RUSKIN BOND

My Favourite Nature Stories

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Ruskin Bond has been writing for over sixty years, and has now over 120 titles in print—novels, collection of short stories, poetry, essays, anthologies and books for children. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, received the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Award in 1957. He has also received the Padma Shri (1999), the Padma Bhushan (2014) and two awards from Sahitya Akademi—one for his short stories and another for his writings for children. In 2012, the Delhi government gave him its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Born in 1934, Ruskin Bond grew up in Jamnagar, Shimla, New Delhi and Dehradun. Apart from three years in UK, he has spent all his life in India, and now lives in Mussoorie with his adopted family.

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Introduction Ruskin's Green-World

It is good of my long-time publishers, Rupa, to bring out this selection of some of my favourite nature pieces on my 82nd birthday.

I have been writing stories, sketches, poems and novels for over 65 years, and the greatest pleasure has come from writing about the natural world in my vicinity—wherever I may have been living.

When I came to live in Mussoorie just over fifty years ago, I lived in Maplewood Lodge, a cottage below Wynberg-Allen School. Its windows opened on to a well-forested hillside. So naturally I wrote about the trees, wild flowers and birds and other creatures who lived among them. Then circumstances forced me to move higher up the mountain, and for the last thirty-five years I have lived on the top floor of Ivy Cottage, in Landour Cantonment. Here there are windows too, and they open on to sky, clouds, the Doon valley, and range upon range of mountains. And from this perch on the hillside I feel that I am part of the greater world, mother India as well as the natural world of planet Earth.

Humankind took over the earth from the dinosaurs, who perished due to natural upheavals and dramatic climate changes. We could go the same way, as we have proved to be bad tenants with little or no regard for the natural world that we have inherited.

But I do not despair. Dawn gives way to daybreak and daybreak to sunrise. And when the sun bursts through my windows and streams across my little room, I look forward to another great day on the planet Earth. We must cherish each day as though it is our last.

Some of these pieces have appeared before in magazines or newspapers. A few are recent. Several have not been published between book covers.

I dedicate this book to all who cherish the green world of India, its forests, fields, streams and sacred rivers. Nature sustains us. Let us not do away with our natural inheritance.

Ruskin Bond

Among the Maples and Oaks

It isn't many years since I left Maplewood, but I wouldn't be surprised to hear that the cottage has disappeared. Already, during my last months there, the trees were being cut and the new road was being blasted out of the Mountain. It would pass just below the old cottage. There were (as far as I know) no plans to blow up the house; but it was already shaky and full of cracks, and a few tremors, such as those produced by passing trucks, drilling machines and bulldozers, would soon bring the cottage to the ground.

If it has gone, don't write and tell me: I'd rather not know.

When I moved in, it had been nestling there among the oaks for over seventy years. It had become a part of the forest. Birds nestled in the eaves; beetles burrowed in the woodwork. Some denizens remained, even during my residence. And I was there—how long? Eight, nine years, I'm not sure; it was a timeless sort of place. Even the rent was paid only once a year, at a time of my choosing.

I first saw the cottage in late spring, when the surrounding forest was at its best—the oaks and maples in new leaf, the oak leaves a pale green, the maple leaves red and gold and bronze; this is the Himalayan maple, quite different from the North American maple; only the winged seed-pods are similar, twisting and turning in the breeze as they fall to the ground, so that the Garhwalis call it the Butterfly Tree.

There was one very tall, very old maple above the cottage, and this was probably the tree that gave the house its name. A portion of it was blackened where it had been struck by lightning, but the rest of it lived on; a favourite haunt of woodpeckers: the ancient peeling bark seemed to harbour any number of tiny insects, and the woodpeckers would be tapping away all day. A steep path ran down to the cottage. During heavy rain, it would become a watercourse and the earth would be washed away to leave it very stony and uneven. I first took this path to see Miss Mackenzie, an impoverished old lady who lived in two small rooms on the ground floor and who was acting on behalf of the owner. It was she who told me that the cottage was to-let provided she could remain in the portion downstairs.

Actually, the path ran straight across a landing and up to the front door of the first floor. It was the ground floor that was tucked away in the shadow of the hill; it was reached by a flight of steps, which also took the rush of water when

the path was in flood.

Miss Mackenzie was eighty-six. I helped her up the steps and she opened the door for me. It led into an L-shaped room. There were two large windows, and when I pushed the first of these open, the forest seemed to rush upon me. From below, from the ravine, the deep-throated song of the whistling thrush burst upon me.

I told Miss Mackenzie I would take the place. She grew excited; it must have been lonely for her during the past several years, with most of the cottage lying empty, and only her old bearer and a mongrel dog for company. Her own house had been mortgaged to a moneylender. Her brothers and sisters were long dead.

I told her I would move in soon: my books were still in Delhi. She gave me the keys and I left a cheque with her. It was all done on an impulse—the decision to give up my job in Delhi, find a cheap house in a hill-station, and return to freelance writing. It was a dream I'd had for some time; lack of money had made it difficult to realize. But then, I knew that if I was going to wait for money to come, I might have to wait until I was old and grey and full of sleep. I was thirty-five—still young enough to take a few risks. If the dream was to become reality, this was the time to do something about it.

I don't know what led me to Maplewood; it was the first place I saw, and I did not bother to see any others. The location was far from being ideal. It faced east, and stood in the shadow of the Balahissar Hill; so that while it received the early morning sun, it went without the evening sun.

There was no view of the snows and no view of the plains. In front stood Burnt Hill. But the forest below the cottage seemed full of possibilities, and the windows opening on to it probably decided the issue. In my romantic frame of my mind, I was susceptible to magic casements opening wide. I would make a window-seat and lie there on a summer's day, writing lyric poetry…

But long before that could happen I was opening tins of sardines and sharing them with Miss Mackenzie. And then Prem came along. And there were others, like Binya. I went away at times, but returned as soon as possible. Once you have lived with mountains, there is no escape. You belong to them.

When Cicadas Chorus

The barbet is one of those birds which are heard more often than they are seen. Summer visitors to Shimla, Mussoorie and other north-Indian hill resorts will be familiar with its monotonous, far-reaching call: '*pee-ho, pee-ho'*. It keeps to the tops of high trees, where it is not easily distinguished from the foliage.

Barbets love listening to their own voices, and often two or three birds answer each other from different trees, each trying to outdo the other in a shrill shouting match. Although most birds are noisy during the mating season, barbets are noisy all the year round.

There are some who like the barbet's call and consider it both striking and pleasant. Others don't like it and simply consider it striking.

Up here in the Garhwal Himalayas, there is a legend that the bird is the reincarnation of a moneylender who died of grief at the unjust termination of a law-suit. Eternally his plaintive cries rise to the heaven: *'unn-ee-ow, unn-ee-ow'* which means 'injustice, injustice!'

So the barbet's call can be interpreted in various ways. To me it always sounds like: '*pakaro, pakaro*!' or 'catch him, catch him!' And of course there's a story about how a barbet helped to catch a thief.

Now that the monsoon rains are here, the occasional snake, flooded out of its home, makes its appearance on the road or hillsides.

Most of the snakes up here are perfectly harmless, carrying only enough venom to paralyse their natural prey, which consists of frogs, rats, earthworms, small birds and smaller snakes.

Recently, I saw two pretty green and brown snakes on the hillside. I have no idea what they are called; I cannot pretend to be an expert on recognising all the denizens of the wild, and never cease to wonder at the sharp-eyed observations of well-known naturalists who can tell a bullfinch from a chaffinch at a distance of 60 metres, or distinguish a pit-viper from a saw-scaled viper in one hurried glance. I suspect some of them are just showing off. The experts, I mean. Snakes do not show off.

However, as regards the snakes on my hillside, I can say with certainty that one is brown and one is green, and personally I prefer the green one.

The postman, who almost trod on it the other day, wanted it killed; but I quoted the sayings of Buddha, Krishna and Confucius, and persuaded him to let

it live. In some former incarnation it might well have been related to us, I said. Perhaps an aunt or distant cousin. Although he wasn't quite convinced, and nor was I, but the conversation gave the snake enough time to slip away. The postman no longer enters at the gate, but leaves my letters in a hole in the wall.

During monsoon, our insect musicians are roused to their greatest activity. At dusk, the air seems to tinkle and murmur to their music. To the shrilling of the grasshopper is added the staccato notes of the crickets, while in the grass and on the trees, a myriad of lesser artists are producing a variety of sounds.

As musicians, the cicadas are a class of their own. All through the monsoon, their screaming chorus rings through the forest. A shower of rain, far from dampening their ardour, only rouses them to a deafening crescendo of effort.

As with most insect musicians, the males do the performing, while the females remain silent. This moved one chauvinist Greek poet to exclaim: 'Happy the cicadas, for they have voiceless wives!' To which I would respond by saying: 'Pity the female cicadas, for they have singing husbands!'

Probably the most familiar and homely of insect singers are the crickets. I won't attempt to go into detail on how the cricket produces its music, except to say that its louder notes are produced by a rapid vibration of the wings, the right wing usually working over the left, the edge of one acting on the file of the other to produce a shrill, long-sustained note, like a violinist gone mad. Cicadas, on the other hand, use their abdominal muscles to produce their sound.

One of our best-known crickets is a large black fellow who lives underground and rarely comes to earth by day, except when the rains flood him out of his burrow. But when night falls, he sits on his doorstep and pours out his soul in strident song. This troubadour's name is as impressive as his sound —*Brachytrypes portentosus.*

The mole-cricket is a genius by itself. Mole-crickets are tillers of the soil. They use their powerful forelimbs for shovelling up the earth and their hard heads for butting into it.

