was most restful to a harried, hustled, war-time Londoner, he tenderly and carefully cut it off near the ground with a scythe. After he had decapitated about twenty thistles in this way, he naturally needed a little time for recuperation, and sat down on the river bank to meditate. I hadn’t liked to interrupt him when he was working, because so far as I could [256] roughly estimate, there were thirteen thousand four hundred and fifty-three thistles in the meadow—approximately, you understand—and we don’t work according to trade union hours here; sometimes we start an hour later and leave off an hour earlier, and miss out several in between. But since he had evidently reached his rest-hour—and remembering that one of my own fields was plentifully dotted with thistles at the moment, and feeling quite equal myself to that gentle picturesque swish of the scythe—I asked him whether that process killed the thistle right out? (My business instinct forbade my wasting time on the job if it would all have to be done over again later on.)

No, he said, he didn’t think as how it would kill the thistles right out.

Then why did he do it that way? I asked, instead of spudding the thing right up by the root?

“Well”—and he scratched his head thoughtfully—“doing it like this jest diskerridges of ’em a bit, and isn’t sech a deluge o’ trouble as mooting ’em right out would be.” And with that he promptly dropped thistles, and proceeded to discuss the fiendishness of the Germans.

He had a long talk (there wasn’t room for me to say anything), and gave recipes for annihilating completely everything connected with them (excepting thistles; I presume they have [257] some; they deserve a good crop, anyhow), finishing up with—

“But thur—what I says about ’em I won’t exackly repeat in yer presence, m’m; for my wife often says to me, ‘It won’t do nobody no pertickler good,’ she says, ‘if you gets yerself shut out o’ Heaven by yer langidge,’ she says, ‘just to spite they Huns, what don’t even *hear* it!’”

For a full two minutes he worked that scythe with real zest, as though onslaughting the enemy.

Perhaps his method is right (in regard to thistles, I mean), perhaps it is wrong; I’ve never gone sufficiently deep into the subject to be competent to pass an opinion. But I do know that the larger proportion of handy men who have honoured me with their patronage (though there are conspicuous exceptions) invariably weed on these lines of least resistance, and “jest diskerridge ’em”—though I own it takes a lot to discourage *our* weeds!

Not feeling like diskerridging weeds at the moment, I asked Ursula to suggest some occupation for my idle hands, though I didn’t put it like that; I inquired which of the many jobs needing urgent attention I had better tackle next. (It came to the same thing in the end; but instead of advertising my natural indolence, I hoped it would convey an impression that I was [258] rushing pell-mell through an endless succession of tasks.)

Ursula was sitting on a pile of logs under a big fir tree inside the orchard gate—oh yes, there are firs in the orchard, and lilacs, and daffodils, and snowdrops, and a huge Wellingtonia, and a trickle of water with forget-me-nots and mint on its brink; we’re not at all particular about classification. She was darning a stocking, and it seemed a lengthy job. Not that there was any large, vulgar gash in the stocking; it was merely suffering from general war-time debility, and was one of those that you can go on and on darning, and still find more thin places to run up and down.

Have you ever noticed what a snare a stocking of this description can be? You can sit at it for an hour or so, until it seems easier to go on darning it than to bestir yourself to do anything else. In the end, you haven’t accomplished much, considering the time you’ve been about it, but you have acquired a large dose of the virtuous and exemplary feeling that is always the outcome of stocking-darning.

Ursula had got like that, though I wouldn’t have you think I under-estimated her efforts, for it was my apparel she was darning.

“I often think that a garden embodies all the philosophy of life,” she replied to my query, in a detached way, as she closely inspected the stocking foot drawn over her hand, in order to pounce [259] upon any further signs of impending dissolution.

“I seem to fancy I’ve heard that——”

“Oh, I’ve no doubt someone has said it before me. I’ve noticed over and over again that people plagiarize my really cleverest remarks before I’ve actually had time to say them myself; and I

think something ought to be done to prevent the infringement of copyright in this barefaced way. But all the same, whether anyone has, or has not, already helped themselves to this unique creation of my brain, the fact remains that I thought it out for myself, alone and unaided. And the more I meditate upon it, the more I notice what heaps of things in the garden resemble life."

"As for example——?"

"Well, slugs, for instance, and the bindweed, and the rabbits, and the broad beans. They all seem to typify that here we have no abiding anything."

I agreed mournfully, as I thought of the succulent, hopeful-looking scarlet runners that the slugs had eaten right through the tender main stems close to the ground. It was a sad awakening for us the day we found a few score of limp and dying remains, where over-night we had watered as promising a row of youngsters as one could have wished to see. To our grieving spirits, it [260] seemed as though it wouldn't have been nearly so bad if they had eaten the leaves and left us the stems, at least more leaves might have grown, whereas now——!

And the bindweed—where could you find a more striking analogy to original sin? Flaunting beautiful flowers (which I greatly love), yet all the while spreading wicked roots out of sight, choking everything it lays hold of, turning up in the most unlooked-for places—but there is no need to write more under this heading; a healthy crop of bindweed (and I never knew one that wasn't most irritatingly healthy) could give points to a preacher every Sunday in the year, and then have enough to spare for the week-night services. And when he had done with bindweed, he could start afresh on mint.

Rabbits, again, are dear things, with an appeal that is quite different from that of any other of the wild things. Sometimes in the past, when I have been doomed to sit for an hour or so in the airlessness and weariness of crowded hall or place of entertainment, or in the loneliness of a congested social function, where everybody is too buzzingly busy with "being social" to have time to say a word to anyone, I just switch my mind right off the glare and the heat and the stuffiness and the superficiality and the heartlessness, and take a look at the little orchard adjoining the cottage garden, and for just a minute I watch the rabbits, nibbling the grass, sitting up on their [261] hind legs to get a better view of any possible enemy-approach, and scampering back to cover in the coppice with a bobbing of white tails, at the least suspicion of danger. To a woman there is something very touching about the timidity of these little brown things. I always wish I could make them understand that I am their friend and not their enemy—but this is a difficult matter, because there is the small white dog to be considered in the compact, and there is no sentimentality about him where rabbits are concerned!

I wouldn't be without these little furry families in the coppice, but oh, I do wish they would leave the young cabbages alone, or at any rate spare the tenderest of the green leaves! It is a bit damping even to ardour like ours to be greeted, when we arrive from town, by a gardener waving a deprecating hand over rows of hardy cabbage stumps bereft of leaves. At such times it seems as though it wouldn't have been nearly so bad if they had eaten the stems and left us the leaves, at least we could have cooked them, whereas now——!

Rabbits certainly emphasize the fact that life grows thistles as well as figs.

With regard to the beans, it is difficult to be philosophical. I can be to some extent resigned [262] when my misfortunes are handed out to me by Nature, but it is a different thing when they are manufactured for me (at my expense, too) by my fellow-creatures.

On the whole, I cannot speak too highly of the men who have worked for me about the Flower-patch; I have been exceedingly well served, but now and again one comes upon misfortune, and on one occasion I found I had engaged an Ananias of the most proficient type. During his brief *régime* the weeds thrived apace, while the choicest bulbs and flowers took on a world of diskerridgement. When the black pansies, and the heliotrope Spanish iris feathered with white and yellow, and the rare delphiniums, and the yellow arum lily disappeared at one fell swoop, Ananias shook his head sadly and put their defalcation down to the rush of the rain and the angle of the earth.

"Everything do simply run off this soil!" he explained.

Quite true; it certainly did. And two legs invariably ran with it.

