ELIZABETH VON ARNIM

IN THE MOUNTAINS


ELIZABETH VON ARNIM
COLORS MISHIMA
MIRROR MAKER
MARK HADDON VINTAGE
THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME
PICADOR
THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD MARGARET ATWOOD
jeffrey eugenides the virgin suicides
MILLER Tropic of Cancer flamingo
YUKIO MISHIMA Spring Snow
DAREN KING MANUAL
Dylan Thomas Under Milk Wood
THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO KARL MARX AND FREDERICK ENGELS
SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE The Hound of the Baskervilles
Fierce People Dirk Wittenborn
CHARLOTTE FAIRBAIRN
GOD BREATHES HIS DREAMS THROUGH NATHANIEL CADWALLADER
GEORGE ORWELL NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR
VIBRATOR MARI AKASAKA
COCAINE NIGHTS J.G. Ballard
EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED
LIGHTNING ON THE SUN
ALL FAMILIES ARE PSYCHOTIC
MONKEY BRAIN SUSHI
REAL WORLD
IN THE MOUNTAINS

Elizabeth Von Arnim

In the Mountains

EAN 8596547011651

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

Cover
Titlepage
BY
THE AUTHOR OF "ELIZABETH AND HER GERMAN GARDEN"

BY

Table of Contents

THE AUTHOR OF "ELIZABETH AND HER GERMAN GARDEN"

Table of Contents

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED

ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

1920

IN THE MOUNTAINS

Table of Contents

July 22nd.

I want to be quiet now.

I crawled up here this morning from the valley like a sick ant,—struggled up to the little house on the mountain side that I haven't seen since the first August of the war, and dropped down on the grass outside it, too tired even to be able to thank God that I had got home.

Here I am once more, come back alone to the house that used to be so full of happy life that its little wooden sides nearly burst with the sound of it. I never could have dreamed that I would come back to it alone. Five years ago,

how rich I was in love; now how poor, how stripped of all I had. Well, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I'm too tired. I want to be quiet now. Till I'm not so tired. If only I can be quiet....

July 23rd.

Yesterday all day long I lay on the grass in front of the door and watched the white clouds slowly passing one after the other at long, lazy intervals over the tops of the delphiniums,—the row of delphiniums I planted all those years ago. I didn't think of anything; I just lay there in the hot sun, blinking up and counting the intervals between one spike being reached and the next. I was conscious of the colour of the delphiniums, jabbing up stark into the sky, and of how blue they were; and yet not so blue, so deeply and radiantly blue, as the sky. Behind them was the great basin of space filled with that other blue of the air, that lovely blue with violet shades in it; for the mountain I am on drops sharply away from the edge of my tiny terrace-garden, and the whole of the space between it and the mountains opposite brims all day long with blue and violet light. At night the bottom of the valley looks like water, and the lamps in the little town lying along it like quivering reflections of the stars.

I wonder why I write about these things. As if I didn't know them! Why do I tell myself in writing what I already so well know? Don't I know about the mountain, and the brimming cup of blue light? It is because, I suppose, it's lonely to stay inside oneself. One has to come out and talk. And if there is no one to talk to one imagines someone, as though one were writing a letter to somebody who loves

one, and who will want to know, with the sweet eagerness and solicitude of love, what one does and what the place one is in looks like. It makes one feel less lonely to think like this,—to write it down, as if to one's friend who cares. For I'm afraid of loneliness; shiveringly, terribly afraid. I don't mean the ordinary physical loneliness, for here I am, deliberately travelled away from London to get to it, to its spaciousness and healing. I mean that awful loneliness of spirit that is the ultimate tragedy of life. When you've got to that, really reached it, without hope, without escape, you die. You just can't bear it, and you die.

July 24th.

It's queer the urge one has to express oneself, to get one's self into words. If I weren't alone I wouldn't write, of course, I would talk. But nearly everything I wanted to say would be things I couldn't say. Not unless it was to some wonderful, perfect, all-understanding listener,—the sort one used to imagine God was in the days when one said prayers. Not quite like God though either, for this listener would sometimes say something kind and gentle, and sometimes, stroke one's hand a little to show that he understood. Physically, it is most blessed to be alone. After all that has happened, it is most blessed. Perhaps I shall grow well here, alone. Perhaps just sitting on these honey-scented grass slopes will gradually heal me. I'll sit and lick my wounds. I do so dreadfully want to get mended! I do so dreadfully want to get back to confidence in goodness.