Notwithstanding its earthly occupations, the mole-cricket is sometimes moved to music. But as he repeats his note—a solemn deep-toned chirp (more burp than chirp) about a hundred times a minute—the performance can be monotonous.

The cone-headed katydids are probably the most notable performers. Katydids are trim, slender insects, much in evidence in the fresh green grass of the monsoon. In the fields, their loud shrill notes may be heard by day and night. Sometimes one of them comes into the house and treats us to a sudden outburst of high-pitched fiddling. In a room, it can be quite deafening, and the sound is always most difficult to locate—it seems to come from everywhere!

And finally there are the tree-crickets, a band of willing artistes who commence their performance at dusk. Their sounds are familiar, but it is difficult to see the musicians. A tap on the bush upon which one of them sits will bring an immediate end to the performance.

I wish the tree-crickets would duet, in the manner of Nelson Eddy and Jeanette Macdonald. But it is only the males who sing, in order to please their consorts.

And speaking of Nelson Eddy, this is the 100th anniversary of his birth. A fine baritone, unjustly neglected. When I listen to his songs (on tape or disk), the crickets and cicadas maintain a respectful silence. I'm sure they are listening.

Things I love most

Sea-shells. They are among my earliest memories. I was five years old, walking barefoot along the golden sands of a Kathiawar beach, collecting shells and cowries and taking them home to fill up an old trunk. Some of these shells have remained with me through the years. I still have one which I place against my ear to listen to the distant music of the Arabian Sea.

A jackfruit tree. It stood outside my grandfather's house in Dehra Dun: it was easy to climb and generous with its shade and in its trunk was a large hole where I kept my marbles, sweets, prohibited books and other treasures.

I have always liked the smell of certain leaves, perhaps even more than the scent of flowers. Crushed geranium and chrysanthemum leaves, mint and myrtle, lime and neem trees after the rain, and the leaves of ginger, marigolds and nasturtiums.

Of course, there were other smells which as a boy I especially liked—the smells of pillau and kofta, curry, hot jalebis, roast chicken and fried prawns. But these are smells loved most by gourmets (and most boys) and are not as personal as the smell of leaves and grass.

I have always liked trains and railway stations I like eating at railway stations—hot gram, peanut, puris, oranges.

As a boy, I travelled to Shimla on a little train that crawls round and through the mountains. In March, the Dowers on the rhododendron trees provided splashes of red against the dark green of the hills. Sometimes there would be snow on the ground to add to the contrast.

What else do I love and remember of the hills? Smells again. The smells of fallen pine needles, cow-dung smoke, spring, rain, bruised grass, the pure cold water of mountain streams, the depth and blue-ness of the sky.

In the hills, I have loved forests. In the plains, I have loved single trees. A lone tree on a wide, flat plain—even if it is a thin, crooked, nondescript tree—gains beauty and nobility from its isolation, from the precarious nature of its existence.

'Of course, I have had my favourites among trees. The banyan, with its great branches spreading to form roots and intricate passageways. The peepul with its beautiful heart-shaped leaves catching the breeze and fluttering even on the stillest of days. It is always cool under a peepul. The Jacaranda and golmohour

bursting into blossom with the coming of summer. The cherries, peaches and apricots flowering in the hills—the tall, handsome chestnuts and the whispering deodars.

Deodars have often inspired me to poetry. One day I wrote:

Trees of God, we call them. Planted there when the world was young.

The first trees
Their fingers pointing to the stars,
Older than the cedars of Lebanon.
Several of these trees were cut down recently and I was furious
They cut them down last spring
With quick and efficient tools,
The sap was rising still.
The trees bled,

Slaughtered

To make furniture for tools.

And which flower is most redolent of India? Not for me the lotus or the water-lily but the simple marigold, fresh, golden, dew-drenched, kissed by the morning sun.

The smell of the sea. I lived with it for over a year in the Channel Islands, I liked the sea mist and liked the fierce gales that swept across the islands in the winter.

Later, there were the fogs of London; I did not like them but they made me think of Dickens, and I walked to Wapping and the East India Dock Road and watched the barges on the Thames, I had my favourite pub and my favourite fish-and-chips shop. There were always children flying kites from Primrose Hill or sailing boats in the ponds on Hampstead Heath.

Once we visited the gardens at Kew and in a hot-house, moist and smelling of the tropics, I remembered the East and some of the simple things I had known—a field of wheat, a stack of sugar-cane, a cow at rest and a boy sleeping in the shade of a long, red-fingered poinsettia. And I knew I would go home to India.

Heaven on Earth

‘If there be a heaven on earth, it is this, it is this.’ The words are inscribed on the wall of the Hall of Special Audience, in the royal garden of the Red Fort of Delhi, built by the Emperor Shah Jahan in the 17th century. It is a beautiful pavilion, the walls inlaid with jade and other semiprecious stones; and from the latticed windows one sees the waters of the river Jumna winding placidly across the plain. In Shah Jahan’s time, the river ran much closer to the fort, and I like to think that the emperor, when he found time to be alone, strolled along the ramparts of his palace while it was being built; and that one evening, while he gazed at the river, something happened to make him feel at peace with the world, and he was so moved by the moment and all that was associated with it, that he decided to build his private pavilion at that spot, inscribing on it the line: ‘If there be a heaven on earth, it is this, it is this.’

Such moments come to each of us—moments when we feel deeply moved or inspired, moments when time seems to stand still… They come but rarely, as small miracles, like the fragrance of the first summer ram on parched earth, or the song of the whistling-thrush emerging like a sweet secret from a dark forest; moments when heaven is *here,* compensating for the irritations and petty disasters that we create around ourselves each day.

When I was only 17, I wanted desperately to be a writer. My early efforts did not meet with much success, and my relatives discouraged me. At that time I was living and working in the Channel Islands in the UK. Late one evening, when I was feeling particularly discouraged, I went for a walk along the seafront. The tide was in, the sea was rough; and the wind, which was almost a gale, came pouring in from the darkness like a mad genie just released from his bottle. Great waves crashed against the sea-wall, and the wind whipped the salt spray across my face. I was alone in a wild wasteland of wind and water. And then something touched me, something from the elements took hold of my heart, and all the depression left me, and I felt free and as virile as the wind—quite capable of building my own fort, my own pavilion of words. And I spoke to the genie in the swirling darkness and said, ‘I *will* be a writer, and no one can stop me!’

Well, 30 years later, the writing is still going on, and it is still a struggle; but whenever I feel like giving up, I try to recapture that moment when heaven and

earth and I were all one; and then the writing begins again.

Almost always, it's the unexpected that thrills us. It may only be a shaft of sunlight, slanting through the pillars of banyan tree; or dewdrops caught in a spider's web; or, in the stillness of the mountains, the sudden chattter of a mountain stream as you round the bend of a hill; or an emperor's first glimpse of a winding river and the world beyond.

Time, place and emotion must coalesce, hence the rarity of these occasions. Delight cannot be planned for—she makes no appointments!

Street of the Red Well

The sun beats down on the sweltering city of Old Delhi. Not a breath of air stirs in the narrow, winding streets. This old Walled City, now over 300 years old, has no open spaces, no sidewalks, no shady avenues. During the reign of Emperor Shah Jahan, a canal ran down the centre of the main throughfare, Chandni chowk (street of the silversmiths), but the canal has long since been covered over, and the Yamuna river, from which water has been channelled, lies beyond the emperor's fort, the Red Fort of Delhi, where the Prime Minister speaks to the multitude every year on independence Day.

It is not water that I seek most, but shelter and heat from the heat and glare of the overhead sun. I have chosen what is quite possibly the hottest day in May, the temperature over 105 degrees Fahrenheit, to go walking in search of—what? A story, perhaps, and adventure. Or that is what I set out to do. The heat of the day has willed otherwise. I may be ready for an adventure, but no one else is interested. I am the only one walking the streets from choice.

Shopkeepers nod drowsily beneath whirring ceiling-fans. The pavement barber has taken his customer into the shelter of an awning. A fortune-teller has decided that there is nothing to predict and has fallen asleep under the same awning. A vegetable seller sprinkles water on his vegetables in a dispirited fashion. Those cauliflowers were fresh an hour ago: they look old already. Even the flies are drowsy. Instead of buzzing feverishly from place to place, they stagger about on tired legs.

It is the pigeons who have found all the coolest places. These birds have made the old city their own. New Delhi is for the crows who like to have a tree to sleep in, ever, if they take their meals from out of kitchens and verandahs But the pigeons prefer buildings and the older the buildings the better. They are familiar with every cool alcove or shady recess in the crumbling walls of neglected mosques and mansions.

A fat, supercilious pigeon watches me from the window ledge above a jeweller's shop. The pigeon's forebears settled here long before the British thought of taking Delhi. Conquerors have come and gone, Nadir Shah the Persian, Madhav Rao the Maratha, Gulam Kadir the Rohilla, and generations of goldsmiths and silversmiths. Hindus and Muslims have made and lost fortunes in the city, but nothing has disturbed the tranquil life of these pigeons. Their gentle

cooing can always be heard when there is a lull in the jagged symphony of traffic noise. How do they manage to sound so cool?

But here's welcome relief for humans; a shady corner in Lal Kuan bazaar, (street of the Red Well), where an old man provides drinking water to thirsty wayfarers such as myself. His water is stored in a surahi, an earthenware jug which keeps the water sweet and cool. I bend down, cup my hands, and receive the sparkling liquid as my benefactor tilts the surahi towards me.

