

# FOLLOWING PETER BARR IN HIS HUNT FOR DAFFODILS

By TOM D. THROCKMORTON, M.D., *Des Moines, Iowa*

"Sent José to the place, but the farmers would only let him dig up a few bulbs. (These proved to be smallish trumpets, white tinged-sulphur, of *Pallidus praecox* style). Along with Mr. Olay and his friend, went in search of *Narcissus* and found a few in a meadow, and collected a few more bulbs. Along the river Gafa, a small turn close to Oviedo, in a small coppice we found a lot of *Narcissus Ajax* out of bloom. Returned to a cider cellar and refreshed ourselves. In Oviedo we saw a public building where infants are taken in and reared. This was an old nunnery until, with others, it was suppressed. The baby is deposited from the outside in a round cage which is then turned around and a person inside receives it, when a wet-nurse takes it in charge and acts the part of mother. At 8:00 p.m. we all went and supped, and a very fine supper it was. Good fish and mutton well cooked, cheese, four sorts of Asturian and Leon wine: total charge 3 douros (15 pesetas.)".

Thus wrote Peter Barr on April 26, 1887.

I have spent a fascinating summer re-living the experiences of a great plant hunter; I have read season-by-season descriptions of the gardens of Mr. and Mrs. R. O. Backhouse, and enjoyed their seedlings as they bloomed; I have worked for 20 years with the late W. O. Backhouse in developing his first red trumpet daffodil; I have broken the code the late George Johnstone applied to his seedlings, and I helped him care for the bombed-out families of southern England during World War II; and I have helped the late Mrs. Doris Long operate the Trenowith Valley Farms, a large commercial bulb operation in southern England, with ties to the Scilly Isles.

You see, through the thoughtful kindness of Matthew Zandbergen of Sassenheim, Holland, I have had access to the garden or travel journals of these people. How delightful it has been to peer into the minds of these daffodil lovers; to wonder, worry, fret, plan, and succeed with them. And to read between the lines: how descriptive is the single word "Burnt", when written large in pencil across the description of a small clone of seedling daffodils.

I would like to share some of these experiences with you and I believe you, too, will find them of interest. There is no stage like daily life, no actor like a confirmed gardener, and no plot quite like addiction to daffodils.

On this occasion let me bring to you excerpts from two Journals of

Peter Barr, as he sought and collected daffodils in Portugal and Spain. These diaries were written in 1887 and 1892, well beyond Barr's sixtieth year. What kind of a man was he? A bearded figure with a strong personality and a broad Scottish accent that almost shaped the words as he penned them. Born in 1826, he founded Barr and Sugden in Covent Garden in 1861. Almost 50 years later he remembered Covent Garden as "a place where a few old women brought some marigolds and grandmother's flowers for sale".

His deepening interest in daffodils and spring gardening led to the nick-name "Daffodil King". Others, either in close friendship or distant jealousy, called him "Peter the Great". After rescuing the daffodil from obscurity, Peter Barr hunted the flower into its very birthplace, where he collected, categorized, and catalogued. An anecdote published in an *RHS Daffodil and Tulip Year Book* draws the broad outlines of this almost legendary figure: "On one occasion Peter Barr was traveling in Spain and stayed the night at an inn; there was only one room available, in which there were two beds, and he found he was to be charged for this as a double bed in spite of his protests; the Scottish nature no doubt came out when he spent half the night in one bed, and half in the other." Excerpts from his diaries, on which I have exerted some editorial prerogative, fill in the details of a plant hunter eighty years ago.

As Peter Barr wrote:

"Went on board the S.S. Carthage and was in the Channel by evening.

"In the Bay of Biscay. In bed all day, feeling ill but not sick! Most passengers ill. Gained a little strength and was able to take an airing". (Ed. — I know just what he means.)

"By steamer to the 'Green Island' of Moors, a Spanish fortification. The oranges here are very unlike those we get in London, almost melting in one's mouth and quite sweet. One of the remarkable houses I entered had a double row of columns, clean and whitewashed; no furniture, the family squatting on the floor around a fire in the corner. The houses are beautifully cleaned and whitewashed. One wonders how these people live. The men, in groups, were playing cards under the castle wall. The boys and girls followed the visitors, while the women-folk appeared to be doing nothing — yet the houses were all clean, inside and out; all doors open and inviting inspection. Outside the town was the Bull Ring.

