

Letter from W. J. Caparne to Mr. Wister

December 1920

Dear Sir:

I take pleasure in replying to your letter and I should like to congratulate you on having a Society which honors and supports so worthy a subject as the Iris.

Perhaps it will not be amiss if I tell how iris came to be connected with my name, tho' in a sense that is of no consequence. Most of my activities in life are the result of ideals born at quite early periods and after greater or less stages of 'double trenching' have one after another come to the surface and grown and blossomed with interest, satisfaction and some success. The word Iris always flamed up in my mind, from the days when wandering among them I used to pull down the stems to smell of the flowers and later it became a passion to try and illustrate them, a passion which I began to carry out as soon as I possessed a garden. Happily for me a great revival then was occurring to bring herbaceous and other plants to notice and to induce an intelligent interest in the garden to replace the streaks and bands, rounds and squares of this, that, and the other color which monopolized the ground and its master's taste together, and amongst them Irises took a first place with that splendid enthusiast Peter Barr to exhibit, collect, and distribute them. He, with of course others, did a grand work and in conjunction with the equally ardent propaganda of William Robinson in the Garden and Garden Illustrated papers, gave new life to the horticultural world, which materially helped to the advancement of today. My pictures pleased Dr. Foster (since Sir Michael Foster) who was the classical authority and great exponent of the subject and with visits to his home at Great Shelford and his unbounded kindness, my Iris knowledge began to grow apace and he commenced to send me, as they flowered, whatever he had of interest in species, or new hybrids and types worth illustrating, together with many plants for my collection, and as I was an ardent hybridist as keen on colors as on plants, rather with the artist in that matter than with the scientist, I had unrivaled opportunity for crossing. No pollen from any flower sent me was wasted if I had anything on which to try it; this would not please a scientist who wants chapter and verse for everything whilst I asked for beauty only, of form, color, and habit, and where a species was niggardly with only one flower, or so, to produce more; or when the season of flowering was short, to prolong it; in short whatever I deemed desirable to amend the position. Other keen Iridists came in and helped; Rev. Henry Ewbank sent me in a tin box an enormous bloom of Iris Lorteti and again in a bigger box Iris Gatesi, whose like I have never seen again, but both are down amongst my pictures. Dr. Graff, too, so kindly sent me oncocyclus; these more normal served to glorify the others and to give high rank to their possibilities. I could never grow the oncocyclus myself, but the regelias were fertile, amenable if dug up for the summer, kept dry in the greenhouse and planted again in gravel or ashed soil in October, they increased at a great rate. My soil was clay and oolite limestone, and the majority did well; many so well that I have never seen their like since—liars all, some would say of these pictures, but when I came to Guernsey from this cold midland (Northants) I happened on a small field with a soil well trenched and sanded, warm,

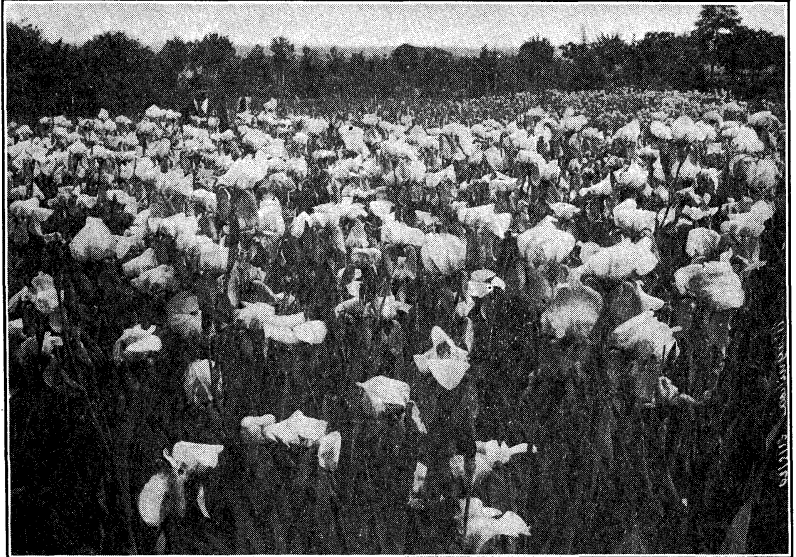
clean and delightful; the plants revealed in it and a great improvement set in in colour—the warm oranges, reds, yellows and browns and bronzes took on rich tones which were a treat, and others slow to bloom came up apace, and I never saw such a show. Happily I have pictorial reminders of it for, alas, they had to go and the bit of ground is again covered with bushes and mortar. The nearest field available was another cold clay again, my weeders had disliked caring for my labels so sent the boy of the party round to collect them in a heap; after that, as the majority did not bloom there again, I never knew where anything was; then another move, no better soil or result; then another, peat; there I am now on the cliffs, and here they do not get enough food to produce flowering rhizomes. This completes the history of the plants to date.