Lal Kuan. The Red Well. Of course it is no longer here, but the street still bears its name. And I like to think that here, in the middle of the street, where a bullock has gone to sleep forcing the cyclists to make a detour, there was once a well made of dark red brick, where the water bubbled forth all day. Imprisoned beneath the soil, held down by the crowded commercial houses of this old quarter, the water must still be there; it gives nourishment to an old peepul tree that grows beside a temple. It is the only tree in the street. It juts out from the temple wall growing straight and tall, dwarfing the two-storeyed houses. One of its roots, breaking throughout the ground, has curled up to provide a smooth, well-worn seat. And it is cool here, beneath the peepul. Even when there is no breeze, the slender heart-shaped leaves revolve prettily. Creating their own currents of air. No wonder the sages of old found it a good tree to sit beneath, and no wonder they called it sacred.

On the other side of the road, a tall iron doorway is set in a high wall. Doors like this were only built in the previous century, when a wealthy merchant's house had to be a miniature fortress as well as a residence. I cannot see over the wall and I would like to know what lies behind the door. Perhaps a side street, perhaps a market, perhaps a garden, perhaps.

The door opens, not easily, because it had been left closed for a long time, but slowly and with much complaint. And beyond the door there is only an empty courtyard, cohered with rubble, the ruins of the old house. I am about to turn away when I hear a deep tremendous murmur.

It is the cooing of many pigeons. But where are they?

I advance further into the ruin, and there, opening out in front of me, ready to receive me as the rabbit-hole was ready to receive Alice, is an old, disused well. I peer down into its murky depths. It is dark, very dark down there; but that is where the pigeons live, in the walls of this lost, long forgotten well shut away from the rest of the city. I cannot see any water. So I drop a pebble over the side. It strikes the wall, and then, with a soft plop, touches water. At that instant there is a rush of air and a tremendous beating of wings, and a flock of pigeons. Thirty or forty of them fly out of the well, streak upwards, circle the building, and then falling into formation, wheel overhead, the sun gleaming white on their

underwings.

I have discovered their secret. Now I know why they look so cool, so refreshed, while we who walk the streets of old delhi do so with parched mouths and drooping limbs. The pigeons are the only ones who still know about the Red Well.

Once You have Lived with Mountains

It was while I was living in England in the jostle and drizzle of London, that I remembered the Himalayas at their most vivid. I had grown up amongst those great blue and brown mountains, they had nourished my blood, and though I was separated from them by thousands of miles of ocean, plain and desert, I could not forget them. It is always the same with mountains. Once you have lived with them for any length of time, you belong to them. There is no escape.

And so, in London in March, the fog became a mountain mist and the boom of traffic became the boom of the Ganges emerging from the foothills. I remembered a little mountain path which led my restless feet into a cool sweet forest of oak and rhododendron and then on to the windswept crest of a naked hilltop. The hill was called Cloud's End. It commanded a view of the plains on one side, and of the snow peaks on the other. Little silver rivers twisted across the valley below, where the rice fields formed a patchwork of emerald green. And on the hill itself the wind made a 'hoo-hoo-hoo' in the branches of the tall deodars where it found itself trapped. During the rains, clouds enveloped the valley but left the hills alone, an island in the sky. Wild sorrel grew among the rocks, and there were many flowers—convolvulus, clover, wild begonia, dandelion—sprinkling the hillside.

On a spur of the hill stood the ruins of an old building, the roof of which had long since disappeared and the rain had beaten the stone floors smooth and yellow. Moss, ferns and Maidenhair grew from the walls. In a hollow beneath a flight of worn stone steps a wild cat had made its home. It was a beautiful grey creature, black-striped with pale great eyes. Sometimes it watched me from the steps or the wall, but it never came near.

No one lived on the hill, except occasionally a coal-burner in a temporary grass thatched hut. But villagers used the path for grazing their sheep and cattle on the grassy slopes. Each cow or sheep had a bell suspended from its neck to let the shepherd boy know its whereabouts.

The boy could then lie in the sun and eat wild strawberries without fear of losing his animals. I remembered some of the shepherd boys and girls. There was a boy who played the flute. Its rough, sweet, straightforward notes travelled clearly through the mountain air. He would greet me with a nod of his head, without taking the flute from his lips.

There was a girl who was nearly always cutting grass for fodder. She wore heavy bangles on her feet and long silver earrings. She did not speak much either, but she always had a wide smile on her face when she met me on the path. She used to sing to herself, or to the sheep, or to the grass, or to the sickle in her hand. And there was a boy who carried milk into town (a distance of about five miles) who would often fall into step with me to hold a long conversation. He had never been away from the hills or in a large city. He had never been on a train.

I told him about the cities and he told me about his village, how they made bread from maize, how fish were to be caught in the mountain streams, how the bears came to steal his father's pumpkins. Whenever the pumpkins were ripe, he told me, the bears would come and carry them off. These things I remembered—these, and the smell of pine needles, the silver of oak leaves and the red of maple, the call of the Himalayan cuckoo, and the mist, like a wet face-cloth, pressing against the hills.

Odd, how some little incident, some snatch of conversation comes back to one again and again in the most unlikely places. Standing in the aisle of a crowded tube train on a Monday morning, my nose tucked into the back page of someone else's newspaper, I suddenly had a vision of a bear making off with a ripe pumpkin! A bear and a pumpkin—and there, between Belsize Park and the Tottenham Court Road station, all the smells and sounds of the Himalayas came rushing back to me.

In the Garden of My Dreams

The cosmos has all the genius of simplicity. The plant stands tall and erect; its foliage is uncomplicated, its inflorescence are bold, fresh, cheerful. Any flower, from a rose to a rhododendron, can be complicated. The cosmos is splendidly simple.

No wonder it takes its name from the Greek ‘cosmos’, meaning the universe as an ordered whole—the sum total of experience! For this unpretentious flower does seem to sum it all up: perfection without apparent striving for it, the artistry of the South American footballer! Needless to say, it came from tropical America.

And growing it is no trouble. A handful of seeds thrown in a waste patch or on a grassy hill slope, and a few months later there they are, en masse, doing their samba in the sunshine. They are almost wild, but not quite. They need very little attention, but if you take them too much for granted they will go away the following year. Simple they may be, but not insensitive. They need plenty of space. And as my own small apartment cannot accommodate them, they definitely belong to my dream garden.

My respect for the cosmos goes back to my childhood when I wandered into what seemed like a forest of these flowers, all twice my height (I must have been five at the time) but looking down on me in the friendliest way, their fine feathery foliage giving off a faint aroma. Now when I find them flowering on the Himalayan hillsides in mellow October sunshine, they are like old friends and I greet them accordingly, pressing my face to their petals.

Not everyone likes the cosmos. I have met some upper-class ladies (golf club members) who complain that it gives them hay fever, and they use this as an excuse to root out all cosmos from their gardens. I expect they are just being snobbish. There are other flowers which give off just as much pollen dust.

I have noticed the same snobbishness in regard to marigolds, especially the smaller Indian variety. ‘Cultivated’ people won’t cultivate these humble but attractive flowers. Is it because they are used for making garlands? Or because they are not delicately scented? Or because they are so easily grown in the backyards of homes?

My grandparents once went to war with each other over the marigold. Grandfather had grown a few in one corner of the garden. Just as they began

flowering, they vanished—Granny had removed them overnight! There was a row, and my grandparents did not speak to each other for several days. Then, by calling them ‘French’ marigolds, Grandfather managed to reintroduce them to the garden. Granny liked the idea of having something ‘French’ in her garden. Such is human nature!

Sometimes a wildflower can put its more spectacular garden cousins to shame. I am thinking now of the Commelina, which I discover in secret places after the rains have passed. Its bright sky-blue flowers take my breath away. It has a sort of unguarded innocence that is beyond corruption.

Wild roses give me more pleasure than the sophisticated domestic variety. On a walk in the Himalayan foothills I have encountered a number of these shrubs and climbers—the ineptly named Dog Rose, sparkling white in summer; the Sweet Briar with its deep pink petals and bright red rosehips; the Trailing Rose, found in shady places; and the wild Raspberry (the fruit more attractive than the flower) which belongs to the same family.

A sun-lover, I like plenty of yellow on the hillsides and in gardens—sunflowers, Californian poppies, winter jasmine, St John’s Wort, buttercups, wild strawberries, mustard in bloom… But if you live in a hot place, you might prefer cooling blues and soft purples—forget-me-not, bluebells, cornflowers, lavender. I’d go far for a sprig of sweetly-scented lavender. To many older people the word lavender is charm; it seems to recall the plaintive strain of once familiar music—

Lavender blue, dilly dilly,
Lavender green,
When I am king, dilly dilly,
You’ll be my queen.

This tame-looking, blue-green, stiff, sticky, and immovable shrub holds as much poetry and romance in its wiry arms as would fill a large book.

Most cultivated flowers were originally wild, and many take their names from the botanists who first ‘tamed’ them. Thus, the dahlia is named after Mr Dahl, a Swede; the rudbeckia after Rudbeck, a Dutchman; the zinnia after Dr Zinn, a German; and the lobelia after Monsieur Lobel, a Flemish physician. They and others brought to Europe many of the flowers found growing wild in tropical America, Asia and Africa.

But I am no botanist. I prefer to be the butterfly, perfectly happy in going from flower to flower in search of nectar.

Ferns in Foliage

At the bottom of the hill there is a small rippling stream, its water almost hidden by the bright green, tangled growth along its course. It is only by its sound as it batters over the pebbles, that we become aware of it. Here we came across many plants that delight to grow in such places—wild strawberries, wood sorrel, orchids, violets and dandelions, and a nest of ferns.

