

The Diary of a Provincial Lady

E.M. Delafield

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Extract

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November 7th. – Plant the indoor bulbs. Just as I am in the middle of them, Lady Boxe calls. I say, untruthfully, how nice to see her, and beg her to sit down while I just finish the bulbs. Lady B. makes determined attempt to sit down in armchair where I have already placed two bulb-bowls and the bag of charcoal, is headed off just in time, and takes the sofa.

Do I know, she asks, how very late it is for indoor bulbs? September, really, or even October, is the time. Do I know that the only really reliable firm for hyacinths is Somebody of Haarlem? Cannot catch the name of the firm, which is Dutch, but reply Yes, I do know, but think it my duty to buy Empire products. Feel at the time, and still think, that this is an excellent reply. Unfortunately Vicky comes into the drawing-room later and says: ‘Oh, Mummie, are those the bulbs we got at Woolworths?’

Lady B. stays to tea. (Mem.: Bread-and-butter too thick. Speak to Ethel.) We talk some more about bulbs, the Dutch

School of Painting, Our Vicar's Wife, sciatica, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

(Query: Is it possible to cultivate the art of conversation when living in the country all the year round?)

Lady B. enquires after the children. Tell her that Robin – whom I refer to in a detached way as ‘the boy’ so that she shan’t think I am foolish about him – is getting on fairly well at school, and that Mademoiselle says Vicky is starting a cold.

Do I realise, says Lady B., that the Cold Habit is entirely unnecessary, and can be avoided by giving the child a nasal douche of salt-and-water every morning before breakfast? Think of several rather tart and witty rejoinders to this, but unfortunately not until Lady B.’s Bentley has taken her away.

Finish the bulbs and put them in the cellar. Feel that after all cellar is probably draughty, change my mind, and take all up to the attic.

Cook says something is wrong with the range.

November 8th. – Robert has looked at the range and says nothing wrong whatever. Makes unoriginal suggestion about pulling out dampers. Cook very angry, and will probably give notice. Try to propitiate her by saying that we are going to Bournemouth for Robin’s half-term, and that will give the household a rest. Cook replies austere that they will take the opportunity to do some extra cleaning. Wish I could believe this was true.

Preparations for Bournemouth rather marred by discovering that Robert, in bringing down the suitcases from the attic, has broken three of the bulb-bowls. Says he understood that I had put them in the cellar, and so wasn’t expecting them.

November 11th. – Bournemouth. Find that history, as usual, repeats itself. Same hotel, same frenzied scurry round the school to find Robin, same collection of parents, most of them also staying at the hotel. Discover strong tendency to exchange with fellow-parents exactly the same remarks as last year, and the year before that. Speak of this to Robert, who returns no answer. Perhaps he is afraid of repeating himself? This suggests Query: Does Robert, perhaps, take in what I say even when he makes no reply?

Find Robin looking thin, and speak to Matron who says brightly, Oh no, she thinks on the whole he's put *on* weight this term, and then begins to talk about the New Buildings. (Query: Why do all schools have to run up New Buildings about once in every six months?)

Take Robin out. He eats several meals, and a good many sweets. He produces a friend, and we take both to Corfe Castle. The boys climb, Robert smokes in silence, and I sit about on stones. Overhear a woman remark, as she gazes up at half a tower, that has withstood several centuries, that This looks *fragile* – which strikes me as a singular choice of adjective. Same woman, climbing over a block of solid masonry, points out that This has evidently fallen off somewhere.

Take the boys back to the hotel for dinner. Robin says, whilst the friend is out of hearing: 'It's been nice for us, taking out Williams, hasn't it?' Hastily express appreciation of this privilege.

Robert takes the boys back after dinner, and I sit in hotel lounge with several other mothers and we all talk about our boys in tones of disparagement, and about one another's boys with great enthusiasm.