And the vegetables seemed as subject to diskerridgement as the flowers, though it was always referred to as "blight."

There were the broad beans, for instance; I had given him two quarts of seed, and indicated where I would like them planted. They were a special prize strain that had been sent to me by a [263] famous firm of seedsmen, who had been moved to this generous deed on reading some of the chronicles of the Flower-patch when they were first published in *The Woman's Magazine*. The head of the firm wrote me that they were a new mammoth variety, and they would be pleased if I would try them in my cottage garden.

We planned great things when those broad beans should be ready. Two quarts would make about ten rows, we reckoned, quite a goodly plantation for us; and we decided that as we should have plenty, considering our small household, we would be extravagant and gather our first dishful when they were quite young and in that deliciously tender state that is unknown to the

town dweller, who seldom sees a broad bean till it is a tough old patriarch, and in such a condition considers it a coarse vegetable.

It was a cold day in February when I handed the seed to Ananias; we were returning to London the same day, so we beguiled part of the long journey discussing whether that first dish should be accompanied by parsley sauce and boiled ham, or whether to fry the ham and have the broad beans given one turn in the frying-pan after they were boiled.

The subject seemed more and more vital the further we got along the road, for we couldn't get luncheon baskets (no, not the War; it was before that event, and due to one of the many cheerful [264] strikes with which our pre-war existence was punctuated), and the bananas and Banbury cakes we purchased *en route* seemed woefully unsatisfying. Hence, it was pleasant, but very tantalizing, to contemplate that dish of beans, and we finally agreed that the ham should be fried, and that we would dig some new potatoes specially for the occasion. We sat and meditated on that meal, as the winter landscape flew past us, and the more we meditated the more violently hungry we got.

You see, the beans really assumed more than ordinary importance.

But alas, when bean time came, all that decorated the bean plot was one miserable row of wretched-looking stalks.

"It's that thur blight agin," remarked Ananias; "I watched it a-comin' up the valley."

"But why didn't you pinch off the tops, if they were showing blight?" I inquired; "then they would have made fresh shoots lower down."

He shook his head and looked at me pityingly: "We don't do our beans like that a-here."

"And where are all the other rows," I asked; "I suppose blight didn't carry off roots and all of the remainder?"

"No, 'twere slugs, I warrant, or birds, or else the seed were stale, maybe."

Ursula carefully turned over the rest of the ground later on, but never a glimmer of a [265] benighted bean did she find.

Still, Ananias was, as usual, quite willing to be obliging. "My beans has done uncommon well this year," he continued. "It's jest all accordin' how it takes 'em; sometimes mine does well and t'other people's doesn't; and then agin t'other people'll have a fine crop and I won't have a bean. I can let you have some o' mine if you like. I know you're powerful fond o' broad beans. I allus say you're jest like my missus." (I'm sorry I haven't a portrait of stout, unwashed, sixty-five-year-old Sapphira to reproduce; without it you cannot possibly understand how pleased I was!)

He brought over half a bushel, explaining that he had to charge twopence a pound more than other people, as these were specially large and good yielders, that were expensive in the first place.

They were remarkably fine beans, indeed as fine as I have ever seen; and I wrote to the firm of seedsmen and told them their mammoth variety had proved all they claimed for it.

I conclude the miserable row in my garden was a twopenny packet bought from the travelling huckster who peddles seeds around the villages at suitable seasons.

These instances are sufficient to indicate the trend of Ursula's thoughts when she started to [266] philosophize on the garden. She interrupted her valuable remarks, however, to exclaim: "Do look at that wench!" And Virginia might well be looked at! Her exertions had turned her the colour of a peony; down her face streamed copious "extract of forehead." The clipping mania had got thorough hold of her, and she was trying to trim every hedge about the place, leaving in her wake a trail of clippings for someone else to clear up—as is the way with all first-class amateurs.

The next task pointed out itself. Ursula got a birch broom, while I trundled the wheelbarrow out of the tool barn; and seeing that there was already a pile of greenstuff waiting disposal, I started a bonfire, while Ursula swept up and supplied extra fuel.

I feel sorry for the town dweller; he knows nothing of the real charm of a bonfire. All too often the word stands to him for nothing more than a mass of damp and decaying leaves that simply won't burn. He can only attend to it after his return from business, unless he be one of the favoured few in town who have gardens sufficiently large to allow of their keeping regular gardeners. And unfortunately the lighting restrictions of the present day give no real scope to the bonfire maker—even if he has anything worth burning. His dank mass smoulders to death, or he [267] adds paraffin to encourage it, and the neighbours close their windows with meaning violence, while the parish reeks of the obnoxious odour. Seldom has he air enough to fan anything like a good fire; and at length, after burning the dozenth newspaper, and listening to minute statistical particularization on the part of his wife regarding the present price of matches, collectively and individually (with deviations *re* sultanas, lemon soles, kitchen tea, coal-cards, sugar for the charwoman, ½*d.* per lb. for delivery, soda, a financial comparison of pre-war sirloin with modern soup-bones, and the antiquity of the new-laid hen), he flings himself disgustedly indoors again, depositing a layer of greasy town-garden soil and dead leaves on the door-mat, and perchance trailing it up to his dressing-room.

The town bonfire is usually an abomination; the country bonfire is often sheer delight; and the reason for this difference is due to the fact that the shut-in nature of the average town back-plot seldom supplies the good current of air that a bonfire needs to get it going full-swing; and more than this, the refuse that collects in a town garden is often sooty, unsanitary and malodorous. Whereas in the country there is a great diversity of stuff to be burnt, and much of it is delightfully aromatic. Also, the wind that sweeps continually over our hills, for instance, dries up the rubbish pile—unless it be actually raining; we seldom get that dank sodden stuff that is the bane of the [268] town gardener. We can always get a current of air, if not a stiff breeze, to fan the first stages; and being unhampered by the claims of city offices, we can start it in the morning, and keep it going the whole day long. Our only trouble is to get the red-hot mass to slumber through the night; it has such a trick of suddenly bursting out again about 2 A.M., lighting up the cottage in the dark, and flaming forth a vivid beacon worthy of the men of Harlech, and recalling stirring scenes in old romance—only the local constabulary have no poetic leanings, and merely see in it a case for a £10 fine under the Defence of the Realm Act.

I started the bonfire—not with newspapers, these are far too few and precious; why, our very paper bags are smoothed out and treasured in a dresser drawer; some done-with straw and dry leaves make a good beginning, with some of the dead twigs from the larches. If there are laurel clippings to put on next, and there usually are, then success is assured.

Soon the flames were licking up my initial work, and I proceeded to pile on hedge trimmings, the sweepings-up of an apple-tree that had blown down and been sawn up—and how sweet they made the air! Thistles, nettles, brambles, surplus raspberry canes that spring up everywhere, a holly-bush that had lately been cut down, worthless gooseberry bushes, piles of ivy that had been [269] cut from the walls, more barrow-loads of stuff tipped on by Ursula—how the laurel flared and the yew crackled, and one's eyes smarted as the smoke swept round like a whirlwind and enveloped one at times! I am a great believer in the burning of all refuse vegetation; it does away with so much blight and vermin and plant disease, and clears out mosquito haunts, and is generally sanitary.

Virginia had betaken herself to cooler climes, but Ursula and I worked at that heap, forking on new stuff to stop up flame bursts, till we too were shedding dew from our foreheads, and our hands were almost sore with wielding the heavy forks.

