The Walled Garden

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MANILLA
PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
MANILLA PRESS
An imprint of Bonnier Books UK
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London, WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

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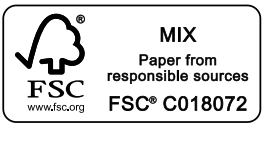
A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978–1–83877–952–2
Export ISBN: 978–1–83877–926–9

Also available as an ebook and an audiobook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Manilla Press is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

Secrets, silent, stony sit in the dark palaces of
both our hearts:
secrets weary of their tyranny . . .
History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying
to awake.

Ulysses
James Joyce

Prologue

SOME SECRETS ARE TOO terrible to tell. And in 1946 Britain is a country where most keep silent. What you witnessed during the war, what you sanctioned, what you are still afraid of, is left unsaid. For those bitter years of conflict and separation you buoyed yourselves up on sentiment, crooning 'We'll meet again'. And we did meet again, thinks Alice Rayne, only to discover we have nothing to say to one another.

The wind whipping in off the North Sea slaps her face and, pushing her hair from her eyes, she glances back over the marshes. Arcs of crimson cut through the darkening sky, dazzling and brilliant. Then the sun dips below the flat horizon.

She turns and draws nearer the waves glinting in the raw twilight. Just that afternoon, the army finished clearing the mines, rolling away rusting tangles of barbed wire, tearing down warnings of DANGER. No one will see, she thinks. No one will know. It's been so long since she's felt the sea's closeness, tasted salt on her lips. Before she can doubt herself, she strips off her old tweed coat, woollen dress, the lot, and, naked, runs for the freezing grey waters.

Shock makes her cry out and she almost loses her nerve. Gasping for air, she forces herself in up to her waist then, closing her eyes, she lets herself fall forwards and under.

She knows only cold. But as her temperature drops her body stops fighting. Pain eases, breathing calms. All she has to do is merge into the waves, ice into ice. She's no longer frozen but indomitable. She can stay in forever. She can swim on and on. Away from it all.

A break appears in the clouds and a pale moonlight spreads towards her. It's as if the shimmering train of a wedding dress is lying over the sea. And into her mind flashes the spectre of a bride without a groom.

1

PLEASE GOD, NO ONE is watching, thought Alice, as she scrambled over the shingle, her legs numb. She grabbed her clothes, attempted to dry off, then stumbled up to the dyked path that took her to the short cut through the marshes and out across the fields of winter beet.

In the hedgerows, the first of the blossom held fast to bare, spiked branches. And despite feeling desperate for warmth, she was tempted to linger. Anything rather than go home.

But she'd been gone for more than three hours. She couldn't delay any longer so she continued on to the lane that took her back to Oakbourne Hall. 'Just having a quick walk,' she'd said to her husband as she'd left. 'Will you join me?' He hadn't answered. She hadn't expected him to.

Her pace slowed and she looked up. She could hear the geese before she saw them. Then hundreds upon hundreds of steely grey birds were filling the sky, flying in their V-formations for the migration north – the clearest sign that winter was over. And briefly her senses lifted: it would be the first spring in peacetime for seven years.

All week there'd been hints of sweetness: golden aconites round the abandoned Nissen huts, narcissi piercing the uncut grass, a wren nesting in the ivy engulfing her bedroom

window. An enormous bedroom, she reminded herself sternly as she marched on, whereas millions have nothing. When she read the papers, it seemed as if the entire land mass of Europe was still on the move, mile upon mile of exhausted men and women, clutching their children, pushing prams and laden farm carts, fleeing who knew what blood and horror.

But she was privileged to live in what was known locally as 'the Big House'. No matter that the War Office had commandeered it for a battalion of Canadian soldiers and the place was wrecked. 'Some people have all the luck,' she'd overheard the butcher's wife mutter in church when Stephen, her husband, came home from the war 'all in one piece'. He had been the very last in the village to return. From where, he refused to say. Let alone what he'd done. But he was alive.

And you're alive, Alice insisted, straightening her back as she walked on past stumps of centuries-old chestnut trees felled early in the war to make . . . What? Weapons? Coffins? But such thinking was pointless.