"Left Gibraltar for Tangiers. An east wind had been blowing and the apes had been seen on the N.W. side of the rock. Above this point, the barracks are situated. The large guns were in practice this day. The steamer to Tangiers is small but strong, doing duty as passenger boat or tug as circumstances required. Visited the marketplace,

abounding in donkeys, mules, and camels. Also huts in which the owners squatted, to rest for the night. After seeing the town, went out on a mule with Hadi Rifi and Mr. McLean on a botanical run. Saw white Tazzeta Narcissus out of flower. Rain came on, and for a time very violent, and it was very cold. On the abatement of the storm, we returned to the hotel.

"The Moors are mostly white, especially those who are indoors most of the time; others more exposed are tanned with sun and perhaps dirt. Women go about with their children fastened above their hips. They move much bent forward. Mr. McLean says the Moor is an immoral man and can put his wife away at any time. Should they come together again, a strange man must cohabit for one night with the woman, before she returns to her husband.

"Took boat to Cadiz and had a look around. Started for Jerez; saw the 'Twelve Apostles' (large sherry casks each containing the same quantity of sherry, 6,500 liters in all). And a very fine brown sherry. I also saw the Jubilee Cask of sherry made especially for Queen Victoria.

## **GEORGE LEE BECOMES FIRST EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADS**

The position of Executive Director of the American Daffodil Society, created by the Board of Directors at its October meeting last year, has been filled by George S. Lee, Jr., of New Canaan, Conn.

Mr. Lee, a charter member and past-president of the ADS, is a keen horticulturist of varied interests, and retired a couple of years ago from the Railway Express Agency's office in New York City.

The Board created the job of Executive Director in view of the steady increase in clerical details and correspondence which has accompanied the growth of the Society. As the first to fill the position, Mr. Lee will handle the keeping of membership records, mailing of publications and general notices to members, and all correspondence involving memberships, supplies, records, and business matters. Much detail formerly handled by the officers of the ADS will be centralized in the office of the Executive Director, with the purpose of giving individual members better service in their contacts with the organization. The director's salary has been set at \$100 per month.

Under Mr. Lee, the ADS executive office will be located in his home at 89 Chichester Road, New Canaan, Conn. 06840.

The brand she drinks, like Queen Isabella, is a blended sherry. Reached Seville the same night. Weather fine!

"Took train to El Cerro; was met by Alexander MacNabb, who conveyed me to the mines by special train. In loading up the copper, much of the carrying is done by women. One was pointed out to me who could carry about 18 tons a day and then spend the evening in dancing. In the valley of the mines, where sulphur fumes had not destroyed the vegetation, I saw growing yellow *Narcissus Corbularia*, the first I had met with.

"Started for Aguamonte, by train to Gibraltar; and was conveyed from the station to the town by omnibus, and then by coach with five light-aged horses with the usual old trappings and rope reins. The ride was a most pleasant one, cultivated fields bordering either side of the road. I saw many large cemented basins used for treading out the corn by oxes, instead of threshing it out as we do. So that here the operation may be seen as practiced in Palestine 2,000 years ago. Further along the road *Narcissus Corbularia* in the margin of cultivated land, sometimes intermingled with blue *Iris*. But the grand sight was the yellow *Corbularia* in a Pine wood; a mass of gold as far as the eye could reach. On the whole, the ride was one of the most agreeable I have had in a stage coach in Spain.

"Had a good look at the church and cathedral at Tejo. The Bishop was on his throne wearing his golden cap and surrounded with priests. The priest to give the sermon, after ascending the pulpit, first prayed bareheaded; then put on his cap and commenced his sermon which he gave *ex tempore* with a good flow of language. In the midst of the sermon he stopped for some time to leisurely spit and blow his nose. A feature of the churches in Tejo are the blue and white tiles depicting scriptural subjects. Have seen no *Narcissi* in Portugal except one or two between Villa Real and Tejo.

"Spent the whole day driving about in a coach to see more of Lisbon but not with marked success; indeed, I might call it a Don Quixote day. I saw what I did not ask to see, and did not see what I wanted to. Moral: know the language of the country you visit and have a guide who knows the language of the country and yours.

"Went some distance from Coimbra; to the south-east is a Pine wood in which grows *Narcissus Triandrus Concolor* var. Moller: clear, full yellow. Gathered about 250 and would have collected more but did not find the place until afternoon, so that only one hour could be devoted to collecting. The ride was most pleasant and extended to the Town. Opposite the Moorish castle was a chapel with some women about, one crawling on her knees doing penance. Mrs. Tait watched her progress with much interest and declared the knees must have been protected, as

she rose and descended with a great bundle on her head and walked as if her knees suffered no inconvenience.

"Left Oporto and reached Tuy in the afternoon. On entering one church I was arrested and had to go to the Alcade to obtain permission to go about town and visit churches. For the churches, he said, I must see the Dean. So, to him I went and obtained a permit. A peseta to the policeman secured him as a firm friend during our stay in town.

