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MARGARET FULLER

The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain

The stars tell all their secrets to the flowers, and, if we only knew how to look around us, we should not need to look above. But man is a plant of slow growth, and great heat is required to bring out his leaves. He must be promised a boundless futurity, to induce him to use aright the present hour. In youth, fixing his eyes on those distant worlds of light, he promises himself to attain them, and there find the answer to all his wishes. His eye grows keener as he gazes, a voice from the earth calls it downward, and he finds all at his feet.

I was riding on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, musing on an old English expression, which I had only lately learned to interpret. "He was fulfilled of all nobleness." Words so significant charm us like a spell long before we know their meaning. This I had now learned to interpret. Life had ripened from the green bud, and I had seen the difference, wide as from earth to heaven, between nobleness, and the fulfilment of nobleness.

A fragrance beyond anything I had ever known came suddenly upon the air and interrupted my meditation. I looked around me, but saw no flower from which it could proceed. There is no word for it; exquisite and delicious have lost all meaning now. It was of a full and penetrating sweetness, too keen and delicate to be cloying. Unable to trace it, I rode on, but the remembrance of it pursued me. I had a feeling that I must forever regret my loss, my want, if I did not return and find the poet of the lake, which could utter such a voice. In earlier days I might have disregarded such a feeling; but now I have learned to prize the monitions of my nature as they deserve, and learn sometimes what is not for sale in the market-place. So I turned back and rode to and fro at the risk of abandoning the object of my ride.

I found her at last, the Queen of the South, singing to herself in her lonely bower. Such should a sovereign be, most regal when alone; for then there is no disturbance to prevent the full consciousness of power. All occasions limit, a kingdom is but

an occasion, and no sun ever saw itself adequately reflected on sea or land.

Nothing at the south had affected me like the Magnolia. Sickness and sorrow, which have separated me from my kind, have requited my loss by making known to me the loveliest dialect of the divine language. "Flowers," it has been truly said, "are the only positive present made us by nature." Man has not been ungrateful, but consecrated the gift to adorn the darkest and brightest hours. If it is ever perverted, it is to be used as a medicine, and even this vexes me. But no matter for that. We have pure intercourse with these purest creations; we love them for their own sake, for their beauty's sake. As we grow beautiful and pure, we understand them better. With me knowledge of them is a circumstance, a habit of my life, rather than a merit. I have lived with them, and with them almost alone, till I have learned to interpret the slightest signs by which they manifest their fair thoughts. There is not a flower in my native region, which has not for me a tale, to which every year is adding new incidents, yet the growths of this new climate brought me new and sweet emotions, and, above all others, was the Magnolia a revelation. When I first beheld her, a stately tower of verdure, each cup, an imperial vestal, full-displayed to the eye of day, yet guarded from the too hasty touch even of the wind by its graceful decorums of firm, glistening, broad, green leaves, I stood astonished as might a lover of music, who after hearing in all his youth only the harp or the bugle, should be saluted on entering some vast cathedral by the full peal of its organ.

After I had recovered from my first surprise, I became acquainted with the flower, and found all its life in harmony. Its fragrance, less enchanting than that of the rose, excited a pleasure more full of life, and which could longer be enjoyed without satiety. Its blossoms, if plucked from their home, refused to retain their dazzling hue, but drooped and grew sallow, like princesses captive in the prison of a barbarous foe.

But there was something quite peculiar in the fragrance of this tree; so much so, that I had not at first recognised the Magnolia. Thinking it must be of a species I had never yet seen, I alighted, and leaving my horse, drew near to question it with eyes of reverent love.

"Be not surprised," replied those lips of untouched purity, "stranger, who alone hast known to hear in my voice a tone more deep and full than that of my beautiful sisters. Sit down, and listen to my tale, nor fear, that I will overpower thee by too much sweetness. I am indeed of the race you love, but in it I stand alone. In my family I have no sister of the heart, and though my root is the same as that of the other virgins of our royal house, I bear not the same blossom, nor can I unite my voice with theirs in the forest choir. Therefore I dwell here alone, nor did I ever expect to tell the secret of my loneliness. But to all that ask there is an answer, and I speak to thee.

"Indeed, we have met before, as that secret feeling of home, which makes delight so tender, must inform thee. The spirit that I utter once inhabited the glory of the most glorious climates. I dwelt once in the orange tree."

"Ah?" said I! "then I did not mistake. It is the same voice I heard in the saddest season of my youth, a time described by the prophetic bard.

'Sconosciuto pur cammina avanti
Per quella via ch'è piu deserta e sola,
E rivolgendo in se quel che far deggia,
In gran tempesta di pensieri on deggia.'

"I stood one evening on a high terrace in another land, the land where 'the plant man has grown to greatest size.' It was an evening, whose unrivalled splendor demanded perfection in man, answering to that he found in nature, a sky 'black-blue,' deep as eternity, stars of holiest hope, a breeze promising rapture in every breath. To all I might have answered, applying still farther the prophecy,

'Una ombra oscura al mondo toglie.
I varj aspetti e i color tinge in negro.'

"I could not long endure this discord between myself and such beauty, I retired within my window, and lit the lamp. Its rays fell on an orange tree, full clad in its golden fruit and bridal blossoms. How did we talk together then, fairest friend; thou didst tell me all; and yet thou knowest, that even then, had

I asked any part of thy dower, it would have been to bear the sweet fruit, rather than the sweeter blossoms. My wish had been expressed by another.

> 'O that I were an orange tree,
> That busy plant!
> Then should I ever laden be
> And never want
> Some fruit for him that dresseth me.'

"Thou didst seem to me the happiest of all spirits in wealth of nature, in fulness of utterance. How is it that I find thee now in another habitation?"