Now they could plant new trees.

The world was at peace.

We won.

We actually won.

But a chill, even more brutal than the sea, kept churning through her as if there had been no victory and all the warbling about 'love and laughter and peace ever after' was as elusive as the end of the rainbow. When she thought back to VE Day, almost a year ago, and the nation dancing deliriously in the streets, it seemed as if they'd been caged creatures allowed their one day of freedom who, the moment

their euphoria was exhausted, sank straight back down into all-consuming drabness.

But now it was time for rebirth.

In the fields around her, lambs bashed savagely at their mothers for milk, sharp new needles of wheat shot through the hard earth, and overhead crows clawed at each other in a brutal battle for territory. She forced herself on round the concrete pillbox, overrun by rampant rhododendrons.

Her chilblains were stinging now. She'd be thirty soon and already her feet were ugly, crooked things, her hands even worse. Veins stood up in her reddened, roughened skin and her engagement ring – a band of stony diamonds that had been in Stephen's family for two centuries – twisted loosely on her finger.

Again she paused. All too often she was conscious of unease – not of the terror they'd just been fighting, but a new danger she could not quite see. Or was too scared to contemplate.

She thrust her hands in her pockets and kept her head down as the local doctor's blue Rover pulled up outside the cottage where Mrs Martin was expecting her third child. A victory baby, thought Alice. There were two more due in the village.

She heard the doctor groaning and cursing as he heaved himself out of the car. He'd lost his leg after being taken prisoner at Dunkirk and a stab of self-reproach – don't whinge about chilblains – spurred her on to the Gate Lodge where Oakbourne Hall, occupying the one sheltered spot for acres around, lay before her.

At dusk, the fine outlines of the original Tudor manor and its Jacobean, Georgian and Victorian extensions were

silhouetted across the lake: the clock tower, the vast bay windows, the marble colonnades, the west wing topped with battlements, the east wing with a dome. And, for these few fleeting moments, she could almost persuade herself there had been no war. The gathering darkness hid the empty oil drums dumped in the shrubbery; the sandbags, split and soggy, spilling out over the terraces; the broken glass.

A light came on in her husband's study.

During all those nights of blackout and appalling anxiety she had longed for this, to come home to her husband, safe at his desk, waiting for her. Yet still she delayed, shivering beside the crumbling gate pillar, a casualty of the army trucks that for five years had rolled in and out of the requisitioned estate.

Lights too were on in the Gate Lodge and she could see into the kitchen where Mrs Harris was standing at the sink, her husband by her side helping with drying up. Their only son had returned after three years on the Arctic convoys. But he was 'in bits', Alice's housekeeper had told her. 'Just sits by the fire, saying he can't get warm.'

Three years, thought Alice. Three years of desperation and worry for his parents, missing the youth growing into a man, aching for his loving presence and now . . . She stopped herself.

Just that morning she had seen pictures in *The Time*s of scores of lost children, orphans with dazed and hungry eyes in a monastery in France, and the moment she began to imagine how it must feel to lose your husband or your child or your home she found herself in such a blinding waste of misery it was intolerable. I must go to my husband, she urged herself. I must hurry.

Then, through the window, she saw Mrs Harris lift her arm to her eyes as if to brush away a tear. And at the sight of the woman's sorrow, Alice waited. She could see Mr Harris put down his tea towel, reach over and take his wife's hands out of the sink. Holding each in turn, very slowly, he dried them. Alice stood perfectly still, mesmerised as he lifted his wife's bowed head and brought her lips to his.

Abruptly, Alice stepped away. She did not want to dwell on the tenderness in those gestures. A twig cracked under her foot. A deer barked. The bushes stirred. A storm was getting up. They'd lose even more tiles off the roof tonight.

'Mark my words,' her father had said when she'd married, 'out on that Suffolk coast you'll freeze. There's nothing between you and the Urals.'

She turned to embrace the wind, filling her lungs with mile upon mile of space, beyond the fields and dykes, the rough grey sea, over vast lakes and forests, all the way to Siberia, when a shriek, like the sob of a desperate child, rang out from down by the house.