Yet a fascination keeps you at it, till you are smoke-dried and fire-toasted and arm-aching to the last degree. When the shades of evening finally call you in (as a rule, meals are most perfunctory when a bonfire is in progress) you are saturated from head to foot with the bonfire, your very hair has absorbed the time-old pungent odour of the smoke of forest fires.

And maybe months and months afterwards you open a seldom used wardrobe, where old gardening gear and shabby mackintoshes are kept, and suddenly you are overwhelmed with the scent of burning pear and birch leaves and yew; the lure of the woods calls aloud to you; you feel [270] the sweep of the winds on the hills alternating with the great swirls of grey-blue bonfire smoke; the cramped town vanishes, and you are in free open spaces once more——

And all because a certain tweed skirt, or light gardening coat is hanging in the corner of the wardrobe.

If you want a bonfire with a delicious scent that will haunt you with a poignant memory long after its ashes have gone the way of all things, pile up dead apple leaves and twigs, pine needles, beech leaves, the trimmings of the sweet bay bushes, brambles, rose-stalks and larch—and the incense of the forest will be yours, bringing with it a mystic sense of nearness to primæval things that no perfume sold in cut-glass bottles has yet been able to conjure up.

We didn't wait till sun-down, however, that day; for we were in the most thrilling part of the afternoon forking-up, and our complexions were at their very, *very* worst, when Abigail tripped out and announced:

"The Rector. . . . Oh, you needn't worry about your appearance, ma'am. Miss Virginia's talking to him. . . . Yes, she's changed *her* dress, and is telling him just what you look like."

XV

The Meeting at the Cottage

[271]

"I HAVE been wondering," the Rector began, "if it would be possible for you to let us have a Temperance Meeting here in your cottage? I feel sure it would be productive of good, and we sadly need more aggressive Temperance work in this parish. And a little gathering in a private house would be more of a novelty than one held in the Parish Room, or at the Rectory."

"A Temperance Meeting!" I repeated, rather hesitatingly, I confess. I knew well enough that there was work waiting to be done in this direction, but whether those who most needed reforming could be got inside my door was quite another matter.

"Oh, but I am not meaning an evening meeting for the purpose of reaching the men themselves," the Rector explained. "My idea is to have an afternoon Ladies' Meeting to discuss more particularly the question of prohibition. We might eventually get up a week of meetings in various parts of the district. Only it all wants talking over. There are a number of ladies who would be willing to aid, if only some definite scheme were put before them. If you would issue the [272] invitations, I know they would be only too pleased to come; and we could possibly get a committee appointed as the initial step in the proceedings."

I saw at once that the idea was a practical one. Quite a goodly handful of ladies would be available from houses dotted here and there upon the hillside. So we made a list of those living near enough to me to be invited.

"Now, have we overlooked anybody?" I said finally, going down the list once more. It included the Manor House and one or two other large country houses where I knew the people would be sympathetic, the rest being cottage-residences and small places inhabited by people of the educated classes, who kept simple, unassuming establishments—some from choice, some because their means were small. In several cases the ladies dispensed with any servant, finding that life's problems and breakages and fingermarks were much reduced when they did the work themselves!

"By the way, there are two visitors in the place at present, who would like to come, I am sure," said the Rector, "One is a very nice girl, who has been doing V.A.D. work since the beginning of the War. She is here recruiting after a nervous breakdown; and is boarding at the Jones's farm—I know she would appreciate an invitation." I duly wrote down her name.

"And the other, Miss Togsie, is a literary lady, and is lodging with old Mrs. Perkins; do you [273] happen to know her name?"

I had never heard it before.

"Ah! neither had I. But then that would not be remarkable. Only she seemed surprised to think I did not know of her, though, so far as I can ascertain, she has never actually published anything. She is engaged on some book of research, which she regards as an important contribution to the literature of the times, though for the moment the subject has escaped my memory. She is so exceedingly anxious to meet you; in fact, she—er—suggested that I should take her with me to call on you; but I told her that you come down here for rest and quiet, and to escape the conventionalities of society. She is rather a—er—persistent lady, however; and she says her admiration for you is unbounded. So possibly, if you have no objection, it might make a pleasant interlude if she were invited also."

I was not very anxious to have her, but I agreed, as the Rector seemed to wish it. Still, I am afraid my smile was a trifle ironical, as I tailed the list with her name.

Unfortunately, the very day of the meeting was the one suddenly selected by Abigail's sister for her wedding; of course, I insisted that Abigail must not miss the function, and sent her back [274] to town the day before. But when the preparations were divided between the three of us, they did not amount to much in the way of extra work; and Ursula made herself responsible for the fresh relays of tea that would be necessary for new arrivals.

As is the custom in the country, everybody walked round the garden to see how the things were coming on, and we all compared notes with each other's gardens, and, of course, everybody complimented me on the forwardness of my things—as in duty bound, seeing they were drinking my tea!

The V.A.D. proved a delightful girl, very nervous at first, but very appreciative. And as all my other visitors were fully engaged in chatting together in twos and threes, I devoted myself to the shy outsider. The Literary Lady had not yet appeared.

"I come up every day and look over the wall at your flowers," the girl said. "I believe they've done me far more good than the tonic I've been taking."

"I invariably take a dose of them myself, when I'm run down," I replied. We were wandering around the narrow paths, between the beds edged with pieces of grey stone. The paths were beginning to be weedy; and the garden was a mixture of early and late spring flowers, owing to the undue length of the winter.

But for the V.A.D. there were no imperfections. "I've never seen cowslips like these before," [275]

and she stooped and touched them lovingly. “Those mahogany-coloured ones are so rich. And I like the deep reddy-orange ones too. Oh—I like them all!” she added, with a sigh of pleasure. “And when I was ill in London, before they sent me down here, I felt as though I should die if I couldn’t get away somewhere, where there were flowers and sunshine and where the trees and foliage were fresh and clean. Wherever I looked there were grey skies, and dingy houses, and discoloured paint, and dirty streets, and miserable-looking squares and sooty stuff that it was pitiful to call grass, and smoke and mud all the same colour and equally stupefying. Do you think that dirt can get on people’s nerves?”

I nodded. Don’t I know only too well how the grime and gloom and all-pervading sordidness of big cities can get on one’s nerves! Don’t I know how in time they seem to corrode one’s very soul, and dull one’s vision, till faith itself can become clouded, and hope goes, and all one’s work seems of no avail! But the merciful Lord has provided an antidote. It was a Tree He showed at the waters of Marah; and the leaves of the Tree are for the healing of the nations in more senses than one.

The girl continued her confidences: “When I lay awake at nights with insomnia, I used to shut [276] my eyes and think out the garden I wanted to find. It wasn’t a grand garden, or a gorgeous one that I used to plan—carpet bedding and terraces with beds of geraniums and peacocks would have tired me to arrange in proper style just then. The garden I wanted was the sort of happy place where flowers seem to grow of their own accord with no one to worry them about tidy habits!

“And then, it was quite remarkable, the day after I arrived here, I chanced upon the lane leading to your cottage, and there I saw the very garden I had been so longing for, and the masses of flowers and colour I had been quite hungry to see. I could hardly tear myself away from the little gate. Of course, the florists wouldn’t think much of me for saying it, but although I admire with real wonder the magnificent blooms they exhibit at shows, I would rather have that piece of rocky wall, with its wallflowers on the top, than the most expensive orchids they could show me. But perhaps all this seems rather childish to you?”