"How is it, Man, that thou art now content that thy life bears no golden fruit?"

"It is," I replied, "that I have at last, through privation, been initiated into the secret of peace. Blighted without, unable to find myself in other forms of nature, I was driven back upon the centre of my being, and there found all being. For the wise, the obedient child from one point can draw all lines, and in one germ read all the possible disclosures of successive life."

"Even so," replied the flower, "and ever for that reason am I trying to simplify my being. How happy I was in the 'spirit's dower when first it was wed,' I told thee in that earlier day. But after a while I grew weary of that fulness of speech, I felt a shame at telling all I knew and challenging all sympathies. I was never silent. I was never alone. I had a voice for every season, for day and night. On me the merchant counted, the bride looked to me for her garland, the nobleman for the chief ornament of his princely hall, and the poor man for his wealth. All sang my praises, all extolled my beauty, all blessed my beneficence. And, for a while, my heart swelled with pride and pleasure. But as years passed, my mood changed. The lonely moon rebuked me as she hid from the wishes of man, nor would return till her due change was passed. The inaccessible sun looked on me with the same ray as on all others; my endless profusion could not bribe him to one smile sacred to me alone. The mysterious wind passed me by to tell its secret to the solemn pine. And the nightingale sang to the rose, rather than me, though she was often silent, and buried herself yearly in the dark earth.

"I had no mine or thine, I belonged to all, I could never rest, I was never at one. Painfully I felt this want, and from every blossom sighed entreaties for some being to come and satisfy it. With every bud I implored an answer, but each bud only produced—an orange.

"At last this feeling grew more painful and thrilled my very root. The earth trembled at the touch with a pulse so sympathetic, that ever and anon it seemed, could I but retire and hide in that silent bosom for one calm winter, all would be told me, and tranquillity, deep as my desire, be mine. But the law of my being was on me, and man and nature seconded it. Ceaselessly they called on me for my beautiful gifts; they decked themselves with them, nor cared to know the saddened heart of the giver. O how cruel they seemed at last, as they visited and despoiled me, yet never sought to aid me, or even paused to think that I might need their aid; yet I would not hate them. I saw it was my seeming riches that bereft me of sympathy. I saw they could not know what was hid beneath the perpetual veil of glowing life. I ceased to expect aught from them, and turned my eyes to the distant stars. I thought, could I but hoard from the daily expenditure of my juices, till I grew tall enough, I might reach those distant spheres, which looked so silent and consecrated, and there pause a while from these weary joys of endless life, and in the lap of winter, find my spring.

"But not so was my hope to be fulfilled. One starlight night I was looking, hoping, when a sudden breeze came up. It touched me, I thought, as if it were a cold white beam from those stranger worlds. The cold gained upon my heart, every blossom trembled, every leaf grew brittle, and the fruit began to seem unconnected with the stem. Soon I lost all feeling, and morning found the pride of the garden black, stiff, and powerless.

"As the rays of the morning sun touched me, consciousness returned, and I strove to speak, but in vain. Sealed were my fountains and all my heart-beats still. I felt that I had been that beauteous tree, but now only was—what—I knew not; yet I was, and the voices of men said, It is dead; cast it forth and plant another in the costly vase. A mystic shudder of pale joy then separated me wholly from my former abode.

"A moment more and I was before the queen and guardian of the flowers. Of this being I cannot speak to thee in any language

now possible betwixt us. For this is a being of another order from thee, an order whose presence thou mayst feel, nay, approach step by step, but which cannot be known till thou art it, nor seen nor spoken of till thou hast passed through it.

"Suffice it to say, that it is not such a being as men love to paint, a fairy,—like them, only lesser and more exquisite than they, a goddess, larger and of statelier proportion, an angel,—like still, only with an added power. Man never creates, he only recombines the lines and colors of his own existence; only a deific fancy could evolve from the elements the form that took me home.

"Secret, radiant, profound ever, and never to be known, was she; many forms indicate and none declare her. Like all such beings she was feminine. All the secret powers are 'Mothers.' There is but one paternal power.

"She had heard my wish while I looked at the stars, and in the silence of fate prepared its fulfilment. 'Child of my most communicative hour,' said she, 'the full pause must not follow such a burst of melody. Obey the gradations of nature, nor seek to retire at once into her utmost purity of silence. The vehemence of thy desire at once promises and forbids its gratification. Thou wert the keystone of the arch and bound together the circling year; thou canst not at once become the base of the arch, the centre of the circle. Take a step inward, forget a voice, lose a power; no longer a bounteous sovereign, become a vestal priestess and bide thy time in the Magnolia.'

"Such is my history, friend of my earlier day. Others of my family, that you have met, were formerly the religious lily, the lonely dahlia, fearless decking the cold autumn, and answering the shortest visits of the sun with the brightest hues, the narcissus, so wrapt in self-contemplation, that it could not abide the usual changes of a life. Some of these have perfume, others not, according to the habit of their earlier state, for as spirits change, they still bear some trace, a faint reminder of their latest step upwards or inwards. I still speak with somewhat of my former exuberance, and over-ready tenderness to the dwellers on this shore, but each star sees me purer, of deeper thought, and more capable of retirement into my own heart. Nor shall I again detain a wanderer, luring him from afar, nor shall I again subject myself to be questioned by an alien spirit to tell the

tale of my being in words that divide it from itself. Farewell stranger, and believe that nothing strange can meet me more. I have atoned by confession; further penance needs not, and I feel the Infinite possess me more and more. Farewell, to meet again in prayer, in destiny, in harmony, in elemental power."

The Magnolia left me, I left not her, but must abide forever in the thought to which the clue was found in the margin of that lake of the South.