Am asked what I think of *Harriet Hume* but am unable to say, as I have not read it. Have a depressed feeling that this is going to be another case of *Orlando* about which was perfectly able to talk most intelligently until I read it, and found myself unfortunately unable to understand any of it.

Robert comes up very late and says he must have dropped asleep over *The Times*. (Query: Why come to Bournemouth to do this?)

Postcard by the last post from Lady B. to ask if I have remembered that there is a Committee Meeting of the Women's Institute on the 14th. Should not dream of answering this.

November 12th. – Home yesterday and am struck, as so often before, by immense accumulation of domestic disasters that always await one after any absence. Trouble with kitchen range has resulted in no hot water, also Cook says the mutton has gone, and will I speak to the butcher, there being no excuse weather like this. Vicky's cold, unlike the mutton, hasn't gone. Mademoiselle says *Ah, cette petite! Elle ne sera peut-être pas longtemps pour ce bas monde, madame.* Hope that this is only her Latin way of dramatising the situation.

Robert reads *The Times* after dinner, and goes to sleep.

November 13th. – Interesting, but disconcerting, train of thought started by prolonged discussion with Vicky as to the existence or otherwise of a locality which she refers to throughout as H. E. L. Am determined to be a modern parent, and assure her that there is not, never has been, and never could be, such a place. Vicky maintains that there *is*, and

refers me to the Bible. I become more modern than ever, and tell her that theories of eternal punishment were invented to frighten people. Vicky replies indignantly that they don't frighten her in the least, she *likes* to think about H. E. L. Feel that deadlock has been reached, and can only leave her to her singular method of enjoying herself.

(Query: Are modern children going to revolt against being modern, and if so, what form will reaction of modern parents take?)

Much worried by letter from the Bank to say that my account is overdrawn to the extent of Eight Pounds, four shillings, and fourpence. Cannot understand this, as was convinced that I still had credit balance of Two Pounds, seven shillings, and sixpence. Annoyed to find that my accounts, contents of cashbox, and counterfoils in cheque-book, do not tally. (Mem.: Find envelope on which I jotted down Bournemouth expenses, also little piece of paper (probably last leaf of grocer's book) with note about cash payment to sweep. This may clear things up.)

Take a look at bulb-bowls on returning suitcase to attic, and am inclined to think it looks as though the cat had been up here. If so, this will be the last straw. Shall tell Lady Boxe that I sent all my bulbs to a sick friend in a nursing-home.

November 14th. – Arrival of Book of the Month choice, and am disappointed. History of a place I am not interested in, by an author I do not like. Put it back into its wrapper again, and make fresh choice from Recommended List. Find, on reading small literary bulletin enclosed with book, that exactly this course of procedure has been anticipated, and that it is

described as being 'the mistake of a lifetime'. Am much annoyed, although not so much at having made (possibly) mistake of a lifetime, as at depressing thought of our all being so much alike that intelligent writers can apparently predict our behaviour with perfect accuracy.

Decide not to mention any of this to Lady B., always so tiresomely superior about Book of the Month as it is, taking up attitude that she does not require to be told what to read. (Should like to think of good repartee to this.)

Letter by second post from my dear old schoolfriend Cissie Crabbe, asking if she may come here for two nights or so on her way to Norwich. (Query: Why Norwich? Am surprised to realise that anybody ever goes to, lives at, or comes from, Norwich, but quite see that this is unreasonable of me. Remind myself how very little one knows of the England one lives in, which vaguely suggests a quotation. This, however, does not materialise.)

Many years since we last met, writes Cissie, and she expects we have both *changed* a good deal. P.S. Do I remember the dear old *pond*, and the day of the Spanish Arrowroot. Can recall, after some thought, dear old pond, at bottom of Cissie's father's garden, but am completely baffled by Spanish Arrowroot. (Query: Could this be one of the Sherlock Holmes stories? Sounds like it.)