Yet it didn’t! I knew exactly what she meant; and every flower-lover will understand it too. There are times when I go a good deal farther than the V.A.D., and actually object to some of the improvements on Nature horticulturists think they can make. What is gained by trying to produce [277] rhododendrons looking like gypsophila, while at the same time they are trying to get gypsophila looking like pæonies? What purpose is served in the modern craze for getting every flower to look like any other flower excepting itself? While I don’t mean to imply that I am so narrow as to object to attempts at horticultural development, there certainly are limits to desirable expansion —as Shakespeare very well knew.

But I had no time to say more, for as she was speaking I caught sight in the distance of a stalwart, aggressive-looking female, with an armful of MSS. and walking-stick clasped to her waistbelt, and clad in a long, loose, tussore silk coat (we were all wearing them short at the moment) that she clutched to her chest with her other hand, as it had lost its fastenings, and was threatening to blow away. Her hat was of the fluffy “girlie” description, somewhat bizarre in shape, which looked preposterous above the lady’s mature locks, more especially as she had put it on hind part front, not even bothering herself to ascertain its compass points.

Miss Togsie was blandly unconscious of any incongruity in her personal appearance, and entered the gate with the assured step of “mind quite oblivious of matter.” Precipitating herself on Ursula—the only hatless person in sight, hence evidently not a fellow guest—she exclaimed in [278] a strident voice, “The Editor of *The Woman’s Magazine*, I believe? *So* glad to meet you. I’ve been *longing* to know you. *So* kind of you to ask me to this *delightful* gathering——” etc.

Now, as I told Ursula later, if she had been a true friend, she would merely have smiled sweetly and wafted the new arrival into the house, and silenced her with refreshments. Instead of which, she meanly disclaimed all editorial connections, and piloted her up the garden to me. Whereupon we began all over again. I waited patiently till she reached a semicolon, and then invited her to come indoors and have some tea.

“No tea for *me*, thank you!” she exclaimed, in tones of stern disapproval. “I never touch tea.”

“Perhaps you would like some milk and a sandwich?”

“Oh, no! I never take flesh foods of any description. I adhere strictly to the fruit diet which Nature has so bountifully provided for our use. If you happen to have a banana, or a few muscatels——” I hadn’t.

“It’s of no consequence,” she said, with an air of kindly tolerance for my shortcomings. “I’m perfectly happy here under the blue dome of heaven.” My other guests seemed to have had enough of her already, and were making their way towards the house, as it was nearly time to [279] start the meeting; but Virginia linked her arm in that of the V.A.D., and followed close at my heels; for her, the lady promised to be interesting.

“Oh, what adorable kroki!” the newcomer went on, without any break, apostrophising a few late crocuses that were already looking jaded. “And those daisies! I do so *love* daisies, don’t you? ‘Wee modest crimson-tipped flowers’—you remember the poet’s allusion, of course? So appropriate.” The flowers she was pointing at with her knotty walking-stick were particularly large, buxom-looking red double daisies, a prize variety, that not even the imagination of a poet

could have described as “wee”!

“It’s wonderful how literature opens one’s eyes to the beauties of nature. I always say ‘Read the poets,’ then it will not matter whether you stay in town or country, nature will be an open book to you.” (Undoubtedly the Literary Lady had arrived; and she was bent either on improving or on impressing us!) “The poets take you into the very *heart* of things. ‘A primrose by a river’s brim’; where can you find a truer picture of the simple wayside flower? And isn’t that an exquisite line, ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet’? I entirely agree with Shakespeare in this” (which was nice of her!); “it is just as I was saying, it really doesn’t matter whether you know a [280] single flower individually—or whether you have ever seen a flower, in fact—all nature can be yours. I consider it criminal to neglect the poets. Wherever the eye wanders,” she went on, “it recalls some great truth that has been crystallised for us by literary men” (evidently the flowers themselves were of small count; all that mattered was what pen-and-ink could make out of them).

“And Ladysmocks all silver white.” It was evident that she was warming to the work and going farther afield, for here the stick took a dangerous sweep round in mid-air (Virginia saved her head by dodging it), and was now pointing into the copse the other side of the garden-wall, where the anemones were still in bloom. “I simply revel in Lady’s Smocks, don’t you?” she said ardently to Virginia, and then smiled expansively into the copse, though there wasn’t a solitary Lady’s Smock there.

“For my own part, I must say I prefer Doxies,” said Virginia sweetly. “‘The Doxy over the dale,’ as Shakespeare so beautifully expresses it. Don’t you just *love* them?”

The V.A.D. had turned her back on us and was studying the distant hills.

“Virginia,” I interpolated hurriedly, for I scented trouble immediately ahead, “isn’t that the Rector coming up the lane? Then we must be getting indoors.”

But the Literary Lady had not nearly said all she had come intending to say; so she told me as [281] we walked to the house that she herself was engaged on a most exhaustive literary work, entitled, “The Cosmic Evidences of Woman’s Supremacy.”

“Yes,” I said, in a blank tone of voice that wasn’t intended to commit me to anything. I’ve handled many similarly exhaustive MSS. in my time, and I’ve met many authoresses of the same, and my one terror was lest she should start to give me a detailed synopsis of each chapter. But fortunately we reached the house before she could get fairly launched.

After the opening hymn and prayer, the Rector briefly sketched his idea in calling the meeting together, and, after reminding us how desirable it was at a time like this that some active campaign should be set afoot to combat the drunkenness that had been such a bane to our land, he asked if any ladies who had suggestions to make would kindly speak briefly and to the point. Hardly had he sat down before the Literary Lady was on her feet urging upon us all the necessity for giving up our inebriate habits! You would have thought she was addressing loafers inside a public-house.

I sat as patiently as I could waiting for her to sit down and give place to someone else, who, at [282] least, knew whom they were addressing. But next moment I found, to my amazement, that she was lecturing us on the advantages of a fruitarian diet, assuring us that most of the evils flesh is heir to (including drunkenness) would be done away with if we only chained our appetites to fruit. She was blissfully unaware that the cause of all the trouble in our district was—cider! After every form of food that was not fruit had been abused, she passed on—by a transition that seemed easy to her, but unaccountable to everyone else—to the question of woman’s suffrage, and we learnt that another cause for drunkenness was to be found in the fact that women had had no votes. And then it dawned upon me that we had let ourselves in for an afternoon with some irresponsible crank.

It really seemed as though she meant to go on for ever. The Rector’s gentle and courteous attempts to stem the rushing torrent were not of the slightest avail. He tried to interpolate a remark now and again, but she never even heard him; she was addressing us at the very top of her voice. Of course he ought to have stopped her at the very outset; but then the situation was one he had never before been called upon to face in the whole of his seventy years; hers was the first female voice to be raised in our parish in defiance of the Rector!

Equally, of course, I ought to have stopped her; but one hesitates to take the initiative in such [283] a case when there is a chairman, and eventually I let matters get quite beyond me. I did rise at the back of the room and try to ask a few questions, but all in vain; the speaker never paused, and at last I meekly sat down again, while Virginia and Ursula, with the V.A.D. between them, suffocated in their handkerchiefs and showed distinct signs of getting out of hand! Besides what *can* anyone do under such circumstances? I asked Ursula, who once attended election meetings, what it was usual to do, and she said, “You just turn them out when they talk too much.” But who was to turn her out? And how do you set about it?