"Left Tuy for Lugo and stayed at Monforte for lunch. All along the line were yellow Narc. bulbocodium in the meadows. After leaving Monforte, about three miles on the right, saw one meadow with trumpet Narcissi and yellow bulbocodium. Returned back to Lugo.

"Made a visit to the churches, after passing an examination by the Governor of the town to make sure we were not anarchists. The cathedral is very fine; and impressive are the city walls from which fine views are to be had of the surrounding country. The town is still lighted by petroleum.

"John Mesa, the old gardener, and I went to Corrales, a rough place. Where we stayed the floor boards had never been swept or washed. John Mesa and I slept in one bed, the sheets of which were as white as snow, and the pillow cases bordered with lace. We returned to Coruna without doing any business.

"John Mesa, I, and Angelo (Ed. — The triandrus Angel's Tears was named for him) went to San Pedro de Nos Carballo. In a field on the right a few bulbs were found, but lower down on the right of the field any quantity were growing on cultivated land. This gets turned over each year and no doubt the bulbs will disappear in a few years. It is a variety of Johnstoni.

"Went on horseback to Trubia. The horse had four legs, but three of them were lame. That is, the two front legs had bad knee caps and the left hind leg seemed to have lumbago, so that the action was somewhat peculiar: a motion forward, backward, and sideways all at one time, so that I never knew whether I should fall off or go over the horse's head or tail. Fortunately I managed to stick on and so escaped biting the dust. After great exertions, we covered four miles in three hours. I noticed that I was an object of interest to all on the road, but did not know why. I had left the choice to Angel (my boy) and when I got to Trubia I understood the reason. I then saw the horse into a meadow. In the evening I trusted to my own legs and walked back to Torrelavega in less time than the horses had taken. Angel declared that his pace had improved since morning. Thus, another lesson was learned: Namely, to carefully examine a horse, donkey, or mule before mounting, thus escaping doing a bit of Don Quixote for the amusement of other people.

"Left Coruna for Santiago de Compostella at 12 noon in a conveyance drawn by eleven horses and mules: some two and others three abreast.

"Mr. Tait states that the potash contained in the gorse maintains the fertility of the land in Portugal, as it had done for centuries without rotation of crops. Seeing that *Narcissus Ajax* grows with the gorse, potash must be the food it uses. Where the soil is shallow, the bulbs bury themselves down, more or less, and are firm and large. When near the surface, they are soft, probably due to a lack of moisture at the roots.

"The *Narc. Corbularia* growing near the railway station have among them many of an orange colour, very fine, growing in sand or in sandy-loam, the richest coloured ones being among young pines.

"Left Oporto for Orense and reached Valencia do Minho between 3 and 4 o'clock P.M.; from thence to Tuy where luggage was examined. The train then proceeded to Calvario in Spain, where we waited three hours for a train to Orense which we reached about 10 p.m. The noise in the house was so great we could not get any sleep until after 12 o'clock. When the men and women had gone to bed, two cats commenced the fun and kept it up well through the night. Up at 6:30 a.m. and had a look at the river Minho, and decided to work for the day.

"The Rio Los Ponjos empties into the Minho. We followed this river up for some distance to the Rio de la Chimanea and found a large clump of *Narc. Ajax*; either bicolor or *Johnstoni*, which we at once bagged and made a vigorous search for more. The roots were growing 9 inches deep in a strong yellow loam in an oak wood, which gave shade in the summer.

"Packed bulbs for London: Boxes 1 and 2 contain bulbs from Santa Maria and Reza, about 2,500. Boxes 3 and 4 contain about 1,600 *Narc. Ajax* from the River Calvos, 700 *Ajax* from Allariz and 300 *Ajax* from Venta de Soto Penedo.

"Found two priests and about twenty nuns conducting a service. I enjoyed the day and returned home with our donkey.

"Left Ponferrada for Leon. Passed through tunnels into a fairly fertile compana; then through waste land with hills in the distance, covered with snow. Our guards were composed of a little man and a tall handsome powerfully built fellow, looking a typical brigand. Just before reaching Torio station, saw few white *Triandrus* on the right, growing on hard slate formation.

