"The Boundaries of Eden". • •

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Esther Brucklacher Warner

The following letter was written to Dr. Pearl Hogrefe, of the English and Speech Department, from Esther Brucklacher Warner, ’38, whose husband, Dr. Robert Warner, is in research work for the Firestone Rubber Co. in Liberia, West Africa. The Warners made the trip to Africa in October, when torpedo boats in southern waters were already making voyages dangerous. While a student at Iowa State, Mrs. Warner was secretary of the Sketch publication board, member of Writers’ Round Table and Chi Delta Phi. She studied for her master’s degree at Columbia University.)

. . . There is so much to tell you that I am uncertain where to begin. Perhaps all the isolated pieces of our life will fall into a more sensible pattern if I give the setting first; so I will ask you to come with us in our fiery red pick-up Ford, “Chief,” from Monrovia, the port, to the research area of this huge plantation.

According to the “Literature,” Monrovia is the size of Ames, but it looks like a jumble of mud huts and unpainted, corrugated-iron structures built up along rambling bush paths. Most of the culverts have caved in under the weight of concrete paving, so that one wishes there were a leaping attachment on Fords. As it is, the tires thud in and thud out of the depressions, and one’s spine telescopes together with each thud. And then I wish there were an earthworm attachment on humans so their spines could be untelescoped by a good wriggle! The shops are open-front, corrugated-iron “caverns” in whose dank interiors one can buy, off rough unpainted shelves, moldy-smelling merchandise, geared in color and quality to native tastes.

Out of Monrovia we pass through palm groves, past mangrove swamps, through grassy areas with occasional high trees, and between “high bush” which comes down to the road like a green wall on either side, so that one feels the road is excavated out of green moss, rather than that the violent growth is on top of supporting earth.

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The plantation begins thirty miles from Monrovia; but as there are about 90,000 acres in the plantation, one never feels he is home when he enters the rubber trees.

My former idea of rubber trees was gained from seeing shiny-leaved potted specimens with a layer of dust on all horizontal planes displayed in the windows of Greek restaurants. I was quite unprepared for the tall ash-like trees with spotted trunks which resemble those of the sycamore tree. I have learned since that the spots are white fungus growth. Near the base are the rough tapping scars winding obliquely around the tree. Like amateur first-aid bandaging. One oblique cut is made half way around each tree every time it is tapped. The bark renewal results in scar tissue. It is too wound-like to leave me feeling comfortable, but there are other trees to be enjoyed in their beauty.

Our house is in the Research Area, which is a very lovely location. One leaves the rubber and drives along palm-lined roads of brick-red earth and approaches our house by winding up a hill between low-growing oil palms. They are shrubby, and their graceful fronds meet over the lane at a height to brush the top of the car as we drive home. It is like passing through a live, green Gothic archway, and it has something stately in it too, like the arch of crossed sabers at West Point weddings.

Once through the arch of palm frond, we see our red brick house against a background of low hills, and beyond these, higher hills covered with high bush. The house itself is very big. The red corrugated iron roof looks like red tile, and the eaves are so wide that the house seems to be sulking under a big red hat. The front part is on eight-foot brick stilts. Before we planted vines to bridge the gap between earth and house, I always got the effect of a huge animal resting on his slimmer hind quarters but reared high and anticipatory on his front feet. We built trellises and planted native vines the first week we were here, and they have now grown from seed to the top of the trellis in less than fifty days!

After climbing a flight of concrete steps you are ready to enter our living room which is about the size of the faculty lounge in Memorial Union. Two and a half sides are screened and have French doors which can be shut against rain, although this is seldom necessary because of the protection from the eaves. We
are really on the "second-story," although there is no first story, nothing but piers beneath us. One feels in an out-of-door living room, because the palms are so near and the birds sometimes fly against the screens.

Besides the master bedroom and the bath, there is a guest bedroom, for you. David, the steward boy, will unpack your bags; and you will probably be a bit uneasy, as I was, at having a strange black boy go through your bags and hang your dresses in the dry closet where an electric heater is always in operation to discourage mold, and put your jewelry and underthings and hairpins and hosiery, much to your surprise, just where you would have put them yourself.

When you awaken from your afternoon nap, you will be surprised to see that noiseless hands have been at work while you slept. All your shoes have been shined in a way they could never be shined in America. They are sitting in a neat row at the foot of your bed. All your dresses have been taken from the closet while you slept and perfectly pressed, and returned again. Clean underthings have been taken from the dresser and put in the dry closet, so they will be warm and dry when you are ready to put them on.

When you awaken about four, you are surprised that you could sleep in such bright white light, but to shutter out the light is to close out the pleasant breeze, so one learns to sleep with the light.

When you have had your bath and have found that the only way to get dry enough to dress in the humid atmosphere is to stand before a fan, you are ravenously hungry. The fragrance of fresh tea, of fruit, freshly sliced, of cinnamon toast, and of freshly roasted and salted ground peas (peanuts) hastens your dressing.

From tea time until dinner is cool and pleasant. We might play tennis or go to the bush to collect exotic plants, or visit a native village or drive to a latex station, but you have had a hard day and we have not seen each other for much too long, so today we will sit quietly and talk of many things. There will be plenty of time later for these other adventures.