It was evident from her absurd and illogical statements that neither the Fruitarians nor the Woman’s Suffrage party owned her or would have authorised her to advocate their claims. She was merely one of those women one meets occasionally who take up every new craze that comes along, and get on their feet and speak about their latest hobby, in season and out of season, having not the slightest sense of proportion, and of the fitness of things. Such a woman loves to

hear her own voice, and imagines that other people love to hear it too!

After half an hour of this sort of thing the lady of the Manor took her departure—not very [284]
quietly either! As I stepped outside in the porch to bid her a mournful “Good-bye,” she pressed my hand and murmured—

“You poor dear! Do let me know who finally chokes her!”

How we should have silenced her eventually I don’t know, but the matter was taken out of our hands by no less important a personage than Johnny, the boy who delivered the bread from the village shop.

Unable to find any Abigail at the kitchen door, he had come along to the other door to know how many loaves I required. From my seat in the room I tried to indicate, by dumb pantomime, that I wanted one loaf; Miss Smith caught sight of him, and remembering that she was two miles away from any bread if he overlooked her, she told him in a clear voice not to forget to leave her a loaf. Then everyone else in the room woke up to the fact that Johnny was outside, and with one accord they all asked him if he had remembered them, or told him how many loaves to leave, and no one troubled in the slightest whether it interfered with the speaker or not. In fact, they seemed to enjoy the clatter they were making.

Johnny, being attacked by so many voices at once, stood on the doorstep and addressed the room stolidly and respectfully—

“I’ve lef’ your loaf on the window-ledge, Miss Primkins; an’ I put two for you in the fork of the [285]
apple-tree, Miss Robinson, so’s the dog can’t get at it, as he’s loose; an’ Miss Jones, your’n is on the garden seat; and I’ve a-put Mrs. Wilson’s a-top of the wood-pile wiv a bit of paper under it”—(undue favouritism to Mrs. Wilson, we all thought!)—“an’ I’ve lef’ your nutmegs and soda and coffee on the doorstep, Miss White; and I driv a cow out of your garden, what had got in, Miss Parker; the gate was lef’ open; but he’s latched up all right now——”

At this intelligence the room gave a general shuffle, preparatory to a stampede. Why, a cow might have got into every garden! Who could tell? And only those who have cherished gardens in the country know what terrible import lurked in the words, “The gate was lef’ open!”

The Rector, seeing where matters were trending, said we would close with a hymn. Before he had given out more than one line, Ursula did what she had never done before, and has never done since—raised the tune! She said it was sheer hysterics made her do so. At any rate we all took it up vigorously, because we saw the Literary Lady was trying to add a postscript to her previous remarks. It’s true, Ursula started us on a six-lined tune, whereas the verses were only four lines each, but I fortunately discovered it in time, and repeated the last two lines to save the [286]
situation.

The people all left hurriedly as soon as the Benediction had been pronounced; most of them looking unutterable things at me for having let them in for such a time! The Literary Lady alone seemed to have enjoyed herself, and went away leaving the bundle of MSS. she had brought, after telling me that she intended to call on me the very next afternoon and bring me “The Cosmic Evidences,” as she felt sure it would be the very thing for my magazine. The unkindest cut of all, however, was the farewell remark made by the Vicar’s niece, as she was adjusting her bonnet-strings—

“I can’t think why on earth you ever asked that individual to address us; but I suppose she is some personal friend of yours?”

When the two girls and I were left alone with the general disorder that always prevails after one’s guests have gone, Ursula made some tea, and Virginia brought in what was left of the festal fare, and we sat around the fire and ate in melancholy silence.

“I’m going to town by the very first train to-morrow,” I said at last.

“So ’m I!” fervently ejaculated the other two in unison. “And may I never set eyes or ears on that fruit creature again,” added Virginia, as she set down her plate, with an air of a pain in her [287]
chest, after her sixth cucumber sandwich.

But, though I escaped the lady’s next call, I had not got to the end of her. She sent an avalanche of MSS. to my office, and called persistently in person. Howbeit, she never was troubled to walk beyond the inquiry office, and her MSS. were always returned to her with the utmost promptitude.

Some weeks later Virginia and I, after doing some shopping in the stores, turned into the refreshment-room for lunch. I do not know any place where a more varied assortment of feminine idiosyncrasies thrust themselves upon one’s notice than in the ladies’ luncheon-room; neither do I know any place where you can hear, within a given space of time, more particulars of the births, marriages, ailments and deaths—plus a wealth of intervening data—of people you know nothing about, than in that self-same room.

We had hardly taken our seats at a table before we were accompanying our next-door

neighbour to a dentist, she being in a state of *complete* nervous prostration (full symptoms given), and having four teeth extracted (*most* obstinate one that came out in eleven separate pieces) with gas that wouldn't "take" (italicised description of what the victim underwent, and [288] was conscious of, in her half-gone condition). After this we dallied through an exceedingly comprehensive catalogue of what she had been able to take in the way of nourishment since the momentous occasion; and finally received, with breathless interest, the important information as to the exact date when she would be once more fully equipped for dinner-parties.

On our right two more were discussing, with gusto, the doings (none of them, apparently, what she ought to have done) of a bride who had recently entered their family.

Our own corner of the room was so engaging that we did not notice the newcomers who were finding seats at other tables. But suddenly, above the general chatter, there arose the sound of a strident voice that there was no possibility of mistaking. Virginia and I gasped simultaneously; and there, a short distance away from us (though, fortunately with its back towards us), we beheld the fluffy hat (rightside front this time), above a screw of hair, and the long tussore coat of recent blessed memories! The Literary Lady had a friend with her, but obviously the friend didn't count for much, she hadn't a chance; at most she only squeezed in a word when the other made a semi-pause for breath. We sat spell-bound, and this is what we heard:

"Now, dear, what are you going to have? They have soup, roast beef, roast lamb and mint [289] sauce, roast mutton" (and so on, she declaimed the menu to the bitter end, while a long-suffering waitress stood first on one tired foot and then on the other). "Oh, but you must have something more than a bun. . . . Nonsense, that was hours ago; I had mine late, too, but I'm quite ready for lunch. . . . On strict diet, are you? That doesn't count. Specialists always say that sort of thing; that's what you pay the money for; but it doesn't follow that you do what they say. Why, you'd starve to death if you did, and then you'd have to go to them again and pay another fee—though I dare say that's their idea. . . . You would like a little roast lamb? Well, I might manage a little, too, if it is *very* hot; but I expect they've only got it about lukewarm. If the roast lamb isn't quite . . . what? It's *cold?* All the joints are cold? The waitress says it's *cold*, dear! Isn't it simply ridiculous in a place like London never to be able to get a hot lunch! . . . What? The grill is hot? But, my good girl, I don't want any grill. . . . And the soup and fish? I don't want either soup or fish. . . . No, and I don't want hot steak-and-kidney pie. I wanted hot roast lamb. Still, if you haven't it, I suppose it isn't your fault. All the same, it does seem as if you are—— . . . . Sausages, did you say? They would be rather nice. Now are *they* hot or cold, which? . . . *Smoked??* Only [290] *smoked* sausages?? Did you ever know such a place! . . . What do you say to oysters? . . . You thought I only took fruit? I tried that for a little while; my last doctor but one was very keen on it; but if you believe me, I was losing *pounds* a week! I should have been a perfect skeleton by now if I'd gone on. So I went to another man, and he insisted—absolutely *insisted* that I must take food containing a larger percentage of proteids. And I wasn't sorry; I never had any faith in that fruit idea, only I met that doctor when I was at the Hydro, and he begged me to try it. A most charming man, and he took the *greatest* interest in my writings; but someone told me only last week that he has a wife who is a positive—— . . . . Salmon? Is there salmon? I didn't notice it. That wouldn't be bad, would it? and the very best thing you could have as you're dieting; so digestible, I always find. Now where's that girl gone? I declare they slip away the minute your back's turned, and they don't give you a moment to look at the menu. Is that our waitress over there? I think it is; she has on an apron just like the girl who was here. . . . That's true, now you mention it; their aprons are all alike. Still, I think that was the one, and she's gone over there on purpose to be out of reach. But I'll go to her."

