

# THE BERRY PITCHER

ESTHER CLARK WRIGHT

THE little gray pitcher is gone. It had an ominous crack I remember, and I feared its days were numbered. It had lost its spout years ago, perhaps as far back as those dim and distant days when we went to the shore in the summers. I wonder if it lost its handle before it came to its end. I wonder how that end came: did some careless person drop the pitcher or pour hot water upon its cracked surface, or did it, in a berry field, break open and spill its contents?

The little gray pitcher was always assigned to me when we went berry picking. It was such a satisfactory pitcher for that purpose; it sat firmly on a broad base and bellied out above its base in such a way as to make it hard to upset; above its swollen lower half, straight sides rose so that berries did not easily spill out and the last part of the task of filling the pitcher was quickly done. The handle, too, was convenient, large enough for my hand, but slight enough for a finger in the top of the curve, if that was the desired way to grasp it. The gray pitcher held nearly a pint, ever so much more than the mugs the younger children carried, and sufficient to make a noticeable addition to the family kettle or pail when its contents were emptied into that receptacle.

As soon as school had closed, the family moved to the seaside, bag and baggage, horse and carriage, bedding and provisions. The gray pitcher and other dishes, and all the furniture, were left at the cottage from year to year. Almost before we had had time to get settled and to explore the fields and the shore and the new neighbours, somebody would find strawberries ripening along the fence. Then would begin the quests that took us off three afternoons or more a week, horse and double-seated carriage with three or four passengers to each seat, kettles, boxes, mugs, and the gray pitcher.

When wild strawberries were in season, our hope was modest, to get enough for supper, and triumphant was our return if that objective were reached. In strawberry time there was no feasting on the way home, unless some thoughtful member of the party had at the last minute picked stalks for that express purpose. All the berries would be needed for the strawberry shortcake, which would be the supper. When we reached home, grandfather put up the horse; mother made the fire, if the other grownup could be trusted with the important

task of mixing the biscuit dough for the shortcake; somebody picked over the berries (grandfather never hulled his and neither did his grandsons); somebody set the table; and the youngest children were dispatched to the farm for cream. Cutting open the biscuit sheet, when all the cooks approved the brownness of the crust, was always Mother's job. She buttered the halves, spread the lower half with berries mashed with sugar, then laid the upper half carefully upon it and heaped it high with the best of the berries, over a sprinkling of powdered sugar. The huge squares into which the shortcake was cut, were served in the large flat-bottomed saucers used for porridge in the mornings. They held cream, plenty of it, skimmed from the pan in the dairy by the farmer's wife, while the children watched impatiently and wondered if the shortcake would be ready when they returned with the cream.

Strawberries, and also blueberries, we found in a pasture, on the edge of the woods, a long, long distance away, to childish measurement, but probably not much more than a mile even in horse and buggy days. We drove down the road, perhaps at that time a distance of half a mile, with the long winding descent and ascent from the bridge over the creek; but now on the improved road the car's speedometer makes it less than three-tenths of a mile. At the entrance to the farm lane, there was always the business of somebody getting down to open the gate and to close it after the carriage had been driven through. In front of the farmhouse, a large, square, white house, with a narrow verandah adhering uncertainly to its front, there was an old-fashioned garden surrounded by a white picket fence. We children thought it a marvellous garden, and were greatly thrilled by an occasional invitation from the farmer's wife or daughter to step inside the enclosure, and almost overwhelmed by the gift of a bouquet of fat pink roses or of gaudy marigolds.

Other people picked berries in the pasture, too many of them sometimes, and we would have to drive further afield, past all the houses of the settlement and into the woods, to try our luck along the roadsides or in the half-cleared or burnt-over areas. Wild strawberries are chancy things to seek, and the presence of vines and leaves in abundance is no guarantee that berries are present. There may be berries on those vines the next summer, if you can remember where to find them; the summer after, also, you may find a few, smaller berries on those same vines. After that, if the vines have sent out successful runners, the cycle begins again. The worst enemy

of the wild strawberry is the plough. Where the farmers of a district are converted to crop rotation, there are no fields and pastures left undisturbed year after year, and only on the islands, the dykes, the right of way along the railroad, do strawberries have a chance to send out runners for their necessary renewing.

There used to be, close to the Basin of Minas, a pasture that had escaped the plough, whatever its later fate may have been. The wild strawberries were small one summer, but plentiful; the sun shone graciously; the long Fundy tides rolled ceaselessly in and out over the miles of mud; the white houses of Kingsport gleamed in the morning sunshine; and the red cliffs, the green fields, the dark spruce woods of Blomidon stood out clearly above the blue waters. There was a magic in those July mornings, and healing for a worn body and a sore heart.

Once, two scorners of the highway, on their way to Evangeline Beach, climbed over a remote corner of the fence that encloses the Grand Pré park. On their way up to pay respect to monuments and historical remains, they found in the long grass wild strawberries, great clusters of them, large and sweet and ripe. Hastily they gathered stalkfuls, and hid them in their lunch basket, lest any other visitors be tempted to stray from the lawns and the paths and the worshipping at the shrines to discover the treasure hidden in the long grass of the unguarded part of the enclosure. Next year they went to the park again in strawberry time, only to find that the field where the strawberries grew so richly had been ploughed up and planted to apple trees, an improvemen for which the Commissioners doubtless praised themselves highly in their annual report.

