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Irma Wassall

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## WADE IN THE WATER

*Irma Wassall*

**A**LL THE AUGUST DAY, under the lazy sky, we felt the sticky heat. Late in the afternoon a haziness came into the heavy air, slow clouds formed, grew, and drifted together, until a smothering blanket lay in the sky between the earth and the sun, and the oppressive air was hard to breathe, like steam in the lungs.

I remembered such an afternoon far from Kansas, in the Tierra Caliente, the hot country, at Tamazunchale in the valley of the Río Moctezuma in Mexico. The village, divided by the river the color of dull jade, spanned by a bridge of shining steel, is less than five hundred feet above sea level, in the lowlands of San Luís Potosí, at the foot of the mountains incredibly towering.

Immediately I felt the weight of the humid heat dragging like chains upon me, I thought aloud, *storm*, but was told it was the great variation in altitude and temperature, and the fatigue of traveling, since early morning, through the mountains.

Now, as then, sensing the storm before the clouds had gathered, and averse as a cat to being drenched, I stayed in my apartment. Suddenly, at five o'clock, the clouds, as from the heaviness of water above them, were torn apart like sleazy paper, and the rain spilled down, the torrent of water mixed with globes of ice, the hail.

Through a window away from the slant of the storm, the wind brought the smell of bruised leaves. The marks of drought on the elm leaves, edged with brown, were incongruous in the almost solid fall of water. The mulberry leaves, against the wet brick wall bright red in the rain, shone glossy and green as the hail tore through them and whipped them loose from their moorings on the Asian-yellow branches.

It seemed the trees themselves must break and fall. The ventilator in the ceiling rattled like a "lights out" sound effect, and bits of leaves caught in the window screens, while the lightning flashed on and off like a turning beacon, and the thunder in the clouds mingled with the thunder on the roofs and ground.

So it was in Tamazunchale, when we walked from the one-story structure of single file, separate-entrance rooms, slowly through the hot and clinging dampness to the dining room. The rapid descent of the clouds was like the usual quickly falling darkness in the tropics. As the lights were switched on, a young man in oilskins hurried to close the windows of the rooms. As the storm swooped down, the other diners moved toward the center of the room, away from the screened-glass window-walls. Of two handsome, expensively-dressed couples from Chicago, the women looked frightened, and their men-of-the-world husbands seemed anxious. Voices, though lifted against the clamor of the storm, could scarcely be heard.

I stood looking out. The whole world turned brilliant white as the bombarding hail struck with a terrific din upon the roof, filling the night with noise. In the almost continuous flashes of lightning, the bridge shone through the downpour, a thing of silver filigree delicate as any piece of jewelry in Taxcan *platerias*. I could see the hail stripping the long leaves from the palms, the trees threshing about in the violent wind. I shuddered at how it would have been on the mountain highway with the sky thus falling upon the car, if we had not reached the village before the darkness and the storm began. There was also the danger of rock slides, inevitable in every hard rain.

Some of the huts along the highway had no walls, the roofs, usually of thatch, propped up by poles. I asked, in Spanish, the little Mexican serving-boy who, with terror in his small brown face, came to draw the curtains across the great windows, what shelter the occupants of such huts had from the weather, and he said, "They move over to the other side." He also told me, through his chattering teeth, that he had never seen so terrible a storm in Tamazunchale. Several people were sure to be killed by roofs falling in upon them. A few days earlier, he said a boy had murdered his father with a hatchet; the storm had followed to punish the entire village now so mercilessly battered.

I crept between the drawn curtains and the glass, only the thin transparency separating me from the spectacle without. The electric

system was disabled, and to add to the ghostly effect outside the windows, flickering candles were lit and placed upon the tables.

Finally, the hail was succeeded by a downpour of rain. As the rain diminished, the lightning, still intermittently flashing, revealed the shambles of vegetation, the fallen branches, leaves, and flowers strewn upon and beaten into the ground; and the hailstones heaped at the feet of the palms and against the buildings.

The Kansas street was a flooding river of brown water, down which I saw a great leaved branch floating. Who would not think of Noah, and those who drowned when all the earth was covered with swirling water, and the Ark floated free and safe with its priceless cargo of men and animals and plants?

The river itself must have risen out of its banks, rushing and foaming among the trees beside it, carrying broken, even uprooted, trees, pieces of houses and other buildings, a white chicken standing on a moving crate as on a raft, a drowned hog, and a black horse, scrambling up the steep slope out of the water, sleek and wet as a seal.