Here Virginia and I narrowly escaped detection, for the Literary Lady strode across the room, [291] knocking down other people's umbrellas in passing, brushing one lady's velvet stole from the back of a chair, and kicking over a tray that had been put down in, apparently, the most out-of-the-way spot in the room. Clutching the arm of the waitress who belonged to our table and had no dealings with the other end of the room, she demanded immediate service. Instinctively Virginia and I bent our heads forward as low as possible over our plates, and fortunately the wide brims of our hats helped to conceal our features. But we only breathed freely when she returned to her seat to report to her friend—

"That waitress says the other girl will be back in a minute; but I doubt it. There; now *she's* gone off too! Ah, here's ours—at last! Now, dear, you said sausage, didn't you? Or did we decide on oysters? . . . You're right; it was salmon. I always think that salmon—— . . . . What did you say? . . . Why, of *course* we want bread! We couldn't eat it without, could we? . . . Oh, I see, you mean bread or roll? She says will you have bread or roll, dear? . . . Yes, rolls would be nice, but —— Waitress! Not crusty ones! . . . Well, perhaps bread *would* be softer for you under the circumstances. Stale bread, waitress! Those rolls are usually as hard as—— . . . . Yes, perhaps we [292] *had* better decide on what we will have to drink. I'm going to have lime-juice. You'd better have some too. It goes so well with salmon. . . . Of course they have coffee, if you really prefer it; but I do think that lime-juice—— Well, if that girl hasn't gone off again! They do nothing but run about from pillar to post. Oh, she is bringing the other things! *That* isn't brown bread, waitress! I said *brown* bread surely? I *must* have said brown bread, because I positively cannot touch anything else. Don't you remember I called you back and said, '*Brown* bread, waitress?' Well, if you can change it, that's all right. Wait a minute, though; after all, I think I'll have white. . . . Yes, you can leave it; but all the same, I can't think why people never listen to what one says."

Here half the room broke out into an unconcealed smile; *i.e.*, the half that had found it impossible to raise their voices above hers, and so had finally given it up as hopeless, and now

devoted themselves to listening. But all oblivious of everything but herself, she continued—

"I don't like the look of that salmon. I feel sure it's been frozen. Is that the best you have? It looks to me like New Zealand or Canterbury salmon! Really, *everything* seems to be made in Germany nowadays, doesn't it? And no mayonnaise. . . ? It's in the cruet? I never care for that bottled stuff. . . . Oh, yes, leave it; but I wish now that we had had oysters. . . . It's no use offering [293] to change it; we've done nothing else so far but have wrong things brought us to have changed—or at least it would have been changed if I hadn't consented to put up with the white bread. But you can bring us some lime-juice. Now don't forget *this* time and bring ginger-beer. . . . Yes, lime-juice for two. . . . But I thought you agreed to lime-juice just now? . . . Oh, have what you like by all means; *I* don't mind what it is; I only advised lime-juice because coffee is so *very* bad for anyone on diet, and you can't be too careful; still, please yourself, only *do* let us decide on *something*, or she'll be off again. . . . That's it, one coffee and one lime-juice. . . . Yes, with plenty of milk. . . . Now, I wonder if that scatter-brained girl will go and put the milk in the lime-juice?

"You were surprised to hear I was back in town? I returned last week. I absolutely couldn't have *existed* on that benighted hill-top another hour. . . . I knew the moment I set eyes on it that it wasn't sufficiently cooked. No one could be expected to eat it. She must get us something else. Waitress! This salmon isn't *half*-done. It's as soft as. . . . Oh, I see; yours is hard? Well, at any rate, it isn't what it ought to be. Mine is quite spongy, and this lady's is as hard as . . . the skin, is it? . . . this lady's skin is just like leather. . . . I suppose it had better be oysters. . . . Now I wonder [294] how much longer she'll keep us waiting? But as I was saying, they were the dullest, most bucolic set of people I ever came across; not a thought above their fowls and cabbages. I tried to discuss Art and Literature with them—simple things, not too far above their heads, you know, just to draw them out; but they merely gazed at me in utter blankness. . . . Yes, she has a cottage there; I'd forgotten I mentioned it in my letter. . . . Oh, yes, I met her; in fact she persuaded me to address a drawing-room meeting at her house; she got it up on purpose, hearing I was in the district. I could ill afford to spare the time from my book; but she wrote and made *such* a point of it, that I could hardly refuse without seeming rude. She invited a number of the local people to meet me; but a more stupid, unimpressionable collection of—— . . . what is she like? *Most* ordinary. As you know, I'm endowed with unusual intuition, and can gauge people and sum them up in a *moment*, and I must say I found her a *very* uninteresting person—not to say exceedingly heavy."

"Which only proves," said Virginia when we got outside, "that even the worst of us may profit by hearing the truth spoken in love!"

XVI

Moon-Gold in the Garden

[295]

The flame of August is over all the garden, a blaze of yellow and scarlet, orange and red, for most of the blues and pinks go out with July, though the lavender flowers are opening intensely blue, and big clumps of eryngium, with blue stems as well as blue flower-heads, make masses of contrasting colour amidst the sunflowers, single and double, and the eschscholtzias and marigolds glowing golden and undaunted by the hottest sunshine. The flowers of the Red-hot-poker rival their namesakes; broad spreading clumps of montbretia, each waving hundreds of fiery orange and red blossoms, have sprung into existence, since last we were here, from lowly modest-looking patches of green blades.

The second crop of Gloire-de-Dijon roses are out, likewise holding in their hearts remembrance of the hot sunshine that pervades the earth. Geraniums, turned out of doors “to get a little air” (though there certainly isn’t much to get just now!), are shouting aloud in pride of their heavy, scarlet bosses. The mountain-ash trees contribute plenty of colour, each branch bent down with a [296] smother of bunches of berries, which are being eagerly devoured by blackbirds, thrushes and hawfinches.

Tall red and yellow hollyhocks try to persuade you that they are nearly as high, and quite as brilliant, as the mountain-ash.

Nasturtiums trail all over the place, climbing where there is next to nothing to support them, with flowers so thick you lose count of the foliage. And what a dazzling mass they make, touched apparently with every shade of yellow and brown and red, from blossoms of palest primrose marked with vivid scarlet, past salmon-colour streaked with orange, and lemon yellow splashed with chocolate, to dark mahogany-red smoked with deep purple-brown. They smother weeds (that gain in impudence as the season advances), and cover bare places where bulbs and earlier blooming plants have died down. They hang over the tops of walls; they crowd the border pinks into the paths; they get mixed up with the hedges, and surprise you by sending out vermilion flowers at the top of a sedate old box-tree clipped to look like a solid square table. They run out of the little white gate into the lane, and they creep under the rails into the orchard. Indeed, there are times when their exuberance almost makes one tired, more especially if the thermometer favours the nineties!

