

### **A Visit to Loreto Convent (from "Eucalyptus Blossoms" circa 1911)**

Let us leave the city by an early train on a fresh September morning, prepared to enjoy a visit to beautiful Normanhurst, among the hills.

We pass at first along the harbour shore; the clear blue water is just rippled by the morning breeze; tiny sailing boats, quite near us, make their way to remote parts of the harbour, and far in the distance the ferry boats ply busily on their rounds. But we are soon cut off from these Scenes by a tunnel, and now the long gradual ascent begins - we are climbing in earnest. Down below us are the rocky fern gullies, and now and then we glide into pretty wayside stations. On either side of these are gardens all glowing with sweet-scented stock and roses hardly stirring in the fresh keen air, and all still holding their dewdrops.

We reach the primitive siding of Normanhurst, surrounded by virgin forest, the stillness of the woodland broken only by the familiar carolling of magpies.

Now we climb a fairly steep hill, and as we pass through the entrance gate get our first glimpses of the Convent. The air is laden with the perfume of the flowering pittosporum, and everywhere are pure white blooms - azaleas, wondrously profuse; quantities of graceful spirea and stately watsonias, marshalled in spotless array on either side of the avenue.

We are glad to rest awhile on the cool verandah out of the brilliant sunlight. Glancing through the open school windows we see a long study hall, with some fine pictures on the walls, and at the end, our Lady's statue smiling down on busy students bent over their work.

In adjoining class-rooms are yet more girls, all equally busy. The juniors are secluded in a large room specially adapted to their wants - a merry little band, to whom work seems a play. But we must not linger among them, for we are to make a hasty tour of the house. On the first floor are the dormitories, spacious and airy, with white curtained beds; from the wide windows are far-reaching vistas of beauty; away beyond hill and dale one can see even the outline of the Blue Mountains. But stay! let us ascend yet higher, the view from the parapet is wider still - an endless sea of tree tops, broken here and there by pretty clusters of red; these are the stations we passed early in the day; and yonder, the wide white country road (beloved of motorists) runs on till it disappears in the distance.

The view from the southern end of the house is different: the well-cared farm-yard, orchard, and vegetable plot, are visible, the orchard, in its spring guise, is one mass of harmonizing colour : running all through it is a plantation of tall arum lilies: and there, suggestive of the tropics, waves a great leafed banana. The south wind wafts us faint scents from the orange groves, and westaria, too, perfumes the air. See! hidden in a wealth of jungle stands the bush house; here the westaria reaches its perfection. Within, we are told, this bush house is a veritable Japanese fairyland, the delicate trails of hanging westaria form a heliotrope canopy, asparagus fern, palms, and wax-plant are growing freely, as well as many varieties from our own gullies.

Out beyond the orchard stretches the sombre gum forest. This dense expanse of mournful grey-green, seen from afar, gives no idea of the secret fairy haunts hidden in its depths.

On the horizon the leaden cloud of Sydney smoke rises to meet the sky; but at night, we are told, instead of the smoke cloud is seen a broad belt of starry lights jewelling the sky. Indeed, night proves that Normanhurst among the hills is not so sequestered as it appears by day. Pennant Hills, Thornleigh, Hornsby and Wahroonga, all show their lights, though none blaze out so brilliantly as those of Sydney, which make the southern horizon one wall of golden light. But we must hasten on, that we may visit the Master of the house in the chapel. Loving devotion is shown by the care and taste displayed here. Crimson waratahs (spoils from the bush) stand stately, sweet-scented westaria trails from the tall vases, a living drapery. These, with stainless azaleas and fresh bowls of maiden hair, all offer their homage to the Lord.

Now for an afternoon in the bush. We take our way down a lane which leads through tall gum trees and bracken fern to Little Gully. On we go by a winding path, and at the last bend we stand to survey the gully. Down below the clear stream of water winds in and out through an undergrowth of flowering shrubs; the banks are thickly overgrown by maiden hair, and wild violets show among the green. Higher up these give place to the bracken, just turning golden-brown. What a foreground for the grim forest beyond!

In the distance is Buttercup Hill, appropriately named from the yellow flowers clustering so profusely amid the fairy grass. At the foot of the hill are pleasant farms and small orchards, where the persimmon trees, now pale green, will, in autumn, be ablaze with red and gold.