Worse than the flood itself is the land after the waters recede, coated with viscous mud, slimy and stinking with the rotting plants of inundated fields and gardens, with pools of stagnant water and the carcasses of animals. Once my house servant came in, gray under the blackness of his skin. "Are you sick?" I asked, and was told, "A ol' man that works at the dessicatin' plant got on the bus, without changin' his clothes. Everybody in the bus held they noses. He was fixin' to set down by me, but I said, 'Go 'way f'om me, man! You cain't set down here!' But it made me sick to my stomach right on. I knew if he set down by me he might get some o' that stink on me, and you wouldn't want me to come in here smellin' like a dead horse, would you, Miss?"

Walls could not keep out this rain. Around the north windows, the water entered and ran in rivulets across the polished floor. Once I came home through such a flood, the car wheels throwing water as in the wake of a boat, among the elegant machines not made for swimming or floating, then, as now, helpless in the water, the heavy busses plowing through like side-wheeling river boats, to my second-floor apartment with the windows left open, to find pools standing on the pale brown floor.

I worried about leakage to the apartment below, remembering paper ceilings ruined by water, the brown mottling somehow connotative of decay. Once rain leaked through the pale blue ceiling over the lace-covered, black-lacquered table in our dining room; and one of us painted futuristic white clouds touched with pastel pink and gray, over the ugly stains. After the tropic storm at Tamazunchale, I noticed that the ceiling was wet, and did not wonder that so many Mexican ceilings are water-spotted. And there was the hotel in the little Arkansas town, the walls of the high-ceilinged bedroom badly watermarked. Great patches of plaster had fallen, leaving the bare laths. Once, at home, I was awakened at three o'clock in the morning by a loud, metallic crash and a feminine scream. I saw through the slat-screen of my door that a galvanized washtub had been set under a leak in the hall of the apartment house, and, one of the hall lights having burned out, a girl visitor had fallen over the tub.

At last the intervals lengthened between flashes of lightning and, though thunder continued to growl, daylight seeped through the thinning clouds, and the sky brightened. The sidewalks were completely covered; the trees seemed to be growing out of the water. Only a small whirlpool indicated the storm sewer opening. Cars left a wake of foam like ships. I remembered storms in New Mexico, striking suddenly and violently, between the arid, piñon-dotted hills—the yellow water plunging like a palomino down the dry arroyos, flecked with foam like the creamy mane and tails of the golden-hided horse.

Now the sun almost shone through, though the rain still fell noisily, through the watery sunlight, the flood pocked by the hard falling drops, the dancing children, the rain-babies. The house servant said, "Whoo-wee! Miss, it's rainin' all colors o' babies out there. Think I'll go out and get us a couple. I'll get you a black one and me one that's yellow to the bone."

A space of blue widened above the street—"the Dutchman's breeches in the sky" remembered from childhood—though still the rain veiled the more distant trees with gray. A fire bell clanged.

People began to wade about their business. A woman in a sun-suit, barebacked, inched her way along the curbing separating a yard and the sidewalk, like the edge of a swimming pool. Another woman sat on the iron-rail fence and dangled a foot, in a bathing shoe, in the water.

A bald-headed man in a raincoat, barefoot, barelegged to the knees, remarked loudly, "What a climate! It dries up, and if it doesn't blow away it's washed away!" As other men—one, a young bank clerk with straw hat and spectacles—waded with trousers rolled to the knees and shoes and socks in their hands, a woman called from her window, "I wish I had a camera!" A middle-aged housewife with flowers on her hat removed her shoes and stepped down from a bus.

The noise of the storm and the roar of recalcitrant motors gave way to the gleeful screams of wading children and the laughter of watchers as the wheels of busses and automobiles flung water on the waders.

When I was a child I waded. I remember the cold muddy water rising around the small-child thighs. And I remember more recently a spiritual, "Wade in the Water," sung in Greenwich Village by four Negro men, with irresistible rhythm, accompanied by drums and tapping feet, surrounded by the fantastic murals, among them Refregier's painted lady in evening dress, with orchids at her throat and waist, and a record-player for a head. Before me was a tiny glass of Pernod, liquid emerald dimmed by dark smoke, poured over a cube of sugar, and the green liquid with the shadow in it turning to white smoke in the clear water, opalescent, milky. (Did the pearl look like that when Cleopatra dissolved it in the clear acid wine before she drank it?) "Wade in the Water," sang the Golden Gate Quartet at the Sheridan Square Café Society, the four dark voices blending so movingly that, behind the impassive face like a mask with shining eyes and slightly parted lips, and the tightly clasped hands, in feeling one leans the head on crossed arms and sobs, or leaps up and cries aloud in out-of-this-world ecstasy.

The water receded, the dripping grass emerged; the sidewalk, and the red bricks of the pavement, appeared. The shallowing water eddied into the storm sewers, the last of the flood guttering into the pipes to the drainage canal. Cars moved as usual along the street in the evening traffic rush. The sun was gone again, this time in setting. Having forgotten the lightning, I went out under the cleared and quiet sky to see the colored sunset.