The first thing one notices is a beautiful group of ferns growing almost to the water. This is the Lady Fern, whose broad fronds must be four to five feet high, a delicate plant, frail and almost transparent in the fineness of its foliage, and looking so tender that you would think the sun and wind would almost scorch or shrivel it up. But the abundant supply of flowing water keeps these ferns cool and fresh.

When the frosts of winter come, the fronds will crumple up into a heap of brown fragments. But their strength has by that time returned into the thick clump of roots to be stored and used for a still finer group of fronds next year.

In the moist parts of any forest there are sure to be several other kinds of ferns such as the Male Fern, with its strong, upright fronds looking like a large green shuttlecock three feet high. One of the commonest of Indian ferns is the Maidenhair which grows along the west coast and in the Himalayan foothills. During the monsoon, it can be found on almost every wall and rock—a delicate, tender fern, easily torn by the wind.

On the stump of a fallen tree grow the Picklytoothed Buckler fern and the Board Buckler fern, whose rootlets penetrate the soft, rotting wood to obtain their moisture. They are hardy, often remaining green all through the winter. The handsome Bracken fern often grows to a height of six or seven feet.

Then there is the lovely Hart’s tongue fern, great clumps of which grow beside the forest paths. It has broad, green crinkled fronds and is quite unlike other ferns. If you look at the back of the fronds you will see from the little heaps of rust-coloured spore cases, that this is indeed a fern; all ferns grow their seeds in this way.

There are several hundred varieties of ferns. They are easily pressed and preserved. They may also be grown indoors in pots. But they are loveliest in the open, in cool, damp places, in the depths of the forest or by the side of a mountain stream.

The history of ferns goes back to the mists of antiquity. There was a time when ferns and plants like them filled the earth. It was a wet and dripping time. Flowers would have been of no use at all but spores could carry on their lives in the prevailing dampness. Some ferns grew as large as trees. The falling stems of these mighty tree ferns were floated together by mighty streams, carried away to the sea and buried under sand and mud. The remains of these plants being thus shut off from the air, could not rot but were slowly changed into coal. The impressions of leaves and stems of these ferns can be distinctively seen on many pieces of coal.

As the earth became drier, ferns retired to the damp, shady spots in which we now find them. They are a declining family but let us hope they will remain with us for some time, for a forest stream without ferns would be like a maiden whose loveliest tresses have been shorn.

Birds on Tap

In spite of several written requests to the municipality, no one came to repair the leaking water-pipe. Gradually the water began seeping through the hillside, collecting in a rocky basin below the cottage. At first I was perturbed; then, when I found that the birds were coming to the pool to bathe and drink, I stopped sending reminders to the municipality.

Before the leak, bird-watching had usually meant a long trudge down to the stream at the bottom of the hill. Now that the birds were coming to me, I could simply sit at my first-floor window and look down at them sporting in the tap-water pool.

The most frequent visitor was the Himalayan whistling-thrush. On summer afternoons I woke from my siesta to hear the splashing of water and flapping of wings, and, looking down, was in time to watch this splendid blue-black bird at his ablutions. Returning to the trees to dry himself, he would burst into song, a song indescribably sweet and melodic, one of the loveliest sounds in the forest.

THE TITS

Later in the afternoon, numbers of small birds visited the tap-water pool: hunting-parties of tits—greytits, red-headed tits, and green-backed tits—and a pair of tiny willow-warblers, their chirping just a fairy tinkle. While the tits were bathing, the warblers would wait in the cherry tree, passing the time by attacking the sour red fruit of the wild cherry.

The various kinds of tits did not fraternise much with each other; nor did they squabble. While the green-backs took their plunge, the red-heads waited patiently on the moss-covered rocks. I thought they showed more discipline than a crowd of people at a city water-tap. But the mynas who are the dacoits of the bird-world, would turn up before long and drive the smaller birds away.

A DUET

Since the pre-monsoon showers began, the tap-water pool has attracted other visitors. It began with one frog croaking dismally in the darker reaches of the night. Next day his loneliness was alleviated by the arrival of a friend or relative. They sang a duet. I thought it was Puccini's 'Your tiny hand is frozen…' On the

following night there were several singers, both Indian and Western, and some of them seemed to have brought their tablas along, too. Now, a week later, there is an all-night Pop festival in progress beneath my window.

I could, I suppose, collect the frogs in a bucket and deposit them near the stream; but others would probably take their place. I could even start a frog farm, and make a fortune exporting frogs' legs to France; but what's a fortune compared to one's peace of mind? As much as I like to have the birds by day, having frogs by night is too heavy a price to pay. So once again I sit down to pen a missive to the municipality, urging them to send someone to repair the leaking water-pipe. Bird-song is wonderful; but frog-song is strictly for the birds.

In Defence of Snakes

It is difficult to understand the reasons for people reacting in such a petrified way to the presence of a snake on the road, in the garden, or on the back verandah. After first freezing with fright, and then discovering that the snake has no evil intentions, humans become very brave indeed, shouting ‘Snake, snake!’ until other humans arrive, armed with stout sticks. And if by that time the snake has not made itself scarce, it is beaten to death.

I suppose it all has something to do with the story of the devil taking the form of a serpent in order to tempt Eve. But Eve would have fallen, anyway, regardless of what earthly form the devil took.

Poor dead snake! All that it ever intended was to bask in the sun for a few minutes between showers, and, if possible, snap up a dallying frog. Instead it finds itself surrounded by a group of terrified and terrifying humans, all determined to put an end to its existence.

Most of the snakes that are killed in this way are perfectly harmless specimens. Of the 300 different species in India, there are only 40 which may be considered dangerous, and of these there are just five which can kill a healthy, grown man. All snakes are poisonous, but some snakes are more poisonous than others. Most of them carry just enough venom to paralyse their natural prey, which consists of frogs, rats, birds, earthworms and smaller snakes. Pythons don’t need any venom. Once they have taken a firm grip on you, they simply squeeze away until all your bones are crushed; and then they start swallowing—preferably starting with the head. But pythons don’t need more than two or three good meals in a year, so you are quite safe with a pet python provided you don’t starve it.

But even a dangerous snake won’t attack you unless it is trodden upon, or in some way provoked. One hears of thousands of people dying from snakebite every year. If this is true, then it is due more to human carelessness than to reptilian aggressiveness. I have yet to come across a victim of snakebite; and I have yet to come across a snake who showed the least inclination to bite me. (As compared to scorpions and centipedes, who can be quite vicious.) After all, snakes kill mainly in order to eat; and no snake that I know of (except, of course, the amiable python) is greedy enough, or large enough, to want to swallow me in my entirety.

My tolerance towards snakes has not gone unrewarded. I have noticed a significant reduction in the frog population. The operatic warbling that kept me awake at night has ceased, and I sleep in peace. I am even thinking of allowing the green snake into the house occasionally, to see if it will rid me of the field-rats who have taken up residence for the duration of the monsoon. I have nothing to lose. My friends have already stopped coming to see me; but so have my creditors.

A Marriage of the Waters

In summer the grass on the hills is still a pale yellowish green, tinged with brown, and that is how it remains until the monsoon rains bring new life to everything that subsists on the stony Himalayan soil. And then, for four months, the hills are deep and dark and emerald bright

But the other day, taking a narrow path that left the dry Mussoorie ridge to link up with Pari Tibba (Fairy Hill), I ran across a path of lush green grass, and I knew there had to be water there.

The grass was soft and springy, spotted with the crimson of small, wild strawberries. Delicate Maidenhair, my favourite fern, grew from a cluster of moist, glistening rocks. Moving the ferns a little, I discovered the spring, a freshet of clear sparkling water.

I never cease to wonder at the tenacity of water—its ability to make its way through various strata of rock, zigzagging, back tracking, finding space, cunningly discovering faults and fissures in the mountain, and sometimes travelling underground for great distance before emerging into the open. Of course, there’s no stopping water. For no matter how tiny that little trickle, it has to go somewhere!

Like this little spring. At first I thought it was too small to go anywhere, that it would dry up at the edge of the path. Then I discovered that the grass remained soft and green for some distance along the verge, and that there was moisture beneath the grass. This wet stretch ended abruptly; but, on looking further, I saw it continued on the other side of the path, after briefly going underground again.

I decided to follow its fortunes as it disappeared beneath a tunnel of tall grass and bracken fern. Slithering down a stony slope, I found myself in a small ravine, and there I discovered that my little spring had grown, having been joined by the waters of another spring bubbling up from beneath a path of primroses.

A short distance away, a spotted forktail stood on a rock, surveying this marriage of the waters. His long, forked tail moved slowly up and down. He paid no attention to me, being totally absorbed in the movements of a water spider. A swift peck, and the spider vanished, completing the bird’s breakfast. Thirsty, I cupped my hands and drank a little water. So did the forktail. We had a perennial supply of pure pure water all to ourselves!

There was now a rivulet to follow, and I continued down the ravine until I came to a small pool that was fed not only by my brook (I was already thinking of it as my very own!) but also by a little cascade of water coming down from a rocky ledge. I climbed a little way up the rocks and entered a small cave, in which there was just enough space for crouching down. Water dripped and trickled off its roof and sides. And most wonderful of all, some of these drops created tiny rainbows, for a ray of sunlight had struck through a crevice in the cave roof making the droplets of moisture radiant with all the colours of the spectrum.

When I emerged from the cave, I saw a pair of pine martens drinking at the pool. As soon as they saw me, they were up and away, bounding across the ravine and into the trees.

The brook was now a small stream, but I could not follow it much farther, because the hill went into a steep decline and the water tumbled over large, slippery boulders, becoming a waterfall and then a noisy little torrent as it sped toward the valley.