We cross the smooth golf links and descend to follow St. Michael's Glen, specially noted for its rich growths. High slender wattle trees wave their branches of fluffy blossom. From every open space we stand to take in some new vista of beauty. Suddenly we come on a bend of the creek, where amass of blackberry vine blocks the way. Its endless white flowers give promise of a tempting crop of summer fruit. Oh! you exclaim, with surprised delight at the creamy mass of clematis drooping from the saplings near. It is irresistible! We fill our arms with the flowery fleeces and go on our way rejoicing.

At the point where St. Michael's Glen meets the Fox Valley road, we leave the gum forest with its shadows, its cool air, and hushed silence. This fine roadway leads on to Sydney, fifteen miles distant. On one side runs a wide gully of great depth, its slopes clothed with greenery. On the other side of the road rises a high and rocky wall, whose every niche affords space for some fresh growth. The road is of historic interest. It was made by the hapless convicts long ago.

We hear the rush of water; after heavy rains the swollen creek rushes thus noisily over the rocks and boulders. Let us rest awhile here at this bend of the road, regale our weary selves with cool oranges, and feast our eyes on the beauty around.

Our rest over, we follow the stream up its course and pass through many glens named years ago, when first explored by the Normanhurst children. Here is St. Magdalen's, cool and sheltered, a favoured spot for maiden hair, which loves the trickling water.

St. Patrick's is near; beautiful in all seasons, between the towering trees, sarsaparilla twines closely, its red shoots showing the year's new growth. Yonder is a tree weighted by a tangle of wild tecoma (traveller's joy.) We must add some of its fairy blossoms to our store.

St. Patrick's has every been the delight of the juniors, because of the "swings" formed by fallen gum trees. Here many generations of little ones have amused themselves bounding up and down on the long branches, laughing and swinging the while.

Now we reach Lake Loreto. It reminds one of Kendall's "Mountain Spring." Truly "Peace hath an altar here," where,

"Year after year, the days of tender heat,  
And gracious nights whose lips with flowers are sweet,  
Keep watch about this still, bright pool."

Tall reeds grow around its banks, and at one end a plot of arum lilies shows regally amid the bush ferns.

Tradition runs that this sheltered pond has at times been used by the Seventh Day Adventists - our near neighbours - for the baptism of their neophytes!

Moving on, we pass through high walls of rock, decked with greenery. Every ledge and jutting corner has its cluster of young ferns bedded in moss; but, alas! they cannot be reached. One may not climb this sheer wall, even for the reward it offers. Oh! for a few feet of ladder, and we could gather armfuls of quaint umbrella and soft rock fern; but we must pass on. Here we are in the sunlight once more. The dear yellow runners are plentiful; they lend a particular charm to Hermit's Glen, as it is called. We must add some trails to our collection.

A weird and rugged glen is this, fit abode for the lonely dweller in it. He has built for himself a wondrous lodge of stone and clay among the rocks. This hermit is a gaunt, bent man, rather fierce of aspect. Books are his sole companions, but of these he has no lack. It is whispered that he was once a prominent professor in a Victorian College. Why he has elected to bury himself in our lovely bush, no one can say.

Leaving the solitary in his weird retreat, we turn homeward, a little tired, but well repaid: on past our neighbour's fragrant orange and lemon groves, and past his orchard, where a mist of peach blossom shows amid dark loquat trees.

The peace of closing day is over all. A group of little ones (the juniors whom we saw this morning) run happily homeward from a bewitching haunt known as "Jumping Log;" maiden hair and wild violets in handfuls bear witness to their blissful afternoon. Happy little ones! may they in after years say with our national poet:-

"Often I sit looking back to a childhood  
Mixt with the sights and the sounds of the wildwood,  
So I may keep in the city and alleys  
The beauty and strength of the deep mountain valleys,  
Charming to slumber the pain and the losses,

With glimpses of creeks and a vision of mosses."

Farewell to dear Normanhurst and to its happy inmates; the prosaic Sydney train approaches and claims us as its own. Let out last look be towards the Blue Mountains, where the sunset is making a glory of purple and gold. Truly, if God's earth be fair, his heavens are more glorious still. "How lovely are Thy Tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts!"

OLIVE M. CARTER

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(Eucalyptus Blossoms was the Loreto Annual that Gonzaga Barry initiated. It circulated among all the Australian Loreto Schools and contained news, writings by the students and items of interest from Loreto overseas. Gonzaga Barry wrote an introductory letter for each edition and it was edited by senior students at Mary's Mount in Ballarat.)