That cry was a hare and she knew exactly what drama was being enacted. Last night, when she couldn't sleep, she'd watched three fox cubs tumbling over the lawn with their mother. All needing to eat and feed on some living creature. She shoved aside the image of a young leveret – easy prey – in the jaws of a vixen. The nature of things, she lectured herself, beautiful and monstrous. Then, to her astonishment, she saw the window to her husband's study open and Stephen climbing over the sill, leaping down and sprinting across the gravel.

Since his return he'd just dragged himself from hour to hour, barely finding the energy to speak, let alone go vaulting

out of windows. Now he was storming into the untended flowerbeds, searching through overgrown thistles and nettles. Then he stopped, bent down, sprang upright and, without any hesitation, smashed his foot into the ground, dealing, she presumed, a quick, merciful death blow.

He must, she realised, have heard the hare cry and found it horribly injured. When she came across rabbits rubbing blind, pus-filled eyes as the paralysis of myxomatosis set in, she too would steel herself to spare the gasping bundles a slow, painful death.

Except that Stephen didn't stop.

Again and again, harder and harder, he was stamping and stamping. She wanted to yell at him that the poor creature had to be dead, but she only shrank further into the shadows as he kicked out and she saw, flying six feet high, the silhouette of a hare – the magnificent hind legs, the long spine extended, reaching for the sky . . . Mid-air, the hare split in two, its head and decapitated body falling into the bushes.

She clasped her hand to her face to silence her breathing. Until that moment, she'd not witnessed the violence her husband was capable of. Whenever she asked him about the war he'd shut her up with a cold glance or storm away as if she was trying to prise open Pandora's Box and he couldn't stand the stupidity of her questioning. So, who he'd killed – or how – she didn't know.

No one survived war untarnished. Not even the sweet, gentle soul she'd married. And she wanted to take him in her arms, to promise she'd make it all better, that her love would soothe whatever demons war had unleashed. Then, overriding her compassion ran fear. What if he turned on her?

There was no denying the power in his body, how he could deal death in an instant. He was stronger than her. Faster. Practised. And she imagined the weight of his boot, her windpipe choking, her neck being crushed.

2

ALICE STOOD AT THE tap in the empty stable block, washing her hands in the icy water. Since last night, she'd avoided Stephen. She'd gone straight to her room, leaving the light on until four in the morning because it was too disturbing to replay in darkness the frenzied actions of the man she loved. But under the brutal glare of the overhead bulb she began to see things differently. The hare, she reasoned, hadn't died immediately. Because she'd been a good fifty yards away, because it was nightfall, she hadn't seen clearly. Of course Stephen *appeared* vicious. Who in their right mind wouldn't rage if given the responsibility of killing such a beautiful young animal?

She rubbed carbolic soap into the scratches on her palm from hacking back brambles. War had done this to her: conditioned her to fear the worst and that incessant sense of dread was lingering on. Even now, the beauty of a full moon could resurrect the terror of the Luftwaffe taking over the skies.

She dried her hands on her skirt then, glancing up as the first of the bats flitted from under the eaves, she saw a plane heading south-west towards London. Nothing to be wary of, now.

Stephen was not the enemy.

Though who he was, she was no longer sure. He refused to talk so she could only guess at what memories he hid. She'd tried to reach him with words, with silence . . . her body. He wanted none of it. From the night he'd come home he'd slept alone in a room up in the attic. The message could not have been clearer.

She scraped the mud off her shoes. After last night's storm the ground was wet and her shoes leaked. She'd neither money nor coupons for new ones. Too bad. The rain had been good for the garden. And for me, she thought, breathing in air that tasted washed and sweet, grounding her with the common sense she'd let career away last night.

She'd already lost six years of her marriage to Hitler. She wasn't going to lose any more because of her own morbid imagination and she hurried inside and found Stephen at his desk, a notepad before him, a pen in his hand. Normally he just slumped by the fire. Please God, she begged. Let him be writing again!

When they first met and she discovered he wrote poetry her twenty-year-old self had been over-awed: Stephen Rayne, the brilliant young diplomat, the civil servant with the artist's soul.

