

Watching the Roses

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WATCHING THE ROSES



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RHCP DIGITAL

For Frances Wilson

ONCE UPON A time, I was a good girl and no trouble to anyone. Now, everyone is worried about me, although I don't think there's really anything that dreadful or strange about my behaviour. I do not want to speak, not at all, not to a single soul in the whole world, and therefore, I'm not speaking. I decided not to speak a week ago, and since then not one word has passed my lips. I stay in this room. I do not want to leave it. They bring me food on a tray and when they've gone, long after they've gone, I eat it. Then at least they don't have to worry about me starving to death. I truly don't want to worry anyone by what I'm doing, although already I can see signs that I have.

A week ago today was June 20th, and it was my eighteenth birthday party. It should have been a perfect day and it was spoiled, oh, horribly spoiled. They all try to get me to say something and I won't. In fact, every time I hear footsteps in the passage outside my door, I get on to the bed and arrange my hands over my body as if I were a medieval stone princess carved on an ancient tomb. I close my eyes. I become as stiff as I can and as still. As far as they're concerned, I won't speak and I won't move. I would like my mother to think that I am sleeping.

The doctor has been and examined me and shaken his head and gone, 'Tsk! tsk!' and whispered in a corner of my bedroom to my mother and father. I couldn't hear what he told them, but my mother (who quite often comes in to talk beside my bed, not really knowing whether I can hear her or not) said:

'You're exhausted, Alice. Nervously exhausted, that's what Dr Benyon says. He says we must let you rest and rest. First the exams, he says, and then . . . well, what happened at the party . . .' (she blinks very quickly in case I notice the tears in her eyes) 'you're simply worn out.'

That's a very good way of describing how I feel: worn out. As if I were a piece of cloth, or a sock or something that's been rubbed thinner and thinner until it's almost transparent. I am writing in an old notebook that must have belonged to my father when he was younger than I am now. I found it under a loose floorboard in my wardrobe. This was my father's room when he was a child. I'm quite used to the fact that my father is an expert on roses, and writes books about them and articles in magazines and newspapers telling people how best to take care of them, but now I can see the beginnings of this passion. In this notebook, he has copied down names of roses and a brief description of them, perhaps from an old catalogue. I like seeing what he wrote. I like the look of his young handwriting on the page and I feel as though he's provided a kind of decoration, an ornamental border for my own words. Perhaps, also, I will add something to what he has to say about the roses. I can see so many from this room.

When I was a very small child, my father used to take me for walks through the gardens. They seemed enormous then, laid out in elaborate patterns of flower-beds and terraces and arbours and lawns dotted with trees. The drive seemed to go on for ever, and the gates at the end of it rose up above my head as tall as cliffs. I couldn't reach the big ring that you had to twist to open them until I was seven years old. Now, although I can reach it easily enough, turning the ring to lift the latch would take all my strength. The gates usually stand open, but my father has closed them now. He closed them after all the guests had left the party.

As we walked about the garden, my father used to explain the roses to me: Damasks, Gallicas, Bourbons, Albas and the rest. I loved their names. So many of them were called after French-sounding ladies that I imagined them sweeping along the gravel paths in crinolines made of brocade and tall, powdered wigs: *Honorine de Brabant*, *Madame Lauriol*

de Barry, Comtesse de Murinais, . . . there were scores of them, and I knew every one of them personally because my father did. He loved them and cared for them. I loved them and looked at them and inhaled their fragrance every summer, and felt saddened and betrayed when, year after year, having been so beautiful, they faded and grew brown along the edges of their petals and died.

‘There’ll be more roses next year,’ my father used to tell me, and that was supposed to console me for the loss of these flowers, this particular beauty. In the end I grew suspicious of all the coloured glory and began instead to admire the winter skeletons of the plants. I liked the filigree pattern made by the dark stems, and the way the thorns stood out clearly, unhidden by any foliage or blooms.

Every evening, when I finish writing, I lock this notebook in a drawer of my desk, a secret drawer. Sometimes I imagine myself completely gone: dead, vanished, faded away, quite rubbed out, and then no one will think of looking in this hidden place for years and years, and these pages will just lie there, becoming yellow and dry like old petals. Someone will find them long after my death, and they won’t know who I was or who anyone I’ve written about was, and they’ll toss the whole notebook on the rubbish heap or put it on a bonfire.

Since the party, my dreams have been different. Before the night comes, I drift and slide into what I suppose are daydreams, because I know that I’m not fully asleep. I’m still conscious of my room all around me, but the edges of everything become fluid and soft, and the thoughts I’m thinking seem to turn into scenes in a play. All the figures are misty, like ghosts, and their words come to me from very far away. My dreams at night are quite different. When I’m fully asleep, I go into strange rooms, move in strange landscapes, and the people are like real people, but twisted

somehow, contorted. In my dreams at night, everything looks as if it were being reflected in a fairground mirror.

FANTIN LATOUR. 1900. Large spreading shrub. Very palest pink.

These bushes are in a round bed at the front of the house. The flowers this year are so abundant that the tips of the branches are weighed down, sweeping the ground.

How melodramatic I've become, just lying here! It's this house. I wish I could be back at school, at Egerton Hall. I wouldn't want to speak there either, but I could lie on my bed in the Tower Room and Bella and Megan, my friends, would be there. I wonder what my parents have told them. That I am ill? That I must not be disturbed by letters or visits? I cannot even ask these questions. If I were in the Tower Room, Megan and Bella would chat away, and I could listen and everything would be plain. The food. The clothes. The decoration of the room. I like thinking about all the brown wooden desks in the classroom, lined up so straight in their rows that it makes you feel safe.