July 25th.

For three days now I've done nothing but lie in the sun, except when meals are put in the open doorway for me.

Then I get up reluctantly, like some sleepy animal, and go and eat them and come out again.

In the evening it is too cold and dewy here for the grass, so I drag a deep chair into the doorway and sit and stare at the darkening sky and the brightening stars. At ten o'clock Antoine, the man of all work who has looked after the house in its years of silence during the war, shuts up everything except this door and withdraws to his own room and his wife; and presently I go in too, bolting the door behind me, though there is nothing really to shut out except the great night, and I creep upstairs and fall asleep the minute I'm in bed. Indeed, I don't think I'm much more awake in the day than in the night. I'm so tired that I want to sleep and sleep; for years and years; for ever and ever.

There was no unpacking to do. Everything was here as I left it five years ago. We only took, five years ago, what each could carry, waving goodbye to the house at the bend of the path and calling to it as the German soldiers called to their disappearing homes, 'Back for Christmas!' So that I came again to it with only what I could carry, and had nothing to unpack. All I had to do was to drop my little bag on the first chair I found and myself on to the grass, and in that position we both stayed till bedtime.

Antoine is surprised at nothing. He usedn't to be surprised at my gaiety, which yet might well have seemed to him, accustomed to the sobriety of the peasant women here, excessive; and nor is he now surprised at my silence. He has made a few inquiries as to the health and whereabouts of the other members of that confident group that waved goodbyes five years ago, and showed no

surprise when the answer, at nearly every name, was 'Dead.' He has married since I went away, and hasn't a single one of the five children he might have had, and he doesn't seem surprised at that either. I am. I imagined the house, while I was away, getting steadily fuller, and used to think that when I came back I would find little Swiss babies scattered all over it; for, after all, there quite well might have been ten, supposing Antoine had happened to possess a natural facility in twins.

July 26th.

The silence here is astonishing. There are hardly any birds. There is hardly any wind, so that the leaves are very still and the grass scarcely stirs. The crickets are busy, and the sound of the bells on distant cows pasturing higher up on the mountains floats down to me; but else there is nothing but a great, sun-flooded silence.

When I left London it was raining. The Peace Day flags, still hanging along the streets, drooped heavy with wet in what might have been November air, it was so dank and gloomy. I was prepared to arrive here in one of the mountain mists that settle down on one sometimes for days,—vast wet stretches of grey stuff like some cold, sodden blanket, muffling one away from the mountains opposite, and the valley, and the sun. Instead I found summer: beautiful clear summer, fresh and warm together as only summer up on these honey-scented slopes can be, with the peasants beginning to cut the grass,—for things happen a month later here than down in the valley, and if you climb higher you can catch up June, and by climbing higher and higher you can climb, if you want to, right back into the spring. But you

don't want to if you're me. You don't want to do anything but stay quiet where you are.

July 27th.

If only I don't think—if only I don't think and remember—how can I not get well again here in the beauty and the gentleness? There's all next month, and September, and perhaps October too may be warm and golden. After that I must go back, because the weather in this high place while it is changing from the calms of autumn to the calms of the exquisite alpine winter is a disagreeable, daunting thing. But I have two whole months; perhaps three. Surely I'll be stronger, tougher, by then? Surely I'll at least be better? I couldn't face the winter in London if this desperate darkness and distrust of life is still in my soul. I don't want to talk about my soul. I hate to. But what else am I to call the innermost *Me,* the thing that has had such wounds, that is so much hurt and has grown so dim that I'm in terror lest it should give up and go under, go quite out, and leave me alone in the dark?

July 28th.

It is dreadful to be so much like Job.

Like him I've been extraordinarily stripped of all that made life lovely. Like him I've lost, in a time that is very short to have been packed so full of disasters, nearly everything I loved. And it wasn't only the war. The war passed over me, as it did over everybody, like some awful cyclone, flattening out hope and fruitfulness, leaving blood and ruins behind it; but it wasn't only that. In the losses of the war, in the anguish of losing one's friends, there was the grisly comfort of companionship in grief; but beyond and

besides that life has been devastated for me. I do feel like Job, and I can't bear it. It is so humiliating, being so much stricken. I feel ridiculous as well as wretched; as if somebody had taken my face and rubbed it in dust.