Climbing up the sides of the ravine to the spur of Pari Tibba, I could see the distant silver of a meandering river and I knew my little stream was destined to become part of it; and that the river would be joined by another that could be seen slipping over the far horizon, and that their combined waters would enter the great Ganga, or Ganges, farther downstream.

This mighty river would, in turn, wander over the rich alluvial plains of northern India, finally flowing into the ocean near the Bay of Bengal.

And the ocean, what was it but another droplet in the universe, in the greater scheme of things? No greater than the glistening drop of water that helped start it all, where the grass grows greener around my little spring on the mountain.

Best of All Windows

Those who advertise rooms or flats to let often describe them as 'Room with bath' or 'Room with tea and coffee-making facilities'. A more attractive proposition would be 'Room with window', for without a view a room is hardly a living place—merely a place of transit.

As an itinerant young writer, I lived in many single room apartments, or bedsitters as they were called, and I have to admit that the quality of my life was certainly enhanced if my window looked out on something a little more inspiring than a factory wall or someone's backyard. We cherish a romantic image of a starving young poet living in a garret and writing odes to skylarks, but, believe me, garrets don't help. For six months in London I lived in a small attic room which had no view at all, except for the roofs of other houses—an endless vista of grey tiles and blackened chimneys, without so much as a proverbial cat to relieve the monotony. I did not write a single ode, for no self-respecting nightingale or lark ever found its way up there.

My next room, somewhere near Clapham Junction, had a view of the railway, but you couldn't actually see the railway lines because of the rows of washing that were hung out to dry behind the building. It was a working class area and there were no laundries round the corner. But if you couldn't see the railway, you could certainly hear it. Every time a train thundered past, the building shuddered, and ornaments, crockery and dishes rattled and rocked as though an earthquake was in progress. It was impossible to hang a picture on the wall, the nail (and with it the picture) fell out after a couple of days. But it reminded me a bit of my Uncle Fred's railway quarters just near Delhi-main railway station, and I managed to write a couple of train stories while living in this particular room.

Train windows, naturally, have no equal when it comes to views, especially in India, where there's an ever-changing panorama of mountain, forest and desert, village, town and city, along with the colourful crowds at every railway station.

But good, personal windows—windows to live with—these were to prove elusive for several years. Even after returning to India, I had some difficulty in finding the ideal window.

Moving briefly to a small town in north India, I was directed to the Park

View lodging-house. There did happen to be a park in the vicinity, but no view of it could be had from my room or, indeed, from any room in the house. But I found, to my surprise, that the bathroom window actually looked out on the park. It provided a fine view! However, there is a limit to the length of time one can spend in the bath, gazing out at palm fronds waving in the distance. So I moved on again.

After a couple of claustrophobic years in New Delhi, I escaped to the hills, fully expecting that I would immediately find rooms or a cottage with widows facing the eternal snows. But it was not to be! To see the snows I had to walk four miles from my lodgings to the highest point in the hill-station. My window looked out on a high stone rampart, built to prevent the steep hillside from collapsing. True, a number of wild things grew in the wall—bunches of red sorrel, dandelions, tough weeds of various kinds, and, at the base, a large clump of nettles. Now I am sure there are people who can grow ecstatic over nettles, but I am not one of them. I find that nettles sting me at the first opportunity. So I gave my nettles a wide berth.

And then, at last, fortune smiled, or rather, persistence was rewarded. I found my present abode, a windswept, rather shaky old house on the edge of a spur. My bedroom window opened on to blue skies, mountains striding away into the far distance, winding rivers in the valley below, and, just to bring me down to earth, the local television tower. Like The Red Shadow in *The Desert Song*, I could stand at my window and sing 'Blue heaven, and you and I', even if the only listener was a startled policeman.

The window was so positioned that I could lie on my bed and look at the sky, or sit at my desk and look at the hills, or stand at the window and look at the road below.

Which is the best of these views?

Some would say the hills, but the hills never change. Some would say the road, because the road is full of change and movement—tinkers, tailors, tourists, salesmen, cars, trucks and motor-cycles, mules, ponies and even, on one occasion, an elephant. The elephant had no business being up here, but I suppose if Hannibal could take them over Alps, an attempt could also be made on the Himalayan passes. (It returned to the plains the next day.)

The road is never dull, but, given a choice, I'd opt for the sky. The sky is never the same. Even when it's cloudless, the sky colours are different. The morning sky, the daytime sky, the evening sky, the moonlit sky, the starry sky, there are all different skies. And there are almost always birds in the sky—eagles flying high, mountain swifts doing acrobatics, cheeky myna birds nesting under the eaves of the roof, sparrows flitting in and out of the room at will. Sometimes

a butterfly floats in on the breeze. And on summer nights, great moths enter at the open window, dazzled by my reading-light. I have to catch them and put them out again, lest they injure themselves.

When the monsoon rains arrive, the window has to be closed, otherwise cloud and mist fill the room, and that isn't good for my books. But the sky is even more fascinating at this time of the year. From my desk I can, at this very moment, see the clouds advancing across the valley, rolling over the hills, ascending the next range. Raindrops patter against the window-panes, drum on the corrugated iron roof. The mynas line up on the window-ledge, waiting for the rain to stop.

And when the shower passes and the clouds open up, the heavens are a deeper, darker blue. Truly magic casements these… For every time I see the sky I am aware of belonging to the universe rather than to just one corner of the earth.

The Gentle Nights Befriend Me

Here in Landour, India, on the first range of the Himalayas, I have grown accustomed to the night's brightness—moonlight, starlight, lamplight, firelight! Even fireflies and glow-worms light up the darkness.

Over the years, the night has become my friend. On the one hand, it gives me privacy; on the other, it provides me with limitless freedom.

Not many people relish the dark. Some even sleep with their lights burning all night. They feel safer with the lights on. Safer from the phantoms conjured up by their imaginations.

And yet, I have always felt safer by night, provided I do not deliberately wander about on cliff-tops or roads where danger may lurk. It's true that burglars and other lawbreakers often work by night. They are not into communing with the stars. Nor are late-night revelers, who are usually to be found in brightly lit places and so are easily avoided.

I feel safer by night, yes, but then I have the advantage of living in the mountains, in a region where crime is comparatively rare. I know that if I were living in a big city in some other part of the world, I would think twice about walking home at midnight, no matter how pleasing the night sky.

Walking home at midnight in Landour can be quite eventful, but in a different way. One is conscious all the time of the silent life in the surrounding trees and bushes. I have smelled a leopard without seeing it. I have seen jackals on the prowl. I have watched foxes dance in the moonlight. I have seen flying squirrels flit from one treetop to another. I have observed pine martens on their nocturnal journeys, and listened to the calls of nightjars, owls and other birds who live by night.

Not all on the same night, of course. That would be too many riches at once. Some night walks are uneventful. But usually there is something to see or hear or sense. Like those foxes dancing in the moonlight.

Who else, apart from foxes, flying squirrels and night-loving writers, are at home in the dark?

The nightjars, for one. They aren't much to look at, although their large, lustrous eyes gleam uncannily in the light of a lamp. But their sounds are distinctive. The breeding call of the Indian nightjar resembles the sound of a stone skimming over the surface of a frozen pond; it can be heard for a

considerable distance.

Another nightjar species utters a loud grating call which, when close at hand, sounds exactly like a whiplash cutting the air. Horsfield's nightjar (with which I am more familiar) makes a noise similar to that made by striking a plank with a hammer.

I must not forget the owls, those most celebrated of night birds, much maligned by those who fear the night.

Most owls have very pleasant calls. The little jungle owlet has a note that is both mellow and musical. One misguided writer has likened its call to a motorcycle starting up, but this is libel. If only motorcycles sounded like the jungle owl, the world would be a more peaceful place in which to live and sleep.

The little Scops owl speaks only in monosyllables, occasionally saying 'wow' softly, but with great deliberation. He will continue to say 'wow' at intervals of about a minute for hours throughout the night.

Probably the most familiar of Indian owls is the spotted owlet—a noisy bird that pours forth a volley of chuckles and squeaks in the early evening and at intervals all night. Toward sunset, I watch the owlets emerge from their holes, one after another. Before they come out, they stick out their queer little round heads with staring eyes. After emerging, they usually sit very quietly for a time as though only half awake. Then, all of a sudden, they begin to chuckle, finally breaking into a torrent of chattering. Having apparently 'psyched' themselves into the right frame of mind, they spread their short, rounded wings and sail off for the night's hunting.

I wend my way homeward. 'Night with her train of stars' is enticing. The English poet W.E. Henley found her so. But he also wrote of 'her great gift of sleep', and it is this gift that I am about to accept with gratitude and humility. For it is also good to be up and dancing in the morning dew.

A House Called Ivanhoe

‘Stand still for ten minutes, and they’ll build a hotel on top of you,’ said one old-timer, gesturing towards the concrete jungle that had sprung up along Mussoorie’s Mall, the traditional promenade. This hill-station in northern India is now one long, ugly bazaar, but if you leave the Mall and walk along some of the old lanes and by-ways, you will come across many of the old houses, most of them still bearing the names they were born with, back in the mid-nineteenth century.

Mussoorie, like other hill resorts in India, came into existence in the 1820s or thereabouts, when the families of British colonials began making for the hills in order to escape the scorching heat of the plains. Small settlements grew into large ‘stations’, and were soon vying with each other for the title of ‘Queen of the Hills’. Mussoorie’s name derives from the Mansur shrub (Cororiana nepalensis), common in the Himalayan foothills; but many of the house-names derive from the native places of those who first built and lived in them. Today, the old houses and estates are owned by well-to-do Indians, many of whom follow the lifestyle of their former colonial rulers. In most cases, the old names have been retained.