Twilight is a beautiful time of bird songs, blue haze, soft breezes, sweet smells from night-blooming flowers, and an insect
chorus from the swamp between our house and the mountains. There is an old bull-frog whose pompous bellowings are as dramatic and seem as self-conscious as the vocalizing of a famous baritone. It is the light of the moon, and there will be drums and dancing all night in the near-by labor camp. An occasional booming in intricate pattern gives promise of the throbbing rhythm that will begin later and last until dawn. Christmas is approaching, and that means the Devil is unusually active. The boys will not leave the house except in groups carrying lanterns and armed with cutlasses. Many a boy has disappeared because "the Devil got him." If he is ever seen again it is as a corpse from which the heart has been cut out, but usually no trace is found of him. We will hear the Devil's pipes later. Sometimes they seem to come from the mountain just back of the house and sometimes the sound seems to come from the valley and echo against the mountain. To suggest that the Devil might be men is dangerous. We, by a great stroke of luck and the help of a civilized native, were able to obtain a Devil pipe. One night Bob got it out and without thinking, blew an experimental blast. When I went to the kitchen the boys were crouched in the corner, quivering and as pale as it would be possible for colored boys to become. I put them all to work at once, but I am sure they think the Devil passed under our house that night and that they had a miraculous escape.

All food is called "Chop," and chop is at eight at our house, although when we go out to eat, chop is usually at ten or eleven. We will dress for dinner. At first this seems like too much trouble—one is always bathing or sleeping or dressing. Now I have come to see that in a changeless land men must make their own changes through activity and dress and customs. So, dressing for dinner is not a foolish vanity; it has a function in a land where women especially are likely to "let down."

Bob sits at one end of a long table and I at the other, and you are between us on the coolest side of the table. It would be quite impossible for us to pass any food to each other but that is not necessary. David will serve us first because he has been told he must. Why white men prize and honor women is quite beyond him, but at any rate he will manage the serving so that Massa gets the choicest portions! In movies, the shot of two people dining
alone at opposite ends of a long table and looking at each other
over an expanse of white linen, flowers, and candles has always
seemed either pathetic or very funny. Here it is just another new
experience.

Tonight we are dining “off the land.” We start off with shrimp
cocktail. A boy named Ga-ga (Pessi for “duck”) brings live
ones every morning in an old rusty bucket covered with banana
leaves for shade. No matter what he asks I offer a third less, and
he will agree after a time for my price plus a cup of rice “for
dash” (gift). We cook them like lobster, dropping them one at
a time in rapidly boiling water. They change from dull olive
drab to rosy salmon in a few seconds, after which Sammy Cook
shucks them out of their shells. Having the water at rapid rolling
boil was an innovation to Sammy. I went to the kitchen one day
and found he was giving them a slow stew in a small kettle, and
they were still kicking. I couldn’t eat shrimp for several days
after that, and Sammy was completely baffled at my anger. The
boys are completely unaware of suffering in animals or other
people, and very stoic about enduring pain themselves.

We have stuffed water deer (shot by ourselves) for the main
course. At first I couldn’t eat a bite of deer. They seem to me the
most beautiful creatures in the whole animal world. But the
scarcity of fresh meat and the poor quality of tinned meat work
together to break down one’s sentimental ideas.

Then we have baked native sweet potato, fried eggplant, and
a platter of browned pineapple slices.

Dessert is papaya pie, which is like pumpkin pie except that
it is more subtle in flavor and doesn’t need spices from cans; its
own flavors are sufficient . . .

. . . But you have had a big day and I prattle on. The trip
into Monrovia in one of the little surf boats which bring you
from the ship was hot, the ride out was rough, and the tropical
heat makes all newcomers want only to eat and to sleep for
several days. So to bed now! our mosquito net is tucked in under
the mattress, David has laid out the night gown he thinks you
should wear (always the prettiest one), and your slippers have
been set just the right place to step into them. To step even once
on the floor bare-footed would invite trouble. A strange animal
called a “jigger” lays eggs which hatch out just under the skin.
They swell and itch and swell. When they are finally “ready,” the egg sack is as large as a pea and must be removed intact or the eggs will hatch more deeply in the tissue. Getting the sack out is not as bad as having the hole poured full of iodine!

When you are under the mosquito net you feel like something on exhibit at an old fashioned farmers’ short-course, before the days of cellophane and show cases. You ring for David to turn out the light; he brings you a “night cap” of mixed fresh fruit juices and disappears with your shoes. It gets to be almost annoying, this business of always having one’s shoes whisked away, as though one had a right to them only by keeping them on his feet.

Down in the boys’ quarters, the boys and the wives and Jabo, the small girl, are softly crooning Bassa songs, and you fall asleep with the lullaby.

Before you have been here long this world which seemed so strangely beautiful and dream-like at first seems the real world, and the world we left seems a place where all people hurry too much and where there is a terrible war going on. But surely that must be another planet. What could conquest have to do with this Eden-like spot? The only conquest I see is the conquest of jungle re-claiming men’s painful and laborious clearing. Yet, actually, I know that beyond the mountains back of our house where wild monkeys play in the high trees, the “cats” and the shovels and the scoops are working night and day to finish the new airport. The boundaries of Eden are not wide! But I feel that I have had you inside them with me a short time.

Sincerely, ESTHER B. WARNER

Globe Trotter’s Anchor

Helen Taylor

H. Ec. So.

Padua, Farrara, 
Madagascar, Nome, 
New York, London, 
Paris, Rome, 
Tibet, Rangoon, 
Manila, home. 

Heat, sand, 
Grasslands, loam, 
Mountains, lakes, 
Ocean foam, 
Palm trees, pine trees, 
Hall trees, home.