He wrote in French – thanks to his Parisian mother, he was bilingual. Alice's French was limited but she could translate the reviews and his first collection, published shortly after they were married, had been described as 'Wordsworthian, beautiful, bold, generous . . .'

Years ago, they would lie in bed reading Baudelaire and Rimbaud and he would correct her accent, taking her lips between his fingers, saying, 'Hold your mouth like this', and the warmth of his touch was like sunlight pouring

through her. She'd thought even if war comes and bombs fall on me this very minute it will be all right, because I have known this.

'What is it?' he asked, not looking up.

Trying to take the eagerness out of her voice, she said, 'Are you—?'

'Am I what?' he interrupted, scrunching up a sheet of paper and hurling it into the fire.

'Writing?'

'Hardly.' He screwed up more paper. She watched that go up in flames. Then a third ball.

'Oh, stop!' she said, intercepting the fourth and smoothing it out. 'Let me read . . .'

'Leave it!' he yelled. 'I said . . . !' At once she dropped the paper as he sprang forwards and grabbed the poker. But he just bashed the paper into the fire, then turned to her, despair written on his face. And she felt a reciprocal pain beat in her. This desperate man was no danger to her. Only to himself.

'It's good to see you . . .'

'What?'

Doing something, she thought. Anything but sit for hours on end, as if nothing matters anymore.

'Don't destroy it just yet,' she said. 'Perhaps it's better than you think. And you're so good.'

'You've no idea whether it's good or not.' He threw the rest of the papers on to the fire.

'When you got it right in the past,' she ventured, 'it brought you . . .' He sneered but she carried on. 'It brought you joy.'

As did I, she thought. She'd unleashed something truly good in him – ideas, confidence, words. Or so he'd told her.

'Did your walk, my dear Alice, bring you *joy*?'

She'd learned to ignore his awful, warped irony. It would pass. 'I was working in the garden actually,' she said. 'But it was lovely out.'

He stared into the roaring blaze, the sudden light emphasising the lattice of lines and hollowness around his eyes. He looked far more than seven years older than her, but it wasn't simply because of the ageing in his face. It was the resignation in all his movements, every expression, his voice.

'I didn't mean to shout earlier,' he muttered. 'I'm sorry.'

She leapt on his apology, almost giddy with relief. 'That's all right.'

'Meet anyone on your walk?' he asked.

She'd just told him she'd been gardening. But she was used to him not listening.

'No,' she said simply. When she did go for walks she deliberately kept to herself as she hated fielding the questions: 'How is Sir Stephen?' Or the enquiring lilt with which people commented, 'We've not seen him for such a long while . . . ?'

'Though,' she continued, trying to engage him, 'yesterday I did see Dr Downes's car outside the Martins'. Their baby's imminent.'

In response he lit a cigarette.

She pressed on: 'There was a taste of spring. You know, blackthorn, odd daffodils, snowdrops on the wane . . .' She heard her clichés prancing about like tired circus clowns trying to grab his attention. 'Perhaps you might come with me tomorrow?'

'What's that?'

'We could go for a walk together.'

'No . . . And tomorrow? Is that when we've got this new vicar coming round?'

'Yes, but you don't need to be there—' The last thing she wanted was for anyone to think that this caustic, cynical man was the real Stephen. 'I'll make some excuse for you. I'll tell him you've got a bad cold and you don't want him to catch it.' The new vicar – his predecessor had been at pains to let everyone know – had a heart condition.

'Thank you.' And he gave her a straightforward smile, not his usual twisted turn of the lips. Then, to her surprise, before collapsing into his chair, he laid a hand on her shoulder with what seemed like affection.

Cautiously, she sat on the stool by his feet, so close now, she could reach out to him. You used, she thought, to let me lift your hand to my face, feel your warmth against my cheek and, one by one, I'd slowly take your fingers in my mouth. I would devour that potent mix of strength and tenderness and you loved it.

'You'll catch cold in those wet shoes,' he said.

She didn't move. Her stockings too were sodden. She ought to remove them as well.