And still, like Job, I cling on to what I can of trust in goodness, for if I let that go I know there would be nothing left but death.

July 29th.

Oh, what is all this talk of death? To-day I suddenly noticed that each day since I've been here what I've written down has been a whine, and that each day while I whined I was in fact being wrapped round by beautiful things, as safe and as perfectly cared for *really* as a baby fortunate enough to have been born into the right sort of family. Oughtn't I to be ashamed? Of course I ought; and so I am. For, looking at the hours, each hour as I get to it, they are all good. Why should I spoil them, the ones I'm at now, by the vivid remembrance, the aching misery, of those black ones behind me? They, anyhow, are done with; and the ones I have got to now are plainly good. And as for Job who so much haunted me yesterday, I can't really be completely like him, for at least I've not yet had to take a potsherd and sit down somewhere and scrape. But perhaps I had better touch wood over that, for one has to keep these days a wary eye on God.

Mrs. Antoine, small and twenty-five, who has been provided by Antoine, that expert in dodging inconveniences, with a churn suited to her size out of which she produces little pats of butter suited to my size every day, Switzerland not having any butter in it at all for sale,—Mrs. Antoine

looked at me to-day when she brought out food at dinner time, and catching my eye she smiled at me; and so I smiled at her, and instantly she began to talk.

Up to now she has crept about softly on the tips of her toes as if she were afraid of waking me, and I had supposed it to be her usual fashion of moving and that it was natural to her to be silent; but to-day, after we had smiled at each other, she stood over me with a dish in one hand and a plate in the other, and held forth at length with the utmost blitheness, like some carolling blacks bird, about her sufferings, and the sufferings of Antoine, and the sufferings of everybody during the war. The worse the sufferings she described had been the blither became her carollings; and with a final chirrup of the most flute-like cheerfulness she finished this way:

'Ah, ma foi, oui—il y avait un temps où il a fallu se fier entièrement au bon Dieu. C'était affreux.'

July 30th.

It's true that the worst pain is the remembering one's happiness when one is no longer happy and perhaps it may be just as true that past miseries end by giving one some sort of satisfaction. Just their being over must dispose one to regard them complacently. Certainly I already I remember with a smile and a not unaffectionate shrug troubles that seemed very dreadful a few years back. But this—this misery that has got me now, isn't it too deep, doesn't it cut too ruthlessly at the very roots of my life ever to be something that I will smile at? It seems impossible that I ever should. I think the remembrance of this year will always come like a knife cutting through any little happiness

I may manage to collect. You see, what has happened has taken away my faith in *goodness*,—I don't know who *you* are that I keep on wanting to tell things to, but I must talk and tell you. Yes; that is what it has done; and the hurt goes too far down to be healed. Yet I know time is a queer, wholesome thing. I've lived long enough to have found that out. It is very sanitary. It cleans up everything. It never fails to sterilise and purify. Quite possibly I shall end by being a wise old lady who discourses with, the utmost sprightliness, after her regular meals, on her past agonies, and extracts much agreeable entertainment from them, even is amusing about them. You see, they will be so far away, so safely done with; never, anyhow, going to happen again. Why of course in time, in years and years, one's troubles must end by being entertaining. But I don't believe, however old I am and however wisely hilarious, I shall ever be able to avoid the stab in the back, the clutch of pain at the heart, that the remembrance of beautiful past happiness gives one. Lost. Lost. Gone. And one is still alive, and still gets up carefully every day, and buttons all one's buttons, and goes down to breakfast.

July 31st.

Once I knew a bishop rather intimately—oh, nothing that wasn't most creditable to us both—and he said to me, 'Dear child, you will always be happy if you are good.'

I'm afraid he couldn't have been quite candid, or else he was very inexperienced, for I have never been so terribly good in the bishop's sense as these last three years, turning my back on every private wish, dreadfully unselfish,

devoted, a perfect monster of goodness. And unhappiness went with me every step of the way.

I much prefer what some one else said to me, (not a bishop but yet wise,) to whom I commented once on the really extraordinary bubbling happiness that used to wake up with me every morning, the amazing joy of each day as it came, the warm flooding gratitude that I *should* be so happy,—this was before the war. He said, beginning also like the bishop but, unlike him, failing in delicacy at the end, 'Dear child, it is because you have a sound stomach.'

August 1st.

