Moods and Memories, V

Dana, 1 August 1904, pages 106-110, 2,148 words

I am going to see dear and affectionate friends. The train would take me to them, that droll little *chemin de fer de ceinture*, and it seems a pity to miss the Gare St. Lazare, its Sunday morning tumult of Parisians starting with their mistresses and their wives for a favourite suburb. I never run up these wide stair-ways leading to the great wide galleries full of bookstalls (charming yellow notes), and pierced with little *guichets* painted round with blue, without experiencing a sensation of happy lightness — a lightheadedness that I associate with the month of May in Paris. But the tramway that passes through the Place de la Concorde goes as far as Passy, and though I love the droll little *chemin de fer de ceinture* I love this tramway better. It speeds along the quays between the Seine and the garden of the Champs Elysées, through miles of chestnut bloom, the roadway chequered with shadows of chestnut leaves; the branches meet overhead, and in a faint emotive sweetness I catch at a bloom, cherish it for a moment, and cast it away. The plucky little steamboats are making for the landing places, stemming the current. I love this; sprightly little river better than the melancholy Thames, along whose banks saturnine immoralities flourish like bulrushes! Behold the white architecture, the pillars, the balustraded steps, the domes in the blue air, the monumented swards! Paris, like all pagan cities, is full of statues. A little later we roll past gardens, gaiety is in the air…. And then the streets of Passy begin to appear, mean streets, like London streets. I like them not; but the railway station is compensation; the little railway station like a house of cards under toy trees, and the train steaming out into the fanciful country. The bright wood along which it speeds is like the season's millinery.

It is pleasant to notice everything in Paris, the flymen asleep on their box seats, the little horses dozing beneath the chestnut trees, the bloused workmen leaning over a green-painted table in an arbour, drinking wine at sixteen sous the litre, the villas of Auteuil, rich wood-work, rich iron railings, and the summer hush about villas engarlanded. Auteuil is so French, its symbolism enchants me. Auteuil is like a flower, its petals opening out to the kiss of the air, its roots feeling for way among the rich earth. Ah, the land of France, its vineyards and orchards, its earthly life! Thoughts come unbidden, my thoughts sing together, and I hardly knowing what they are singing. My thoughts are singing like the sun; do not ask me their meaning; they mean as much and as little as the sun that I am part of — the sun of France that I shall enjoy for thirty days. May takes me to dear and affectionate friends who await me at Auteuil, and June takes me away from them. There is the villa! And there amid the engarlanding trees my friend, dressed in pale yellow, sits in front of his easel. How the sunlight plays through the foliage, leaping through the rich long grass; and amid the rhododendrons in bloom sits a little girl of four, his model, her frock and cap impossibly white under the great gaudy greenery.

Year after year the same affectionate welcome, the same spontaneous welcome in this garden of rhododendrons and chestnut bloom. I would linger in the garden, but I may not, for breakfast is ready *et il ne faut pas faire manquer la messe à Madame. La messe!* How gentle the word is,

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much gentler than our word, mass, and it shocks us hardly at all to see an old lady going away in her carriage *pour entendre la messe*, Religion purged of faith is a pleasant, almost a pretty thing. Some fruits are better dried than fresh, religion is such a one, and religion, when nothing is left of it but the pleasant familiar habit, may be defended, for were it not for our habits life would be unrecorded, it would be all on the flat, as we would say if we were talking about a picture, without perspective. Our habits are our stories, and tell whence we have come and how we came to be what we are. This is quite a pretty reflection, but there is no time to think the matter out — here is the doctor! He lifts his skull cap, and how beautiful is the gesture; his dignity is the dignity that only goodness gives; and his goodness is a pure gift, existing independent of formula, a thing in itself, like Manet's painting. It was Degas who said, "A man whose profile no one ever saw," and the aphorism reminds us of the beautiful goodness that floats over his face, a light from Paradise. But why from Paradise? Paradise is an ugly ecclesiastical invention, and angels are an ugly Hebrew invention. It is unpardonable to think of angels in Auteuil; an angel is a prig compared to the dear doctor, and an angel has wings. Well, so had this admirable chicken, a bird that was grown for the use of the table, produced like a vegetable. A dear bird that was never allowed to run about and weary itself as our helpless English chicken is; it lived to get fat without acquiring any useless knowledge or desire of life; it became a capon in tender years, and then a pipe was introduced into its mouth and it was fed by machinery until it could hardly walk, until it could only stagger to its bed, and there it lay in happy digestion until the hour came for it to be crammed again. So did it grow up without knowledge or sensation or feeling of life, moving gradually, peacefully towards its predestined end — a delicious repast! What better end, what greater end than to be a fat chicken? The carcases of sheep that hang in butchers' shops are beginning to horrify the conscience of Europe. To cut a sheep's throat is an offensive act, but to clip out a bird's tongue with a long pair of scissors made for the purpose, is genteel. It is true that it beats its wings for a few moments, but we must not allow ourselves to be disturbed by a mere flutter of feathers. Man is merciful, and saved it from life. It grew like an asparagus! And talking of asparagus, here are some from Argenteuil thick as umbrellas… And now a word about the wine. French wines in England always seem to taste of the sea, but in France they taste only of the sun. Melons are better in June — that one comes, no doubt, from Algeria. It is however the kind I like best, the rich red melon that one eats only in France; a thing of the moment, unrememberable; but the chicken will never be forgotten; twenty years hence I shall be talking of a chicken, that in becoming a fat chicken required twenty years of immortality — which of us will acquire as many?