"Left Leon for Oviedo Santibanez. There, saw an old woman with house slippers and sabots, raising her about three inches off the ground. Immediately after leaving the station, saw a black-brown eagle. The meadows were now full of yellow *Corbularia*. The Asturian



Mountains have snow on them. We run alongside the river Orbiga for a short distance and pass an old aqueduct for carrying water over the river. We pass many villages with houses all crowded together. The mountain is called Nocedo, covered with snow in patches. The mountain scenery is now grand and snow is seen almost down to the railway line. A cloud of eagles appear like a flock of crows. Snow now everywhere, with clear air and bright sunshine. Villamanan . . . a group of villages with meadows of yellow *Corbularia*. The hillsides covered with black sheep, (white quite the exception). A further steep incline and we entered upon a bank and meadows covered with yellow *Corbularia*. Busdongo station, 11:50 a.m. The box where refreshments are sold called 'cantina'.

"At the hotel they baked my shoes in the oven and destroyed them.

"Went to Senor Ramoni's house and collected a few *Narcissi*, but it came on to rain and we had to leave off. The rest of the day was spent in saying goodbyes and purchasing a pair of wooden shoes.

"Today the landlord accompanied us by road and we visited the tunnels, one after another, but could not find the *Corbularia* and so returned to our lodgings to meet my numerous creditors who had collected *N. Corbularia* and crocuses. In the meantime José and the man went to look for more *N. Minimus*, and returned with a few in full flower. We returned to Leon and spent the Sunday visiting and seeing a procession taking the 'Mother of God' (a figure under a canopy of silver) home to her village, some miles distant. She had been brought to Leon to pray for rain, as there had been a great drought. Her visit was well timed, as on her arrival rain came and lasted for 9 days and she got the credit for it. Her church was crowded with worshippers, from morning to night! Her return was accompanied with large demonstrations, music, flags, etc. While at Leon, the Marques de Cervese was my guide and showed me much, providing also many introductions to bishops, priests, governor of the province, minister general of the forces, and many other illustrious persons.

"Collected *Narcissus* on tiny island in water (*N. Cyclamineus*) and slept on a bed of Indian Corn leaves at Senora Diez's being waited upon by her daughters, Aurora, and Felecia. Collected what appeared to be *Narc. Cyclamineus* and the girls confirmed this when I showed them a painting. They may be said to grow in water, and in England could safely be cultivated in semi-marsh land where in the summer they could be fairly dry. I found them growing in tree clumps, moss, etc., but the bulbs themselves were in loam. The brook where they are most abundant is near Diez's house.

"Started on horseback 5 a.m. and remained on its back as far as I could go. When the horse was done up, Posset and I started on foot

over the snow and reached the mountain ridge country between Spain and France. On descending had splendid views of valleys and mountain peaks. Further down we were challenged by soldiers who wished to know who I was. In the distance was a posse of soldiers awaiting our approach, so we got a public and military reception at Burgete. It had been reported that Torelle, a famous bandit, was about to enter Spain and I was suspected of being the man. The Commandant saluted and we entered the house to refresh ourselves. Shortly afterward the Commandant joined us, and Posset and he had a long discussion. We then had dinner, rested for some time, and then resumed our journey. I on a mule. The St. Lena Cascade and the Cascade de la Chella very grand. Leaving the village of Tolosa at our right, we reached a small hut and found a through of whey of which we drank freely. We then proceeded over a rough bridle path and it was astonishing how the mules ascended the stoney way and sharp inclines, and crossed rivers knee-deep among large boulders. The scenery in the Val D'Arras is grander and more wild than I have yet seen. The formation reminded one of the cathedrals and castles of Crystal.

"Up at 4 a.m. from our resting place under a ledge of rock. Had a little wine and bread and ascended to the Narcissus quarters. After a long and arduous trudge we came to the spot and found it cleared of Narcissi, 12,000 having been taken 2 days before. It appears that Celestin, Posset, and Pierre had had a commission. Very few remained, and these will be collected. At the base of Mount Perdu and Soum se Ramond, we found Narcissus Moschatus at 8 p.m. (Ed. — At this time P. B. was age 62.)

"N. Poeticus was in bloom, but N. Nobilis generally over, even at higher altitudes. At last, rain came down heavily and we beat a retreat, all getting very wet. We made for a Cabana where we sheltered and lit a fire. We explored the valleys, on the way down. A hunter informed us that there were Narcissus in the Pic d'Orhy valley, 8 hours distant.

"Started on horse about 6:30 a.m. from Lecumberri and ascended to about 1,600 meters with Raphael. I gathered a few Narcissi on the Spanish side and doubt not it abounds down the eastern slope in Spain.

"Left Bayonne for England; Bordeaux was all illuminated to commemorate the anniversary of the Republic.

"Sailed for England and arrived at London Docks on Monday morning, July 18, 1887, having been absent from home for five months."

Thus, Peter Barr, the Daffodil King, returned to his empire. And who would gainsay him the title then . . . or even now.