After strawberries come raspberries. Picking raspberries is no gentle exercise of wandering over hayfield or pasture and stooping from time to time for the fruit whenever it is to be found. Picking raspberries is a strenuous day's work, which involves climbing over rocky hillsides, clambering through brush piles, and leaping over blackened tree trunks amidst the confusion that lies in the wake of a forest fire. The pickers on their way home compare scratches on arms and legs, and tears in clothing, but they also point proudly to pails and kettles full of luscious fruit.

Of course, raspberries, like strawberries, have been taken into the garden and have increased in size and sweetness, and have acquired names and pedigrees. Raspberry bushes are trained to grow in decorous rows and are neatly tied to stakes.

The berries are placed carefully in very small boxes, the smallness of the boxes due, as the grower explains, to his wish not to allow the berries to crush themselves with their own weight. There is much to be said for these cultivated raspberries, especially since their seeds have been bred softer, and since the old-fashioned white ones have disappeared from gardens. I do not know whether the white ones affected other people the same way, but they had for me a disagreeable odor, and I always found it exceedingly difficult to thank a kind neighbour who presented us yearly with a bowlful of them. My one desire was to get away from the unpleasant smell but, instead, I had to stand there holding the bowl and making polite speeches, all the time trying not to turn up my nose and not to see the white worms crawling among the berries.

Wild raspberries bring to mind pictures of many places along the coasts of the Maritime Provinces, as well as of the seaside where we summered. There was a glorious morning on Grand Manan, which tempted to early rising, begging at the kitchen a glass of milk and a piece of blueberry cake left from supper, and setting out for the "whistle", as they called the foghorn at one end of the island. There were raspberries all the way, a very refreshing supplement, both as food and drink, to the hasty breakfast. There was another morning at Wolf River, near the end of the road along the Albert County coast, where a little brook leads the road down through the hills to a millpond and a gorge cut deeply into the rocky coast. A beautiful place it was on an August morning, the mill and the houses empty and deserted, only ourselves there—and the raspberries, on which we gorged to our hearts' content. Or the picture is of the Cabot Trail in Cape Breton, with the car climbing slowly up French Mountain, and one of the passengers hanging out the window, crying out that there are raspberries and more raspberries. Finally, a stop is made, to look down three thousand feet to the sea below, and back along the valleys where the hills fold one upon the other along the little streams—and to eat raspberries. Another stop is made, for another magnificent prospect, and more handfuls of raspberries.

Blueberry season follows closely upon raspberry season. Sometimes, in those pickings during the seaside holidays, we would come upon both, and either take a choice of which each would pick, or else pick both and leave it to the person who looked over the berries afterwards to sort out the red from the blue. The gray pitcher was particular, and preferred

one kind at a time, generally showing a partiality for blueberries. The pitcher seemed to shrink as the summer advanced to become much smaller in raspberry time than in strawberry time, and still smaller in blueberry season, when it filled with amazing rapidity and had to be emptied again and in in the course of the afternoon.

Supper on the days when we had been picking raspberries and blueberries was not the exciting event that it had been in the raspberry season, but we did look forward with much eagerness to the next day's dinner. For supper the berries were eaten raw, with cream and sugar, but for dinner on the following day they were used in pie or rolypoly. The pies were made in deep dishes, with no bottom crust, and with a top crust held up by a specially constructed funnel which carried off the steam and kept the pastry from the juiciness beneath it. The rolypoly was made of biscuit dough, rolled thin, spread with berries and sugar, then carefully rolled up and the edges sealed, laid on a large saucer or soup plate and put in the steamer to cook.

Blueberries have not been taken into the garden as freely as raspberries and raspberries have, although a few tall bushes with enormous round berries are seen here and there. In regions best suited to their growth they are produced in enormous quantities and shipped by the carload to the markets and to the canneries. In alternate years they undergo ordeal by fire, when the covering of hay is burned above them; and in the years when the crop is gathered in a combination rake and dust-

The product turned out by the cannery is a poor substitute for the home bottled berries, which are boiled up quickly with sugar, and which taste, when the bottle is opened, as fresh berries they had just been gathered and stewed. I can never understand why dried blueberries are not more frequently used, for they are better than currants for cakes and muffins.

Once or twice a season, in the summers at the shore, we used to undertake a longer excursion, partly for blueberries, but chiefly for cranberries, the little rock cranberries, some called foxberries. They grow on little vines, with very small leaves, and they hug the rocks among the moss. When they are fully ripe, the cranberries are a dark red, but when we were gathering them, in late August, they were white underneath and light red on top. There was no temptation to eat the berries on the drive home, for they are most unpleasantly and tasteless until they are cooked. Their tartness makes

them combine well with blueberries, and by themselves they make a richly flavored pie, or a delicious jelly, if the yare cooked with equal quantities of sugar and water.

The little gray pitcher survived all those summers at the shore, and went to the pasture for strawberries and blueberries, to the woods for raspberries, to the rocks for cranberries. Then it managed to endure through several winters of use for holding crabapple jam and jelly, made from a large crabapple tree in the garden. It was still in existence when a camp was built along the river, and it went into service again for picking strawberries on the island and along the railroad tracks, raspberries in the clearings in the woods, and blackberries along the fence. Now it has gone, along with the horse and carriage and the days of family berry-picking, to the Land of Things That Are No More.

---