Thanks are due to you sir, for the trouble you have taken in enumerating the varieties I had sufficient stock of to list when trying to make the subject pay some of its costs under the commercial title of this old sheet of paper, (The Iris Plant and Bulb Co.) but it wouldn't, and therefore came to end in conjunction with the misfortune shown above, but please allow me to say that I am just as much interested as ever in them and my notes of plants which bloomed, but did not get listed still amuse me and show there is encouragement for members of your Society. May I recall a plant eight inches high, flower four inches in diameter, standards pure white, falls pure rose: another hybrid of Korolkowi, standards ivory, falls warm pink with ivory tinge; a third, standards white, falls clear satin emerald green like the wing of the hair-streak butterfly; another; standards, white, falls cobalt blue and purple shot. The waifs and strays of them all now help to decorate my cliff side ever and anon; a few of them show courage and color, keep hope alive, and look after themselves for I try to arrange my place as if every thing occurred there naturally, a system which is pleasant, but has obvious drawbacks from a cultivator's point of view. Our thousands of mice of various species, vegetarians all, and rats, smell out the delicious scented rhizomes of some, the stealable and portable nature of others, and the irises tend to lose their best and yet are never killed, while an army of snails and slugs all do their part, and as a cat at a plate, best first is the rule, which they practice with an intelligence which is enviable,—we are apt to overlook or depreciate the knowledge of wild things which has no relation whatever to their size or shape, but is of its kind as good as ours any day though it does land some of them underfoot. The end of December here as I write finds me surrounded with blooming furze, a few campion, wild radish etc., and foxgloves still in bloom; nasturtiums disheveled by gales still all green, and I saw yesterday a tall holyhock with its many flowers still in full beauty. What a chance you will say for Iberica, Susiana, Helenae and the others, but no, every oncocyclus was killed out and eaten up by the second winter, the rest wise in their generation know that it will be abominable in February and so stop silent and asleep, the variegatas all get their possible blooms drilled out and no one would ever suspect what virtue lies around had it but the chance to thrive.

I should like to suggest to your hybridists the values of certain plants for their work; for dwarf plants, *Iris Mellita*, *arenaria*, *rubra*, *marginata*, *Balkana*, this latter has great possibilities both for color and form. Something ought to be done with *cristata* and its friend *verna* and with others of the North American species which as far as I know want a garden constitution and a break in colour. People frankly don't believe me when I say there is *Gatesi* in *Ivorine* and *Empress*, but both spots and streaks are occasionally in them. *I. Kashmiriana* and its var. *persica* are both excellent, though not hardy, and have

helped in the Intermediates. It has always been a grief to me that these latter are obstinately neutral and decline children with modern insistence. At the same time it should be noticed that bimorphism, separation of sire principles, seems a growing factor, so that a plant having no pollen or having deformed anthers has often excellent stygmas and is good for seed and vice versa, while the one with abundant pollen has shriveled stygmata with no moist surface to them, an absolute essential; in others, particular pollen grains will often grow farther than they were intended and so a large flower can often be fertilized with a small one's pollen. It is needless to remark that a green house is an essential to link up early and late flowers though they do not care for forcing, and the variegatas, that most desirable group are scarcely advanced a day by green house heat (here at any rate) for the joy of life outdoors in May and June makes the others ramp and catch up so fast, but it is good for selective purposes. As regards assistance from passing insects it is well to snip off the blade of the fall when you have fertilized a flower, not too far perhaps, for I think there is something in the tightly rolled up petals which may be a necessity for fruiting.

It may be interesting to your Society to know that none of these irises are "Guernsey Irises" they were all raised in Northamptonshire when I was an assistant master in the Crocus Company's School at Arundle and when Shelford was accessible. Circumstances brought me to Guernsey and the never ending wonders of this place combined with the spectacle of its flower-growing industry in beautiful surroundings have kept me painting in it ever since with the result that the records of its flower producing sights, its climatic developments of exotic trees and shrubs from remote parts of the earth, its Himalayan Rhododendrons, New Zealand evergreens and even semi-tropical plants are transferred to pictures in a great collection.



Field at Verrieres, Magnifica in the Foreground.