Take, for instance, the Mullingar. This is not one of the better preserved buildings, having been under litigation for some years; but it was a fine mansion once, and it has the distinction of being the oldest building in Mussoorie. It was the home, naturally enough, of an Irishman, Captain Young, who commanded the first Gurkha battalion when it was in its infancy. As you have probably guessed, he came from Mullingar, in old Ireland, and it was to Ireland that he finally returned, when he gave up his sword and saddle. There is a story that on moonlit nights a ghostly rider can be seen on the Mullingar flat, and that this is Captain Young revisiting old haunts.

There must have been a number of Irishmen settling and building in Mussoorie in those pioneering days, for there are houses with names such as Tipperary, Killarney, Shamrock Cottage and Tara Hall. ‘The harp that once in Tara’s Halls’ must have sounded in Shimla too, for there is also a Tara Hall in the old summer capital of India.

As everywhere, the Scots were great pioneers in Mussoorie too, and were quick to identify Himalayan hills and meadows with their own glens and braes.

There are over a dozen house-names prefixed with ‘Glen’, and close to where I live there is a Scottsburn, a Wolfsburn and a Redburn. A burn is a small stream, but there are none in the vicinity, so the names must have been given for purely sentimental reasons.

The English, of course, went in for castles—there’s Connaught Castle and Grey Castle and The Castle Hill, home for a time to the young Sikh prince, Dalip Singh, before he went to England to become a protege of Queen Victoria.

Sir Walter Scott must have been a very popular writer with the British in exile, for there are many houses in Mussoorie that were named after his novels and romances—*Kenilworth, Ivanhoe, Waverley, The Monastery.* And there is also Abbotsford, named after Scott’s own home.

Dickens’ lovers must have felt frustrated, because they could hardly name their houses *Nicholas Nickleby* or *Martin Chuzzlewit;* but one Dickens fan did come up with *Bleak House* for a name, and bleak it is, even to this day. I have never had the money to buy or build a house of my own, but I am ever the optimist, and if ever I do have one, I shall call it *Great Expectations.*

Mussoorie did have a Dickens connection in 1850, when Charles Dickens was publishing his magazine, *Household Words.* His correspondent in India was John Lang, a popular novelist and newspaper proprietor, who spent the last years of his life in Mussoorie. His diverting account of a typical Mussoorie ‘season’, called ‘The Himalaya Club’, appeared in *Household Words* in the issue of March 21, 1857. Recently I was able to obtain a copy from the British Museum.

I haven’t been able to locate the house in which Lang lived, but from one of his descriptions it may have been White Park Forest, now practically a ruin. The name is another puzzle, because of park or forest there is no trace. But on looking up an old guide, I discovered that it had been named after its joint owners, Mr White, Mr Park and Mr Forest.

It is well over 50 years since a parson lived in The Parsonage, and its owner today is Victor Banerji, the actor, who received an Academy award nomination for his role in David Lean’s A Passage to India. Victor doesn’t mind his friends calling him the Vicar.

Another name that puzzled me for a time was that of the old Charleville Hotel, now an academy for young civil servants. Was it French in its origins? Most of the locals always referred to it as the ‘Charley-Billy’ Hotel, which I thought was an obvious misprounciation; but the laugh was really on me. According to the records, the original owner had two sons, Charley and Billy, and he had named the hotel after them!

This naming of places is never as simple as it may seem. I shall end this piece with Mossy Falls, a small waterfall on the outskirts of the hill-station. You

might think it was named after the moss that is so plentiful around it, but you’d be wrong. It was really named after Mr Moss, the owner of the Alliance Bank, who was affectionately known as Mossy to his friends. When, at the turn of the century, the Alliance Bank collapsed, Mr Moss also fell from grace. ‘Poor old Mossy,’ said his friends, and promptly named the falls after him.

Growing Up with Trees

Dehra Dun was a place for trees, (and Grandfather's house was surrounded by several kinds—peepul, neem, mango, jackfruit and papaya. There was also an ancient banyan tree. I grew up amongst these trees, and some of them, planted by Grandfather, grew with me.

There were two types of trees that were of special interest to a boy—trees that were good for climbing, and trees that provided fruit.

The jackfruit tree was both these things. The fruit itself—the largest in the world—grew only on the trunk and main branches. I did not care much for the fruit, although cooked as a vegetable it made a good curry. But the tree was large and leafy and easy to climb. It was a very dark tree and if I hid in it, I could not easily be seen from below. In a hole in the tree-trunk I kept various banned items—a catapult, some lurid comics, and a large stock of chewing-gum. Perhaps they are still there, because I forgot to collect them when we finally went away.

The banyan tree grew behind the house. Its spreading branches, which hung to the ground and took root again, formed a number of twisting passageways which gave me endless pleasure. The tree was older than the house, older than my grandparents, as old as Dehra. I could hide myself in its branches, behind thick green leaves, and spy on the world below. I could read in it, too, propped up against the bole of the tree, with *Treasure Island* or the *Jungle Books* or comics like *Wizard* or *Hotspur* which, unlike the forbidden Superman and others like him, were full of clean-cut schoolboy heroes.

The banyan tree was a world in itself, populated with small beasts and large insects. While the leaves were still pink and tender, they would be visited by the delicate Map Butterfly, who committed her eggs to their care. The 'hony' on the leaves—an edible smear—also attracted the little striped squirrels, who soon grew used to my presence and became quite bold. Redheaded parrakeets swarmed about the tree early in the mornings.

But the banyan really came to life during the monsoon, when the branches were thick with scarlet figs. These berries were not fit for human consumption, but the many birds that gathered in the tree—gossipy Rosy Pastors, quarrelsome Mynas, cheerful Bulbuls and Coppersmiths, and sometimes a raucous bullying crow—feasted on them. And when night fell, and the birds were resting, the dark Flying Foxes flapped heavily about the tree, chewing and munching as they

clambered over the branches.

Among nocturnal visitors to the jackfruit and banyan trees was the Brainfever bird, whose real name is the Hawk-Cuckoo. ‘Brainfever, brainfever!’ it seems to call, and this shrill, nagging cry will keep the soundest of sleepers awake on a hot summer’s night.

The British called it the Brainfever bird, but there are other names for it. The Mahrattas called it Paos-ala’ which means ‘Rain is coming!’ Perhaps Grandfather’s interpretation of its call was the best. According to him, when the bird was tuning up for its main concert, it seemed to say: ‘Oh dear, oh dear! How very hot it’s getting! we feel it… we FEEL IT … WE FEEL IT!’

Yes, the banyan tree was a noisy place during the rains. If the Brainfever bird made music by night, the crickets and cicadas orchestrated during the day. As musicians, the cicadas were in a class by themselves. All through the hot weather their chorus rang through the garden, while a shower of rain, far from damping their spirits, only roused them to a greater vocal effort.

The tree-crickets were a band of willing artistes who commenced their performance at almost any time of the day but preferably in the evenings. Delicate pale green creatures with transparent green wings, they were hard to find amongst the lush monsoon foliage; but once located, a tap on the leaf or bush on which they sat would put an immediate end to the performance.

At the height of the monsoon, the banyan tree was like an orchestra-pit with the musicians constantly turning up. Birds, insects and squirrels expressed their joy at the end of the hot weather and the cool quenching relief or the rains.

A flute in my hands, I would try adding my shrill piping to theirs. But they thought poorly of my musical ability, for, whenever I played on the flute, the birds and insects would subside into a pained and puzzled silence.

A Boy and a River

Between the boy and the river was a mountain. I was a small boy, and it was a small river, but the thickly forested mountain was big and hid the river. Yet I knew it was there and what it looked like. I had never seen the river with my own eyes, but from the villagers I had heard of it, of the fish in its waters, of its rocks and currents and waterfalls; and it only remained for me to touch the water and know it personally.

I stood in front of our house on the hill opposite the mountain, and gazed across the valley, dreaming of the river. I was barefooted; not because I couldn't afford shoes, but because I felt free with my bare feet, because I liked the feel of warm stones and cool grass, because not wearing shoes saved me the trouble of taking them off.

It was eleven o'clock and I knew my parents wouldn't be home till evening. There was a loaf of bread I could take with me, and on the way I might find some fruit. Here was the chance I had been waiting for: it would not come again for a long time, because it was seldom my father and mother visited friends for the entire day. If I came back before dark, they wouldn't even know where I had been.

I went into the house and wrapped the loaf of bread in a newspaper. Then I closed all the doors and windows.

The path to the river dropped steeply into the valley, then rose and went round the big mountain. It was frequently used by the villagers—woodcutters, milkmen, shepherds, mule-drivers—but there were no villages beyond the mountain or near the river.

I passed a woodcutter and asked him how far it was to the river. He was a short, powerful man, with a creased and weathered face and muscles that stood out in hard lumps.

'Seven miles,' he said. 'Why do you want to know?'

'I am going there,' I said.

'Alone?'

'Of course.'

'It will take you three hours to reach it, and then you have to come back. It will be getting dark, and it is not an easy road.'

'But I'm a good walker,' I said, though I had never walked farther than the

two miles between our house and my school.

I left the woodcutter on the path and continued down the hill.

It was a dizzy, winding path, and I slipped once or twice and slid into a bush or down a slope of slippery pine-needles. The hill was covered with lush green ferns, the trees were entangled in creepers, and a great wild dahlia would suddenly rear its golden head from the leaves and ferns.