Reply that we shall be delighted to see her, and what a lot we shall have to talk about, after all these years! (This, I find on reflection, is not true, but cannot rewrite letter on that account.) Ignore Spanish Arrowroot altogether.

Robert, when I tell him about dear old schoolfriend's impending arrival, does not seem pleased. Asks what we are expected to *do* with her. I suggest showing her the garden, and

remember too late that this is hardly the right time of the year. At any rate, I say, it will be nice to talk over old times – (which reminds me of the Spanish Arrowroot reference still unfathomed).

Speak to Ethel about the spare room, and am much annoyed to find that one blue candlestick has been broken, and the bedside rug has gone to the cleaners, and cannot be retrieved in time. Take away bedside rug from Robert's dressing-room, and put it in spare room instead, hoping he will not notice its absence.

November 15th. – Robert *does* notice absence of rug, and says he must have it back again. Return it to dressing-room and take small and inferior dyed mat from the night-nursery to put in spare room. Mademoiselle is hurt about this and says to Vicky, who repeats it to me, that in this country she finds herself treated like a worm.

November 17th. – Dear old schoolfriend Cissie Crabbe due by the three o'clock train. On telling Robert this, he says it is most inconvenient to meet her, owing to Vestry Meeting, but eventually agrees to abandon Vestry Meeting. Am touched. Unfortunately, just after he has started, telegram arrives to say that dear old schoolfriend has missed the connection and will not arrive until seven o'clock. This means putting off dinner till eight, which Cook won't like. Cannot send message to kitchen by Ethel, as it is her afternoon out, so am obliged to tell Cook myself. She is not pleased. Robert returns from station, not pleased either. Mademoiselle, quite inexplicably, says *Il ne manquait que ça!* (This comment wholly unjustifiable, as

non-appearance of Cissie Crabbe cannot concern her in any way. Have often thought that the French are tactless.)

Ethel returns, ten minutes late, and says Shall she light fire in spare room? I say No, it is not cold enough – but really mean that Cissie is no longer, in my opinion, deserving of luxuries. Subsequently feel this to be unworthy attitude, and light fire myself. It smokes.

Robert calls up to know What is that Smoke? I call down that It is Nothing. Robert comes up and opens the window and shuts the door and says It will Go all right Now. Do not like to point out that the open window will make the room cold.

Play Ludo with Vicky in drawing-room.

Robert reads *The Times* and goes to sleep, but wakes in time to make second expedition to the station. Thankful to say that this time he returns with Cissie Crabbe, who has put on weight, and says several times that she supposes we have both *changed* a good deal, which I consider unnecessary.

Take her upstairs – spare room like an ice house, owing to open window, and fire still smoking, though less – She says room is delightful, and I leave her, begging her to ask for anything she wants – (*Mem.:* tell Ethel she *must* answer spare-room bell if it rings – Hope it won't.)

Ask Robert while dressing for dinner what he thinks of Cissie. He says he has not known her long enough to judge. Ask if he thinks her good-looking. He says he has not thought about it. Ask what they talked about on the way from the station. He says he does not remember.

November 19th. – Last two days very, very trying, owing to quite unexpected discovery that Cissie Crabbe is strictly on

diet. This causes Robert to take a dislike to her. Utter impossibility of obtaining lentils or lemons at short notice makes housekeeping unduly difficult. Mademoiselle in the middle of lunch insists on discussing diet question, and several times exclaims *Ah, mon doux St Joseph!* which I consider profane, and beg her never to repeat.

Consult Cissie about the bulbs, which look very much as if the mice had been at them. She says: Unlimited Watering, and tells me about her own bulbs at Norwich. Am discouraged.

Administer Unlimited Water to the bulbs (some of which goes through the attic floor on to the landing below), and move half of them down to the cellar, as Cissie Crabbe says attic is airless.