The last first of August I was here was the 1914 one. It was just such a day as this,—blue, hot, glorious of colour and light. We in this house, cut off in our remoteness from the noise and excitement of a world setting out with cries of enthusiasm on its path of suicide, cut off by distance and steepness even from the valley where the dusty Swiss soldiers were collecting and every sort of rumour ran like flames, went as usual through our pleasant day, reading, talking, clambering in the pine-woods, eating romantic meals out in the little garden that hangs like a fringe of flowers along the edge of the rock, unconscious, serene, confident in life. Just as to-day the delphiniums stood brilliantly blue, straight, and motionless on this edge, and it might have been the very same purple pansies crowding at their feet. Nobody came to tell us anything. We were lapped in peace. Of course even up here there had been the slight ruffle of the Archduke's murder in June, and the slight wonder towards the end of July as to what would come of it; but the ruffle and the wonder died away in what seemed the

solid, ever-enduring comfortableness of life. Such comfortableness went too deep, was too much settled, too heavy, to make it thinkable that it should ever really be disturbed. There would be quarrels, but they would be localised. Why, the mere feeding of the vast modern armies would etc., etc. We were very innocent and trustful in those days. Looking back at it, it is so pathetic as to be almost worthy of tears.

Well, I don't want to remember all that. One turns with a sick weariness from the recollection. At least one is thankful that we're at Now and not at Then. This first of August has the great advantage of having all that was coming after that first of August behind it instead of ahead of it. At least on this first of August most of the killing, of the slaughtering of young bodies and bright hopes, has left off. The world is very horrible still, but nothing can ever be so horrible as killing.

August 2nd.

The only thing to do with one's old sorrows is to tuck them up neatly in their shroud and turn one's face away from their grave towards what is coming next.

That is what I am going to do. To-day I have the kind of feelings that take hold of convalescents. I hardly dare hope it, but I have done things to-day that do seem convalescent; done them and liked doing them; things that I haven't till to-day had the faintest desire to do.

I've been for a walk. And a quite good walk, up in the forest where the water tumbles over rocks and the air is full of resin. And then when I got home I burrowed about among my books, arranging their volumes and loving the feel of

them. It is more than ten days since I got here, and till to-day I haven't moved; till to-day I've lain about with no wish to move, with no wish at all except to have no wish. Once or twice I have been ashamed of myself; and once or twice into the sleepy twilight of my mind has come a little nicker of suspicion that perhaps life still, after all, may be beautiful, that it may perhaps, after all, be just as beautiful as ever if only I will open my eyes and look. But the flicker has soon gone out again, damped out by the vault-like atmosphere of the place it had got into.

To-day I do feel different; and oh how glad I'd be if I *could* be glad! I don't believe there was ever anybody who loved being happy as much as I did. What I mean is that I was so acutely conscious of being happy, so appreciative of it; that I wasn't ever bored, and was always and continuously grateful for the whole delicious loveliness of the world.

I think it must be unusual never to have been bored. I realise this when I hear other people talk. Certainly I'm never bored as people sometimes appear to be by being alone, by the absence of amusement from without; and as for bores, persons who obviously were bores, they didn't bore me, they interested me. It was so wonderful to me, their unawareness that they were bores. Besides, they were usually very kind; and also, shameful though it is to confess, bores like me, and I am touched by being liked, even by a bore. Sometimes it is true I have had to take temporary refuge in doing what Dr. Johnson found so convenient, — withdrawing my attention, but this is dangerous because of the inevitable accompanying glazed and wandering eye.

Still, much can be done by practice in combining coherency of response with private separate meditation.

Just before I left London I met a man whose fate it has been for years to sit daily in the Law Courts delivering judgments, and he told me that he took a volume of poetry with him—preferably Wordsworth—and read in it as it lay open on his knees under the table, to the great refreshment and invigoration of his soul; and yet, so skilled had he become in the practice of two attentivenesses, he never missed a word that was said or a point that was made. There are indeed nice people in the world. I did like that man. It seemed such a wise and pleasant thing to do, to lay the dust of those sad places, where people who once liked each other go because they are angry, with the gentle waters of poetry. I am sure that man is the sort of husband whose wife's heart gives a jump of gladness each time he comes home.

August 3rd.