Soon I was in the valley, and the path straightened out and then began to rise. I met a girl who was coming from the opposite direction. She held a long curved knife with which she had been cutting grass, and there were rings in her nose and ears, and her arms were covered with heavy bangles. The bangles made music when she moved her wrists. It was as though her hands spoke a language of their own.

'How far is it to the river?' I asked.

The girl had probably never been to the river, or she may have been thinking of another one, because she said, without any hesitation, 'Twenty miles.'

I laughed and ran down the path. A parrot screeched suddenly and flew low over my head, a flash of blue and green. It took the course of the path, and I followed its dipping flight, running until the path rose and the bird disappeared amongst the trees.

A trickle of water came down the hillside, and I stopped to drink. The water was cold and sharp and very refreshing. But I was soon thirsty again. The sun was striking the side of the hill, and the dusty path became hotter, the stones scorching my feet. I was sure I had covered half the distance: I had been walking for over an hour.

Presently I saw a boy ahead of me, driving a few goats down the path.

'How far is it to the river?' I asked.

The village boy smiled and said, 'Oh, not far, just round the next hill and straight down.'

Feeling hungry, I unwrapped my loaf of bread and broke it in two, offering one half to the boy. We sat on the hillside and ate in silence. When we finished, we walked on together and began talking; and, talking, I did not notice the smarting of my feet and the heat of the sun and the distance I had covered and the distance I had yet to cover. But after some time my companion had to take another path, and once more I was on my own.

I missed the village boy; I looked up and down the mountain path but no one else was in sight. My own home was hidden from view by the side of the mountain, and there was no sign of the river. I began to feel discouraged. If someone had been with me, I would not have faltered; but alone, I was conscious of my fatigue and isolation.

I had come more than half way, and I couldn’t turn back; I had to see the river. If I failed, I would always be a little ashamed of the experience. So I walked on, along the hot, dusty, stony path, past stone huts and terraced fields, until there were no more fields or huts, only forest and sun and loneliness. There were no men, and no sign of man’s influence—only trees and rocks and grass and small flowers—and silence…

The silence was impressive and a little frightening. There was no movement, except for the bending of grass beneath my feet, and the circling of a hawk against the blinding blue of the sky.

Then, as I rounded a sharp bend, I heard the sound of water.

I gasped with surprise and happiness, and began to run. I slipped and stumbled, but I kept on running, until I was able to plunge into the snow-cold mountain water.

And the water was blue and white and very wonderful.

My Trees in the Himalayas

Living in a cottage at seven thousand feet in the Garhwal Himalayas, I am fortunate to have a big window that opens out on the forest so that the trees are almost within my reach. If I jumped, I could land quite neatly in the arms of an oak or horse chestnut. I have never made that leap, but the big langurs—silver-gray monkeys with long, swishing tails—often spring from the trees onto my corrugated tin roof, making enough noise to frighten all the birds away.

Standing on its own outside my window is a walnut tree, and truly this is a tree for all seasons. In winter the branches are bare, but beautifully smooth and rounded. In spring each limb produces a bright green spear of new growth, and by midsummer the entire tree is in leaf. Toward the end of the monsoon the walnuts, encased in their green jackets, have reached maturity. When the jackets begin to split, you can see the hard brown shells of the nuts, and inside each shell is the delicious meat itself.

Every year this tree gives me a basket of walnuts. But last year the nuts were disappearing one by one, and I was at a loss as to who had been taking them. Could it have been the milkman's small son? He was an inveterate tree climber, but he was usually to be found on the oak trees, gathering fodder for his herd. He admitted that his cows had enjoyed my dahlias, which they had eaten the previous week, but he stoutly denied having fed them walnuts.

It wasn't the woodpecker either. He was out there every day, knocking furiously against the bark of the tree, trying to pry an insect out of a narrow crack, but he was strictly non-vegetarian. As for the langurs, they ate my geraniums but did not care for the walnuts.

The nuts seemed to disappear early in the morning while I was still in bed, so one day I surprised everyone, including myself by getting up before sunrise. I was just in time to catch the culprit climbing out of the walnut tree. She was an old woman who sometimes came to cut grass on the hillside. Her face was as wrinkled as the walnuts she so fancied, but her arms and legs were very sturdy.

'And how many walnuts did you gather today, Grandmother?' I asked.

'Just two,' she said with a giggle, offering them to me on her open palm. I accepted one, and thus encouraged, she climbed higher into the tree and helped herself to the remaining nuts. It was impossible for me to object. I was taken with admiration for her agility. She must have been twice my age, but I knew I

could never get up that tree. To the victor, the spoils!

Unlike the prized walnuts, the horse chestnuts are inedible. Even the rhesus monkeys throw them away in disgust. But the tree itself is a friendly one, especially in summer when it is in full leaf. The lightest breeze makes the leaves break into conversation, and their rustle is a cheerful sound. The spring flowers of the horse chestnut look like candelabra, and when the blossoms fall, they carpet the hillside with their pale pink petals.

It stands erect and dignified and does not bend with the wind. In spring the new leaves, or needles, are a tender green, while during the monsoon the tiny young cones spread like blossoms in the dark green folds of the branches. The deodar enjoys the company of its own kind: where one deodar grows, there will be others. A walk in a deodar forest is awe-inspiring—surrounded on all sides by these great sentinels of the mountains, you feel as though the trees themselves are on the march.

I walk among the trees outside my window often, acknowledging their presence with a touch of my hand against their trunks. The oak has been there the longest, and the wind has bent its upper branches and twisted a few so that it looks shaggy and undistinguished. But it is a good tree for the privacy of birds. Sometimes it seems completely uninhabited until there is a whining sound, as of a helicopter approaching, and a party of long-tailed blue magpies flies across the forest glade.

Most of the pines near my home are on the next hillside. But there is a small Himalayan blue a little way below the cottage, and sometimes I sit beneath it to listen to the wind playing softly in its branches.

When I open the window at night, there is almost always something to listen to—the mellow whistle of a pygmy owlet, or the sharp cry of a barking deer. Sometimes, if I am lucky, I will see the moon coming up over the next mountain, and two distant deodars in perfect silhouette.

Some night sounds outside my window remain strange and mysterious. Perhaps they are the sounds of the trees themselves, stretching their limbs in the dark, shifting a little, flexing their fingers, whispering to one another. These great trees of the mountains, I feel they know me well, as I watch them and listen to their secrets, happy to rest my head beneath their outstretched arms.

Death of the Trees

The peace and quiet of the Maplewood hillside disappeared forever one winter. The powers-that-be decided to build another new road into the mountains and the PWD saw fit to take it right past the cottage, about six feet from the window which overlooked the forest.

In my journal I wrote—Already they have felled most of the trees. The walnut was one of the first to go. A tree I had lived with for over ten years, watching it grow as I had watched Prem's small son Rakesh grow up, looking forward to its new leaf-buds, the broad green leaves or summer turning to spears of gold in September when the walnuts were ripe and ready to fall. I knew this tree better than the others. It was just below the window where a buttress for the road is going up.

Another tree I will miss is the young deodar, the only one growing in this stretch of the woods. Some years back it was stunted from lack of sunlight. The oaks covered it with their shaggy branches, so I cut away some of the overhanging ones and after that the deodar grew much faster. It was just coming into its own this year—now cut down in its prime like my young brother on the road to Delhi last month. Both victims of the roads—the tree kilted by the PWD, my brother by a truck.

Twenty oaks have been felled just in this small stretch near the cottage. By the time this by-pass reaches Jabai khet, about six miles from here, over a thousand oaks will have been slaughtered, besides many other fine trees—maples, deodars and pines—most of them unnecessarily as they grew some fifty or sixty yards from the roadside.

The trouble is, hardly anyone (with the exception of the contractor who buys the felled trees) really believes that trees and shrubs are necessary. They get in the way so much, don't they? According to my milkman, the only useful tree is the one which can be picked clean of its leaves for fodder! And a young man remarked to me, 'You should come to Pauri. The view is terrific, there's not a tree in the way!'

Well he can stay here now and enjoy the view of the ravaged hillside. But as the oaks have gone, the milkman will have to look further afield for his fodder.

Rakesh calls the maples butterfly trees because when the winged seeds fall, they flutter like butterflies in the breeze. No maples now. No bright red leaves to

flame against the sky. No birds! That is to say, no birds near the house. No longer will it be possible for me to open the window and watch the scarlet minivets flitting through the dark green foliage of the oaks… the long-tailed magpies gliding through the trees, the barbet calling insistently from his perch on the top of the deodar. Forest birds, all of them, they will now be in search of some other stretch of surviving forest. The only visitors will be the crows who have learnt to live with and off humans and seem to multiply along with roads, houses and people. And even when all the people have gone, the crows will still be there.

Other things to look forward to—trucks thundering past in the night, perhaps a tea and pakora shop around the corner. The grinding of gears, the music of motor horns. Will the whistling thrush be heard above them? The explosions that continually shatter the silence of the mountains as thousand-year-old rocks are dynamited have frightened away all but the most intrepid of birds and animals. Even the bold langurs haven’t shown their faces for over a fortnight.

Somehow, I don’t think we shall wait for the tea shop to arrive. There must be some other quiet corner, possibly on the next mountain where new roads have yet to come into being. No doubt this is a negative attitude and if I had any sense I’d open my own tea shop. To retreat is to be a loser. But the trees are losers too and when they fall, they do so with a certain dignity.

Never mind. Men come and go, the mountains remain.

When the Monsoon Breaks

I was staying at a small hotel in Meerut, in north India. There had been no rain for a month, but the atmosphere was humid, and there were clouds overhead, dark clouds burgeoning with moisture. Thunder blossomed in the air.