Our Vicar's Wife calls this afternoon. Says she once knew someone who had relations living near Norwich, but cannot remember their name. Cissie Crabbe replies that very likely if we knew their name we might find she'd heard of them, or even *met* them. We agree that the world is a small place. Talk about the Riviera, the new waistline, choir-practice, the servant question, and Ramsay MacDonald.

November 22nd. – Cissie Crabbe leaves. Begs me in the kindest way to stay with her in Norwich (where she has already told me that she lives in a bed-sitting-room with two cats, and cooks her own lentils on a gas ring). I say Yes, I should love to. We part effusively.

Spend entire morning writing the letters I have had to leave unanswered during Cissie's visit.

Invitation from Lady Boxe to us to dine and meet distinguished literary friends staying with her, one of whom is the

author of *Symphony in Three Sexes*. Hesitate to write back and say that I have never heard of *Symphony in Three Sexes*, so merely accept. Ask for *Symphony in Three Sexes* at the library, although doubtfully. Doubt more than justified by tone in which Mr. Jones replies that it is not in stock, and never has been.

Ask Robert whether he thinks I had better wear my Blue or my Black-and-gold at Lady B.'s. He says that either will do. Ask if he can remember which one I wore last time. He cannot. Mademoiselle says it was the Blue, and offers to make slight alterations to Black-and-gold which will, she says, render it unrecognisable. I accept, and she cuts large pieces out of the back of it. I say *Pas trop décolletée*, and she replies intelligently *Je comprends, Madame ne désire pas se voir nue au salon*.

(Query: Have not the French sometimes a very strange way of expressing themselves, and will this react unfavourably on Vicky?)

Tell Robert about the distinguished literary friends, but do not mention *Symphony in Three Sexes*. He makes no answer.

Have absolutely decided that if Lady B. should introduce us to distinguished literary friends, or anyone else, as Our Agent, and Our Agent's Wife, I shall at once leave the house.

Tell Robert this. He says nothing. (Mem.: Put evening shoes out of window to see if fresh air will remove smell of petrol.)

November 25th. – Go and get hair cut and have manicure in the morning, in honour of Lady B.'s dinner party. Should like new pair of evening stockings, but depressing communication

from Bank, still maintaining that I am overdrawn, prevents this, also rather unpleasantly worded letter from Messrs. Frippy and Coleman requesting payment of overdue account by return of post. Think better not to mention this to Robert, as bill for coke arrived yesterday, also reminder that Rates are much overdue, therefore write civilly to Messrs. F. and C. to the effect that cheque follows in a few days. (Hope they may think I have temporarily mislaid cheque-book.)

Black-and-gold as rearranged by Mademoiselle very satisfactory, but am obliged to do my hair five times owing to wave having been badly set. Robert unfortunately comes in just as I am using brand-new and expensive lipstick, and objects strongly to result.

(Query: If Robert could be induced to go to London rather oftener, would he perhaps take broader view of these things?)

Am convinced we are going to be late, as Robert has trouble in getting car to start, but he refuses to be agitated. Am bound to add that subsequent events justify this attitude, as we arrive before anybody else, also before Lady B. is down. Count at least a dozen Roman hyacinths growing in bowls all over the drawing-room. (Probably grown by one of the gardeners, whatever Lady B. may say. Resolve not to comment on them in any way, but am conscious that this is slightly ungenerous.)

Lady B. comes down wearing silver lace frock that nearly touches the floor all round, and has new waistline. This may or not be becoming, but has effect of making everybody else's frock look out of date.

Nine other people present besides ourselves, most of them staying in house. Nobody is introduced. Decide that a lady in

what looks like blue tapestry is probably responsible for *Symphony in Three Sexes*.

Just as dinner is announced Lady B. murmurs to me: 'I've put you next to Sir William. He's interested in *water supplies*, you know, and I thought you'd like to talk to him about local conditions.'

Find, to my surprise, that Sir W. and I embark almost at once on the subject of Birth Control. Why or how this topic presents itself cannot say at all, but greatly prefer it to water supplies. On the other side of the table, Robert is sitting next to *Symphony in Three Sexes*. Hope he is enjoying himself.