These burning August days, when I live in so great a glory of light and colour that it is like living in the glowing heart of a jewel, how impossible it is to keep from gratitude. I'm so grateful to be here, to *have* here to come to. Really I think I'm beginning to feel different—remote from the old unhappy things that were strangling me dead; restored; almost as though I might really some day be in tune again. There's a moon now, and in the evenings I get into a coat and lie in the low chair in the doorway watching it, and sometimes I forget for as long as a whole half hour that the happiness I believed in is gone for ever. I love sitting there and feeling little gusts of scent cross my face every now and

then, as if some one had patted it softly in passing by. Sometimes it is the scent of the cut grass that has been baking all day in the sun, but most often it is the scent from a group of Madonna lilies just outside the door, planted by Antoine in one of the Septembers of the war.

'*C'est ma maman qui me les a donnés*,' he said; and when I had done expressing my joy at their beauty and their fragrance, and my appreciation of his *maman's* conduct in having made my garden so lovely a present, he said that she had given them in order that, by brewing their leaves and applying the resulting concoction at the right moment, he and Mrs. Antoine might be cured of suppurating wounds.

'But you haven't got any suppurating wounds,' I said, astonished and disillusioned.

'*Ah, pour ça non*,' said Antoine. '*Mais il ne faut pas attendre qu'on les a pour se procurer le remède.*'

Well, if he approaches every future contingency with the same prudence he must be kept very busy; but the long winters of the war up here have developed in him, I suppose, a Swiss Family Robinson-like ingenuity of preparation for eventualities.

What lovely long words I've just been writing. I can't be as convalescent as I thought. I'm sure real vigour is brief. You don't say Damn if your vitality is low; you trail among querulous, water-blooded words like regrettable and unfortunate. But I think, perhaps, being in my top layers very adaptable, it was really the elderly books I've been reading the last day or two that made me arrange my language along their lines. Not old books,—elderly. Written in the great Victorian age, when the emotions draped

themselves chastely in lengths, and avoided the rude simplicities of shorts.

There is the oddest lot of books in this house, pitchforked together by circumstances, and sometimes their accidental rearrangement by Antoine after cleaning their shelves each spring of my absence would make their writers, if they could know, curdle between their own covers. Some are standing on their heads—Antoine has no prejudices about the right side up of an author—most of those in sets have their volumes wrong, and yesterday I found a Henry James, lost from the rest of him, lost even, it looked like, to propriety, held tight between two ladies. The ladies were Ouida and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. They would hardly let him go, they had got him so tight. I pulled him out, a little damaged, and restored him, ruffled in spite of my careful smoothing, to his proper place. It was the *Son and Brother*; and there he had been for months, perhaps years, being hugged. Dreadful.

When I come down to breakfast and find I am a little ahead of the *café au lait*, I wander into the place that has most books in it—though indeed books are in every place, and have even oozed along the passages—and fill up the time, till Mrs. Antoine calls me, in rescue work of an urgent nature. But it is impossible, I find, to tidy books without ending by sitting on the floor in the middle of a great untidiness and reading. The coffee grows cold and the egg repulsive, but still I read. You open a book idly, and you see:

The most glaring anomalies seemed to afford them no intellectual inconvenience, neither would they listen to any arguments as to the waste of money and happiness which their folly caused them. I was allowed almost to call them

life-long self-deceivers to their faces, and they said it was quite true, but that it did not matter.

Naturally then you read on.

You open another book idly, and you see:

Our admiration of King Alfred is greatly increased by the fact that we know very little about him.

Naturally then you read on.

You open another book idly, and you see:

Organic life, we are told, has developed gradually from the protozoon to the philosopher, and this development, we are assured, is indubitably an advance. Unfortunately it is the philosopher, not the protozoon, who gives us this assurance.

Naturally then you read on.

You open—but I could go on all day like this, as I do go on being caught among the books, and only the distant anxious chirps of Mrs. Antoine, who comes round to the front door to clear away breakfast and finds it hasn't been begun, can extricate me.

Perhaps I had better not get arranging books before breakfast. It is too likely to worry that bird-like Mrs. Antoine, who is afraid, I daresay, that if I don't drink my coffee while it is hot I may relapse into that comatose condition that filled her evidently with much uneasiness and awe. She hadn't expected, I suppose, the mistress of the house, when she did at last get back to it, to behave like some strange alien slug, crawled up the mountain only to lie motionless in the sun for the best part of a fortnight. I heard her, after the first two days of this conduct, explaining it to Antoine, who however needed no explanation because of his god-like