At first, when I was sent to Egerton Hall, I didn't feel safe at all. Everything there was so different from what I'd been used to. The building was terrifying: big and dark on the night I arrived, exactly as I imagined a prison to be. Then, inside, everything was so . . . I can't think of the right word. Empty? Clean? Unadorned? All three, perhaps. I can remember being taken down corridors where the walls were painted green up to the level of my shoulders, and then white up to the ceiling, and the green and white unrolled like two smooth ribbons with not one single picture to interrupt the flow. In my dormitory, the strip of carpet stretched on and on past ten identical cubicles on the right and another ten on the left. I cried in my bed to think of myself in these deserts, these vast, pale spaces, and I longed, longed, longed for the clutter of my home, and the houses, like those belonging to my aunts, that I had been used to.

I *do* have an awful lot of aunts. Bella and Megan could never get over it.

‘Wherever do they all come from?’ Bella said once. ‘I mean, Alice, honestly, it’s indecent. No one has thirteen aunts.’ They aren’t all real aunts, of course. Some are great-aunts, or aunts by marriage. There are aunts of all shapes and sizes and ages, although I can see that to Bella and Megan, who were not used to them, they must all have looked very old and dodderly. Not one of them has a child, therefore all their maternal devotion is focused on me.

‘But,’ said Bella, ‘they’re frightfully aristocratic and romantic and exciting as well. Maybe that’s because some of them are foreign.’

That was true. Long ago, my father’s grandparents came from Russia and my mother’s from France. My great-grandfather’s real name was Gregorovitch, which he changed to Gregson.

‘It’s how they dress,’ said Megan. ‘They don’t dress like aunts.’

‘How do aunts dress?’ I asked.

‘Well,’ said Megan, ‘I don’t know really. Suits, I suppose, in tweed or wool.’

‘And felt hats,’ Bella added. ‘Usually beige or brown.’

‘And dreary shoes.’ Megan was laughing by now.

‘Crepey stockings,’ Bella giggled, ‘and knitted gloves.’ Anything less like my aunts it would be difficult to imagine. Most of them went in for lace collars and cameo brooches the size of belt buckles, amethyst chokers, chiffon scarves and high-buttoned boots. Daphne, one of the younger aunts, was tremendously smart, always dressed in the latest styles as laid down by Vogue.

‘What about uncles?’ Bella wanted to know. ‘There seems to be a marked shortage of uncles.’

There were photographs of men wearing monocles and moustaches on various mantelpieces in my aunts’ houses, but most of the uncles, it’s true, had either died or been

divorced. This didn't seem to worry my aunts at all. Some of them lived together in a big house in London, some had cottages scattered around the Home Counties, and then of course there was the detached Violette, who lived in Paris.

'What's the matter with her?' Bella asked.

I said: 'Well, she's a bit strange. Bohemian. According to Aunt Myrtle, she never washes and lives in a hovel with an impoverished painter and does nothing but complain about how well off the others are while she's starving, etc. And Aunt Daphne can't forgive her for wearing nothing but black. "One cannot help being ugly," Aunt Daphne says, "but one has a duty to be smart at all costs."' "

'She sounds super,' Bella said. 'Let's get her to take us out one Sunday. She could come to Chapel and scare the living daylights out of the Juniors.'

'I've never even met her,' I said. 'I don't think she's been to England since my christening.'

Bella and Megan cheered me up on my first night at Egerton Hall and decided that I needed looking after. I suppose in a lot of ways I still do. I was hopeless at all the ordinary things when I first went to school, like getting all my dirty clothes into the laundry bag at the right moment on the right day. I always forgot, and then Bella or Megan would have to go chasing round to find me (in the long grass in front of Junior House, usually, at least during the summer term) and get me to do it. I wasn't very good at piling up plates and taking them to the serving hatch at the end of meals, or carrying huge silvery bowls full of watery stew from the serving hatch to the table.

'It's because she's a princess,' Bella would explain. She and Megan always teased me like that. They call this house 'The Castle Next Door', but it isn't a castle really, only a rather large house, with a very big garden. Over the years, I've got used to the teasing, but it still annoys me sometimes. Once Bella gets an idea into her head, she'll go on and on about it, so I suppose I'm stuck with Princess.

Bella's house is almost as big as this, even though it's got a much smaller garden because of being in a town.

My room runs the whole depth of the house. One large window faces south, and I can see almost the entire garden, right up to the gate at the foot of the drive. The window at the other end of the room faces north, and from it I have a good view of the terraces, the rose arbour, the kitchen garden and the beginnings of the orchard, which marks the furthest part of the property.

I can also see the summerhouse, but I don't look at it.

From a small round window near my bed, I can see the front of the house, looking like a yellowy-grey cliff with seven enormous windows set into it. The roses that climb along the walls are overgrown. No one has dead-headed them, and they have all become straggly, wilder. That's how they seem to me. It's as though my father has done no work in the garden since the night of the party. I can't speak of it though, and when they come to visit me, I lie like marble and can't bear to open my eyes to look at them.

The dormitories in the Junior House were called things like 'Rose', 'Violet', 'Blue' and 'Green', and the strip of carpet running down the centre of the room matched the name. So did the curtains that you could pull across the entrance to your cubie. That was what we called them. In each one, there was only room for a bed, a chest-of-drawers and a cupboard as narrow as a coffin standing up. There was a swing mirror on each dressing table. Everyone put pictures in leather frames on top of their chest-of-drawers. I had one of my father and mother taken in front of the house. There was also a photograph taken at my christening. I kept it because it included every single aunt, except for the dreaded Violette, of course. We used to pore over it, Megan and Bella and I, comparing hats and dresses, giving each aunt a mark out of ten for beauty, or sex appeal, which Bella insisted was something quite different. I was on my