Conversation becomes general. Everybody (except Robert) talks about books. We all say (a) that we have read *The Good Companions*, (b) that it is a very *long* book, (c) that it was chosen by the Book of the Month Club in America and must be having immense sales, and (d) that American sales are What Really Count. We then turn to *High Wind in Jamaica* and say (a) that it is quite a short book, (b) that we hated – or, alternatively, adored – it, and (c) that it Really Is exactly Like Children. A small minority here surges into being, and maintains No, they Cannot Believe that any children in the World wouldn't ever have *noticed* that John wasn't there any more. They can swallow everything else, they say, but not *that*. Discussion very active indeed. I talk to pale young man with horn-rimmed glasses, sitting at my left hand, about Jamaica, where neither of us has ever been. This leads – but cannot say how – to stag-hunting, and eventually to homeopathy. (Mem.: Interesting, if time permitted, to trace train of thought leading on from one topic to another. Second, and most disquieting idea: perhaps no such train of thought exists.) Just as we reach

interchange of opinions about growing cucumbers under glass, Lady B. gets up.

Go into the drawing-room, and all exclaim how nice it is to see the fire. Room very cold. (Query: Is this good for the bulbs?) Lady in blue tapestry takes down her hair, which she says she is growing, and puts it up again. We all begin to talk about hair. Depressed to find that everybody in the world, except apparently myself, has grown, or is growing, long hair again. Lady B. says that Nowadays, there Isn't a Shingled Head to be seen *anywhere* either in London, Paris, or New York. Nonsense.

Discover, in the course of the evening, that the blue tapestry has nothing whatever to do with literature, but is a Government Sanitary Inspector, and that *Symphony in Three Sexes* was written by pale young man with glasses. Lady B. says, Did I get him on to the subject of *perversion*, as he is always so amusing about it? I reply evasively.

Men come in, and all herded into billiard-room (just as drawing-room seems to be getting slightly warmer) where Lady B. inaugurates unpleasant game of skill with billiard balls, involving possession of a Straight Eye, which most of us do not possess. Robert does well at this. Am thrilled, and feel it to be more satisfactory way of acquiring distinction than even authorship of *Symphony in Three Sexes*.

Congratulate Robert on the way home, but he makes no reply.

November 26th. – Robert says at breakfast that he thinks we are no longer young enough for late nights.

Frippy and Coleman regret that they can no longer allow

account to stand over, but must request favour of a cheque by return, or will be compelled, with utmost regret, to take Further Steps. Have written to Bank to transfer Six Pounds, thirteen shillings, and tenpence from Deposit Account to Current. (This leaves Three Pounds, seven shillings, and twopence, to keep Deposit Account open.) Decide to put off paying milk book till next month, and to let cleaners have something on account instead of full settlement. This enables me to send F. and C. cheque, post-dated Dec. 1st, when allowance becomes due. Financial instability very trying.

November 28th. – Receipt from F. and C. assuring me of attention to my future wishes – but evidently far from realising magnitude of effort involved in setting myself straight with them.

December 1st. – Cable from dear Rose saying she lands at Tilbury on 10th. Cable back welcome, and will meet her Tilbury, 10th. Tell Vicky that her godmother, my dearest friend, is returning home after three years in America. Vicky says: ‘Oh, will she have a present for me?’ Am disgusted with her mercenary attitude and complain to Mademoiselle, who replies *Si la Sainte Vierge revenait sur la terre, madame, ce serait notre petite Vicky*. Do not at all agree with this. Moreover, in other moods Mademoiselle first person to refer to Vicky as *ce petit démon enragé*.

(Query: Are the Latin races always as sincere as one would wish them to be?)

December 3rd. – Radio from dear Rose, landing Plymouth 8th after all. Send return message, renewed welcomes, and will meet her Plymouth.