As we rise from table the doctor calls me into his studio: for he would give me an excellent cigar before he bids me good-bye, and having lighted it I follow my friend to the studio at the end of the garden, to that airy drawing-room which he has furnished in pale yellow and dark blue. On the walls are examples of the great modern masters — Manet and Monet. That view of a plain by Monet — is it not facile? It flows like a Japanese water-colour: the low horizon evaporating in the low light, the spire of the town visible in the haze. And look at the celebrated *Leçon de Danse* by Degas — that dancer descending the spiral staircase, only her legs are visible, the staircase cutting the picture in twain. On the right is the dancing class and the dancing master; something has gone wrong, and he holds out his hands in entreaty; a group of dancers are

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seated on chairs in the foreground, and their mothers are covering their shoulders with shawls — good mothers anxious for their daughter's welfare, for their advancement in life.

This picture betrays a mind curious, inquisitive and mordant; and that plaid shawl is as unexpected as an adjective of Flaubert's. A portrait by Manet hangs close by, large, permanent and mysterious as nature. Degas is more intellectual, but how little is intellect compared with a gift like Manet's. Yesterday I was in the Louvre, and when wearied with examination and debate — I had gone there on a special errand — I turned into the Salle Carrée for relaxation, and there wandered about, waiting to be attracted. Long ago the Mona Liza was my adventure, and I remember how Titian's "Entombment" enchanted me; another year I delighted in the smooth impartiality of a Terbourg interior; but this year Rembrandt's portrait of his wife held me at gaze. The face tells of her woman's life, her woman's weakness, and she seems conscious of the burden of her sex, and the burden of her own special lot — she is Rembrandt's wife, a servant, a satellite, a watcher. The emotion that this picture awakens is an almost physical emotion. It gets at you like music, like a sudden breath of perfume. When I approach her, eyes fade into brown shadow, but when I withdraw they begin telling her story. The mouth is no more than a little shadow, but what wistful tenderness there is in it, and the colour of the face is white, faintly tinted with bitumen, and in the cheeks some rose madder comes through the yellow. She wears a fur jacket, but the fur was no trouble to Rembrandt, he did not strive for realism. It is fur, that is sufficient. Grey pearls hang in her ears, there is a brooch upon her breast, and a hand at the bottom of the picture passing out of the frame, and that hand reminds one as the chin does, of the old story that God took a little clay and made man out of it. That chin and that hand and arm are moulded without display of knowledge, as Nature moulds. The picture seems as if it had been breathed upon the canvas. Did not a great poet once say that God breathed into Adam? and here it is even so. The other pictures seem dry and insignificant, the Mona Liza, celebrated in literature, hanging a few feet away, seems factitious when compared with this portrait; that smile so often described as mysterious, that hesitating smile which held my youth in a little tether, has come to seem but a grimace; and the pale mountains no more mysterious than a globe or map seen at a little distance. The Mona Liza is a sort of riddle, an acrostic, a poetical decoction, a ballade, a rondel, a villanelle or ballade with double burden, a sestina, that is what it is like, a sestina or chant royal. The Mona Liza being literature in intention rather than painting has drawn round her many poets. How many verses has she inspired? We must forgive her many mediocre verses for the sake of one incomparable prose passage. She now lives in literature, she has passed out of that mysterious misuse of oil paint, that arid glazing of *terre verte*, and has come into her possession of eternal life, into the immortality of Pater's prose. Degas is wilting already, year after year he will wither, until one day some great prose writer will arise and transfer his spirit into its proper medium — literature. The Mona Liza and the Leçon de Danse are intellectual pictures, they were painted with the brains rather than with the temperaments, and what is any intellect compared with a gift like Manet's? Leonardo made roads, Degas makes witticisms. Yesterday I heard one that delighted me far more than any road would, for I have given up bicycling. Somebody was saying he did not like Daumier, and Degas preserved silence for a long while. "If you were to show Raphael" he said at last "a Daumier, he would admire it, he would take off his hat, but if you were to show him a Cabanel he would say with a sigh, 'That is my fault!'"

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But my reverie is broken by the piano, my friend is playing, and it is pleasant to listen to music in this airy studio. But there are women I must see, women whom I see every time I go to Paris, and too much time has been spent in the studio — I must go… We are all going, going different ways, everyone no doubt musing on some woman, on some visit he has to pay.

GEORGE MOORE.

(To be continued.)

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