The garden walls are teeming with colour. Sweet Alyssum has seeded itself wherever it can [297] find a spare niche—rather a difficulty, unless a plant goes house-hunting quite early in the season! Though the white and purple arabis finished flowering months ago, it contributes crimson and purple to the colour scheme, as its foliage ripens in the hot sun.

Any intelligent gardener can tell me that the top of a sunny wall is far too hot for a fuschia. Certainly; and of course it is—especially in August. Yet some misguided person had one planted there—just where the wall has a break in it, and a flight of steps leads down to the next level. It is the lovely old-fashioned bush sort, smothered with slender drooping blossoms; and it reaches out long arms that arch right over the steps, and as you go down, unless you lower your head, you set a-tinkling scores of crimson bells with rich blue-purple centres.

And people who understand all about fuchsias glare at it severely, and then at me, and remark, “A most unsuitable position!”

And where nothing else in particular is making any sort of a show, the ubiquitous Herb Robert spreads itself about, on the top of the walls, or roots in crevices down the sides—it isn’t particular where; so long as there are stones that need clothing with loveliness, there you will find it, laying its crimson leaves with a lacy airiness over the stern surface of the rock.

The very scents of the garden are hot and pungent, as one rubs against thyme and marjoram, [298] or the great sage bush that smothers one wall. The trees of sweet bay were cut in the morning; the rosemary bushes had to be trimmed where their branches were lying on the ground; someone has stepped on pieces in passing.

All day long the heat strikes down on the parched, cracking earth, baking the stones, shrivelling up any fern fronds that chance to catch its direct rays, drying up the little brook, and testing the powers of endurance of the scarlets and yellows, orange and reds, that are flaunting themselves in the face of the sun.

To sit out of doors is only possible beneath the firs and larches, in the green shade by the wood house, where the sun never penetrates; and even here it makes one warm to watch the glare beyond the thicket of trees, the hot air quivering, nothing but butterflies and dragon flies about, and nought to break a breathless silence but the twitter of the tits, grub-hunting in the larches, and the perpetual hum of uncountable insects, who seem to find no heat too great.

But presently the shadows of the pines begin to lengthen, and in the shade thrown by the larches along the meadow side blackbirds are seen making short runs along the ground on foraging expeditions. Chaffinches, tits, linnets, and bullfinches come out from green hiding places [299] and go down to the birds’ bath to drink.

Longer grow the shadows, the swallows rise and take high curving sweeps in the upper air—

wonderful little aeronauts whom no man has trained.

As the sun touches the top of the opposite hills a breeze wakes up the birch wood, whispering that the sunset will soon be here, and the leaves start talking about the stifling heat that so exhausted them through the day.

The sun drops lower behind the hill; rabbits peep out from beneath the brambles, then make for the hummocky field that adjoins my cabbages, the field where the big oaks stretch wide arms over soft, green, luscious grass—Offa's Oaks we have named these ancient giants, because they border Offa's Dyke; and they have so often described to the more youthful birch trees the time when they saw Offa, King of Mercia, come marching past in 765 A.D., that at length they have actually come to believe they were alive and flourishing in his day! We humour their age by pretending that it was so.

At last the sun disappears, flaming to the last in crimson and gold, orange and red. The breeze gets lustier after the sun has gone under, and a squirrel comes scampering head first down a tall fir-tree, in search of a delicious toadstool that he sometimes finds at its base. Pheasants strut up [300] out of the coppice, and roam about the pasture.

Imperceptibly, you know not whence it comes, there steals over the earth the cool, refreshing scent of dew-drenched bracken, mingling with the sweet wistful evening incense of some late honeysuckle.

And as you watch the fading after-glow of pink and saffron, sea-green and tawny-rose, you sense that in some mysterious way the face of the garden has entirely changed. Gone is the fire of the scarlet geraniums; lost is the vermilion of the nasturtiums; even the sunflowers hang their heads, and the hollyhocks have turned off their lights. The marigolds have closed their eyes, and the eschscholtzias have folded up their brave flowers, the tired little heads bowing over, thankful for this respite.

Then, as the montbretias toll the Angelus from crowds of golden throated bells, the evening primroses, silently, gratefully, open a thousand blossoms and bathe the garden in a wondrous gleam.

Such a clear, clean yellow it is; so quiet and yet so penetrating; it seems in some strange way to hold the radiance of heaven and focus it on the sleeping Flower-patch, subduing all that would strike a glaring note, hiding the ragged deficiencies of fading leaves and withering seed-pods.

By day one scarcely noticed the straggling plants at all, save perhaps to remark on their rather [301] shabby appearance. But now they shine from terraces and wall-tops; from crannies in the rough stone steps they send up tall shafts, bearing aloft their evening lamps; about the garden beds, among the currant bushes, at the edge of the gravel walk, between the stones in the paved path, wherever they can find root-room, they have taken hold—for they were ever wanderers, and given to exploring the farthermost corner of any garden wherein they have made themselves at home.

The last rose-pink flush has faded from the clouds; not even a sleepy twitter is heard from bush or bough; the wind soughs softly in the pine-trees, those harps of endless strings. From out her hidden stores of abundance, Nature has given moisture to the grass, refreshment to the fainting foxglove leaves, and damped the forest fern. Then, breathing quiet on a weary world, has bidden it take rest.

Yet all are not asleep. Standing like sentinels through the darkest hours of night, the evening primroses, adding scent to scent, flood the garden from end to end with a veritable glory of swaying, gleaming moon-gold.

XVII

The Carillon of the Wilds

[302]

Of all the host of alluring things that make for themselves homes on our hillside, one of the most lovely is the foxglove. Yet there is no blatancy about its beauty, nor a great blaze of light as when the ox-eye daisies wave over the fields in June.

There is something more subtle than even its colouring that attracts one to this flower, for there is mind-rest, there is balm for anxious hearts, there is new hope and new courage, with whispers of happiness, in the depths of a foxglove bell.

If you doubt this, go on a foxglove quest; leave everything bearing the hall-mark of advanced up-to-dateness far behind you—though I've nothing to say against the train that takes you away from towns to the place where the foxgloves grow! Forget all the regulation ways of enjoying yourself, and search out the haunts of the carillon of the wilds.

You will find them on the shady sides of the hedges, their spikes of bells pushing up through hawthorn and sloe, through the tangle of bramble and bryony, cleavers and dog rose that [303] scramble over the pollarded nut-bushes, beeches, elm-stumps, and ash-boles, amid all the dear delights that go to make that poem of loveliness—an English hedgerow.

You will also find them in little hollows and dells, in small ravines and in craggy places—in any spot where they can get a little moisture for the roots and occasional sunshine for the flowers, with a certain amount of immunity from the devastating hand of the human marauder. Give them but a ghost of a chance to seed themselves (though this is what the greedy flower-gatherer invariably denies them), and they will spread with great rapidity, and paint the face of nature with a rich glowing carmine that almost makes you hold your breath when first you see the broad sweeps of colour on certain hillsides in mid-June.

When you have found them, in any of their haunts, lift one of the bells and look right into it, delighting in the splashes and markings, the fine filaments and the silken texture, the pink and purple and crimson, the dark brown and white, the poise of the stalk, the droop of the bells, the balance that the leaf-arrangement gives to the whole plant, and the many other characteristics that go to make up one of the most exquisite of nature's products.

The trouble is that in sparse soil, or in wind-swept places, the plant does not grow so tall as in [304] a protected and secluded spot. Hence when we meet it in the open, its bells hang downwards below the eye-line, and we do not often remember to stoop and lift one, to see what message the bee left for us. Perhaps that is one reason why it seems to me that, while sunflowers and hollyhocks spend their days in gazing after grown-ups, foxgloves are for ever nodding smilingly and encouragingly to little children.