The monsoon was going to break that day. I knew it; the birds knew it; the grass knew it. There was the smell of rain in the air. And the grass, the birds and I responded to this odor with the same longing.

A large drop of water hit the windowsill, darkening the thick dust on the woodwork. A faint breeze had sprung up, and again I felt the moisture, closer and warmer.

Then the rain approached like a dark curtain. I could see it moving down the street, heavy and remorseless. It drummed on the corrugated tin roof and swept across the road and over the balcony of my room. I sat there without moving, letting the rain soak my sticky shirt and gritty hair.

Outside, the street rapidly emptied. The crowd disappeared. Then buses, cars and bullock carts plowed through the suddenly rushing water. A group of small boys, gloriously naked, came romping along a side street, which was like a river in spate. A garland of marigolds, swept off the steps of a temple, came floating down the middle of the road. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

The day was dying, and the breeze remained cool and moist. In the brief twilight that followed, I was witness to the great yearly flight of insects into the cool, brief freedom of the night.

Termites and white ants, which had been sleeping through the hot season, emerged from their lairs. Out of every hole and crack, and from under the roots of trees, huge winged ants emerged, at first fluttering about heavily on this, the first and last flight of their lives. There was only one direction in which they could fly—toward the light—toward the street lights and the bright neon tubelight above my balcony.

The light above my balcony attracted a massive, quivering swarm of clumsy termites, giving the impression of one thick, slowly revolving mass. A frog had found its way through the bathroom and came hopping across the balcony to pause beneath the light. All he had to do was gobble, as insects fell around him.

This was the hour of the geckos, the wall lizards. They had their reward for weeks of patient waiting. Plying their sticky pink tongues, they devoured insects

as swiftly and methodically as children devour popcorn. For hours they crammed their stomachs, knowing that such a feast would not come their way again. Throughout the entire hot season the insect world had prepared for this flight out of darkness into light, and the phenomenon would not happen again for another year.

In hot up-country towns in India, it is good to have the first monsoon showers arrive at night, while you are sleeping on the veranda. You wake up to the scent of wet earth and fallen neem leaves, and find that a hot and stuffy bungalow has been convened into a cool, damp place.

The swish of the banana fronds and the drumming of the rain on broad-leaved sal trees will soothe any brow.

During the rains, the frogs have a perfect country music festival. There are two sets of them, it seems, and they sing antiphonal chants all evening, each group letting the other take its turn in the fairest manner. No one sees or hears them during the hot weather, but the moment the monsoon breaks, they swarm all over the place.

When night comes on, great moths fly past, and beetles of all shapes and sizes come whirring in at the open windows. The fireflies also light up their lamps, flashing messages to each other through the mango groves. Some nocturnal insects thrive mainly at the expense of humans, and sometimes one wakes up to find thirty or forty mosquitoes looking through the netting in a hungry manner. If you are sleeping out, you'll need that mosquito-netting.

The road outside is lined with line babul trees, now covered with powdery little halls of yellow blossom, filling the air with a faint scent. After the first showers, there is a great deal of water about, and for many miles the trees are standing in it. The common sights along an up-country road are often picturesque—the wide plains with great herds of smoke-colored, delicate-limbed cattle being driven slowly home for the night, accompanied by troops of ungainly buffaloes, and flocks of goats and black long-tailed sheep. Then you come to a pond, where the buffaloes are indulging in a wallow, no part of them visible but the tips of their noses.

Within a few days of the first rain, the air is full of dragonflies, crossing and recrossing, poised motionless for a moment, then darting away with that mingled grace and power that is unmatched among insects. Dragonflies are the swallows of the insect world; their prey is the mosquitoes, the gnats, the midges and the flies. These swarms, therefore, tell us that the moistened surface of the ground, with its mouldering leaves and sodden grass, has become one vast incubator teeming with every form of ephemeral life.

After the monotony of a fierce sun and a dusty landscape quartering in the

dim distance, one welcomes these days of mild light, green earth and purple hills coming near in the clear and transparent air.

And later on, when the monsoon begins to break up and the hills are dappled with light and shade, dark islands of clouds moving across the bright green sea, the effect on one's spirit is strangely exhilarating. For in India the true spring, the beginning of things, the birthday of nature, is not in March but in June.

Rosebud: A Fragment

Jai had placed a chair on the beaten earth floor of the little courtyard, in the shade of an apricot tree. Apricots appeared to be the only trees that grew near the village. Their leaves were russet-red in the autumn sun. I felt sure that other fruit could grow here too—apples, pears, peaches. If I were living here, I thought, I could try them out. If I could get a message to McNulty he would send me saplings from the Saharanpur nurseries. And on the other side of the hill, where it was shadier and moister, there were plants that he would love to have. If I were living here—but I had no plans to stay.

Jai's village, in the next valley, was a warmer place. Here we were facing the snows—the mighty Srikanth peak towered directly above us. Two months from now the village would be under snow.

'Do you stay here through the winter?' I asked Gulabi.

She nodded, 'People come down from the Gangotri shrine to stay here during the winter. The temple priests and others.'

I looked down the mountain to where the river, green and gold, wound its way through sandbanks and rocky islets on which grew clumps of pine and maple.

'Why not live down there?' I asked.

'There is no land down there for fields,' she said. 'And sometimes the river is in flood and everything gets swept away.'

She seemed to give out some of the glow that was in her face. I felt it pour over me. And this golden feeling did not pass, even when I went into the cool darkness of the house to join Jai in a meal prepared especially for us.

It can be hot in September, even in the mountains and by the time we climbed the steep path to Harsil, my companion and I were both very thirsty. I sat down on a low boundary wall, while Jai walked over to a small house to ask for water and enquire about his relatives.

It was one of those warm, humid afternoons when drowsiness is in the air, and the buzz of insects lulls one into slumber. I had closed my eyes and was half asleep when a footstep made me sit up. Someone was holding a tumber of water before me, but the hands that held it were not Jai's. They were the hands of a girl—not very delicate, but firm and without blemish. I looked up into her face and our eyes met over the rim of the tumbler. I forgot to take it from her.

She was a fair girl, as fair as they come in the hills, and there was a tinge of pink in her cheeks. Her hair was black and glossy and lay open across her shoulders, for she had been drying it in the warm sun. Her clothes were plain but neat; her feet and hands were brown from sun and wind. Her lips were full and soft. Poppies in her cheeks and roses in her lips, I thought.

'You are thirsty,' she said.

I took my eyes off her for a moment, grasped the tumbler and drank till it was empty.

'Thank you,' I said. 'And who are you?'

'I am Gulabi.'

'Rosebud. A pretty name. It suits you.'

'These are my father's fields. Your friend is a cousin of mine. He is waiting for you in the house. Come inside and rest.'

What I liked about her was her smile. It dropped over her face slowly, like sunshine moving over brown hills.

To the End of Our Days

Six or seven—that's the age at which our essential tastes, even our obsessions—begin to be stamped on us by outside impressions. They are never eradicated, even when we think we have forgotten them. To my dying day I shall have a special fondness for the cosmos flower because I remember walking through a forest of them—or what seemed like a forest—when I was five or six. White, light purple, magenta, those fresh-faced flowers nodded to me as I played on the lawns of the Jamnagar palace grounds; and today more than seventy years later, whenever I see the cosmos in flower, I go among them, for they are eternal even if I am not. And to this day I like the sound of a cock crowing at break of day, because this was one of the first sounds that impinged on my brain when I was a child. A cock crowing at dawn. Harbinger of light, of optimism. 'Great day! Great day!' it seems to say. And it will not be denied.

Little things stay with us, remain with us over the years. The sound of a broom, the small hand-broom, sweeping the steps or verandah takes me back to that distant but vivid childhood, and the thin dark woman who swept the bungalow's rooms and verandah. I loved watching her at work. It seemed like a game to me and sometimes I would take the jharoo from her and sweep so vigorously that the dust rose and settled on the furniture. 'Mem-sahib will be angry,' she'd say, and take the broom away from me. But she'd let me borrow it from time to time, when my parents weren't around! The broom-motif has remained with me, and the other day, seeing that my steps were covered with dead leaves, I picked up the small jharoo lying outside my door and began clearing away the leaves. A local shopkeeper on his way to the bazaar saw me sweeping away and called out: 'Sir, what are you doing? That's not your job. Give the jharoo to the sweeper!' Absorbed in my childhood hobby, all I could say was, 'Yes, mem-sahib,' while sending up a flurry of dead leaves. He continued on his way, muttering something about the poor old writer having lost his balance at last. Not all our early impressions are of a pleasant nature, but they linger with us just the same. Like the frequent quarrels that took place between my parents, frequently in my presence. I hated these quarrels and I was quite helpless to stop them. Eventually they led to my parents' separation. And all my life I have felt profoundly disturbed if I see or overhear a husband and wife quarrelling bitterly. I look around to see if a child is present. And then realise

that I am that child. Fortunately the most lasting impressions are the harmonious ones. Why do I still prefer homemade butter to factory-made butter? Because, when I was five or six, I would watch my father vigorously beating up a bowl of cream and then spreading a generous amount of creamy white butter on my toast. Now Beena, who looks after the household, knows why I am always demanding creamy white homemade butter for breakfast.

And you, dear reader, will have similar impressions to carry with you all your days. That first day at school, maybe an agonising parting from your parents. The face of a loved one lost. A pullover knitted by your granny. A favourite toy. A doll, perhaps. A book of rhymes, tattered and torn. Someone who gave you a flower, a kiss on the forehead. To the end of your days you will carry that kiss with you. And may it protect you from all harm.