The last time she'd undressed in front of him – she could remember exactly – was 18th November, 1943. She'd received a telegram – from whom, she'd no idea – telling her he would be at a hotel in Hastings. They'd have almost forty-eight hours together before he returned – to France, she presumed, doing undercover work, though she'd followed the rules and never asked.

Somehow or other – typically he would not explain – he had brought with him a gold guipure lace shawl. At one point they'd gone for a walk along the seafront and

rain had thundered down from nowhere, soaking them through. So they'd hurried back and run a steaming bath. When she emerged he'd presented her with the shawl, wrapping it around her hot, flushed body and she'd danced for him, turning and twisting in the faded, shabby room, naked except for golden lace, until he caught her in impatient arms and told her, over and over, how much he loved her.

She was conscious he was looking at her. Most evenings, if he hadn't disappeared off to his attic, he just sat with his eyes closed, seeing God knew what ghosts. She searched his face but couldn't read anything there beyond exhaustion.

Slowly, she rolled down her stockings. She pointed her foot at the fire and turned her ankle, the sort of ankles, he'd once said, that made him imagine them entwined behind his neck. Still, he was watching her. She slipped off the stool. Easing back, she stretched her bare leg towards him and smiled the smile she used to give him when they were in a crowded room, at a party or dinner together.

Then, letting her skirt fall further up her legs, she rested her foot on his thigh.

'Poor old thing,' he sighed. 'You've got chilblains.' And he walked out of the room.

She felt ridiculous, sprawled on the floor. But he'd actually touched her – put his hand on her shoulder. That was a first. Besides, it was early days. He hadn't even been home six months as he'd not returned till October 1945.

October?

Once more, the questions began needling away. The war in Europe officially ended in May so what the hell had he been up to after that? She'd heard nothing from him. The

first she'd known he was still alive was when she received a telegram saying he would be on the next train home. And again her imagination seized her and to stop its claws digging in she leapt up. She'd lose herself in an old botany journal of her father's. Pollen production in foxgloves, the microbiology of acid soil, effects of temperature on viability of cotton seeds. In the incongruities and intricacies of nature she could forget this world where peace had been bought at such a price, where men and women could still be so cruel, even in their own homes.

She headed off down the damp corridors to make her habitual three hot water bottles. You won't be the only one, she told herself, lying under the covers reading in a cold bed. Men and women had become strangers to one another all over the world.

All over the village. Her housekeeper, Mrs Green, had told her Mrs Downes, the doctor's wife, had to be a saint to put up with the raging temper her husband had come home with after five years in a German POW camp.

In the kitchen she found four empty tea chests had been delivered. They were for transporting a collection of Venetian glass – built up by the Rayne family over generations – to a millionaire steel manufacturer in Chicago. At the end of the week a delivery van would take the glass to Liverpool to be loaded onto the *Queen Mary*. Just this morning men had also finished work in the hall dismantling the Jacobean oak panelling as that too was heading across the Atlantic, along with marble fireplaces from two of the bedrooms – the best ones had already been sold to a Wall Street banker – and the stained-glass window of irises which had somehow remained intact when a truckload of Canadian soldiers

coming back from a dance had reversed into a wall, missing the window by inches.

Alice felt disappointment pressing upon her. It wasn't so much for the loss of the dazzling glassware. She'd become ruthless in selling off porcelain, paintings, the better pieces of furniture, whatever could make money. It was a malaise that, she feared, was increasingly like Stephen's.

For almost a year now, since the Canadian army's departure, she'd sorted through dusty rooms, trying to make them habitable again. For her and Stephen. For the children they'd once talked about having. But whenever she mentioned the state of the house to Stephen he'd just mutter: 'I couldn't care less – and nor should you.'

So she'd taken charge, trying to bring Oakbourne Hall into the second half of the twentieth century which, they were forever being told, was going to be so very much better than the first.

She was tempted to leave the packing till morning. The electrics in this part of the house were shot to bits so she'd be working in the dark. But something triumphed over her tiredness and made her drag the chests round to the cupboard in the scullery. She lit half a dozen candles. Lovely fluted goblets, whisky tumblers, brandy balloons, all in such brilliant colours, glittered before her like jewels, destined now for someone else's party.