To those who are accustomed to agricultural scenery, where the landscape shows far expanses of pasture-land and cornfields, with wide spreading low-roofed farms clustered around with barns and ricks, our hills come as a surprise with their uneven surfaces, and the scarcity of soil in comparison with the superabundance of rock.

And even taking into consideration all the cleared spaces and small farms, the outstanding feature of the country, so far as the eye can see, is timber. This is a region of woods and coppices, with springs that bubble up at the roots of sturdy trees, protected by their thick leafage from the onslaughts of the sun. This is a land of dim grey-green mystery, of silences that make one tread with reverent awe till one is brought back to earth, by the ring of the woodman's axe, the leisurely song of his saw, and the crish-crash of a tree as it falls.

In the course of time, the woods have to be cut; some are cut every fourteen years; others are [305] left much longer; it all depends on the kind of tree and the purpose for which it is being grown.

But though the woods are cut periodically, it is not so devastating a process as one might imagine. For one thing, it is clean work; for another, it is surface work; and then it is all done in the open air, with hand-tools and no machinery, and it is carried out on nature's own lines. Hence there is no underground disturbance that would prevent further growth, and no smoke of power-driven machinery pollutes the earth and air.

Yet there would be something very pathetic about the felling of the trees, as you walk over ground that has been cut, were it not for the magical display of beauty nature puts forth in such circumstances, multitudes of flowers springing into being that otherwise would not have come to birth.

At first you see but the prostrate trunks of the trees, with ivy still clinging to the bark; there they lie, with branches lopped, each surrounded by piles of small timber cut into regulation lengths for various commercial purposes; with "cords" of faggots for firing, and stacks of stuff for pea sticks and similar purposes.

Yet you are not long wandering over the newly-cleared slopes before you see things that were not evident before.

In winter you discover a red-gold carpet—too golden to be brown, too brown to be red—where [306] lie the leaves of the beeches that you never noticed when the trees were standing.

Then, as spring breathes life into the sleeping earth, the dead leaves stir, silently, mysteriously, no human ear can detect the rustle, no human eye can see the movement, yet the leaves lift and move apart, disclosing the yellow and green, and silvery-pink of the primrose buds.

Still further the dead leaves lift, and the violets look out, and then run all over the place. The wind-flowers push up next, and before you realize what has happened, the place is literally dancing with them. Where did they all come from?

Last spring you went through this very wood and saw only a few scattered about at wide distances, where there chanced to be a filter of light through the dense branches overhead. Now the place is an open air ball-room of curtesying sprites.

Such are the wonderful ways of the woods!

In sheltered spots where the cold winds cannot reach, cushions of wood-sorrel unfurl their pale-green leaves, and then send up, cautiously and shyly, the fragile bells that look as though a breath would blow them away. The woodruff also sets to work, for there must be beauty of odour as well as beauty of colour and form, and something will be needed to take the place of the [307] violets when they go.

By this time the bluebells are ready to come out; but there is no shyness about these, sturdy in their growth, no obstacle seems to hinder them; up come the green spears, making their own way through dead leaves and twigs and moss and acorn cup, through thickets of low-lying bramble, through carpets of close-growing ivy; if a dead branch or a tree trunk lies in their way, they peep out at one side, “Is there a trifle of daylight here?” And up they come, carpeting with blue the open spaces between the huge masses of rock that lie pell-mell about the surface; while the humble little ground-ivy lays cool green fingers, and a little later its violet-blue flowers, over the cream and silver of the birches, the soft grey of the beeches, and the rough bark of the oaks, where the felled trunks lie among the up-springing grass, sensing for the last time the coming of spring and summer on the hillside.

Then it is, when the bluebells have turned to papery seed-pods, and the primroses have paled away into space, that the foxgloves begin to shake out their flowers and the hillside glows and palpitates with colour. They flourish with a joyous abandon that is positively infectious, and makes one feel there is still much left to live for. The way they suddenly appear when the trees are down—whole battalions of them—where only a season before there were regiments of [308] larches, or thick woods of mixed timber, is really marvellous. Undoubtedly the ground must be packed with seed; more than this, there must always be young seedlings coming up among the undergrowth or in sheltered crevices where the larch needles do not penetrate; for no sooner are the trees cut than foxgloves start to spread their leaves to the light, and by the following summer, often before half the timber has been carried, you find them by the thousand—and that is a very low estimate—dotted all over the rough land, and, with a host of ferns, trying to cover up all that is maimed, and bare, and jagged, to hide the scars where the mighty have fallen, to give beauty for ashes in a very literal sense.

Moreover, there seems an almost uncanny intelligence in the way they adapt themselves to their environment. You would think they knew that the winds from the far-off Channel blow strong at times, across these high open spaces; for you find that they invariably place themselves in the shelter of a big boulder, or settle down in a little hollow with a protecting flank of rockery, evidently conscious that their tall stems would be lashed down flat if exposed to the full force of the wind. Or you find them growing, it may be, at the foot of a crumbling gate post, or against an ivy-covered rock, or rows of them nestling close up to a lichen-covered stone wall; and in this way [309] their beauty is enhanced by the background.

And when they find themselves in an uncongenial setting—springing up in the very centre of a woodland path perhaps, or out in the open where the woodmen have been lopping the branches from a felled tree, and there is much devastation to be covered over and atoned for—there the foxglove lays its leaves as flat as possible against the earth, so as to offer the least inducement to the passer-by to injure it. And though it still sends up its flowers as bravely as it knows how, they are only a foot high, not the five and six feet of the foxglove in the shelter. Yet if it be possible, in the least bit possible, it leans against the pile of faggots, or gently touches the desolate trunk of what was once a majestic old tree—and who dare say that the silent companionship counts for nothing?

As I write this, in a year of the Awful War, there are some who would tell me that foxgloves will not find the people in food; while others see no value in the larches apart from their service as mine-props.

Yet, while I would not under-estimate the utilitarian worth of crops and timber, the age-old truth is still insistent: Man cannot live by bread alone.

You may clear from the surface of the land every plant that is not edible; you may fell every [310] tree that does not serve for telegraph pole or pit wood; you may tabulate the food-productive qualities of the whole earth, and serve it out in a blue-book as literature for the people; you may manufacture electricity till there is no longer any night, and the mysteries of the twilight and the moonlight and the starlight are lost to us for ever; you may destroy the birds till there isn’t one Glad-song left in the caterpillar-riddled orchards and gardens; you may harness the rivers and

streams for mechanical purposes, and drown the voices of the weir in the whirr of wheels, till there isn't an ounce of energy flowing to waste throughout the length and breadth of the country; you may turn all Nature into a huge commercial enterprise that is the last word in economics and efficient organization—and what will be the result?

Machines in place of souls!

Germany strove to subserve everything to her own materialistic ends, and the price of her hideous and colossal crime is a world's agony.

Though this may seem but a parable, to some the reading will be clear: Where there is no vision, the people perish.

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

Page 112, "contribubution" changed to "contribution" (own literary contribution)

Page 167, "away" changed to "way" (my way round)

Page 178, "seach" changed to "search" (in search of you)

Page 200, "aromati" changed to "aromatic" (its aromatic leaves)

Page 244, "bric" changed to "brac" of "bric-à-brac"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BETWEEN THE LARCH-WOODS AND THE WEIR ***

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