WALTER DE LA MARE (1873–)
started his career in a bank. He found time to write poetry and two novels, or fantasies, "The Return" and "Henry Brocken." All his writing, in sharp contrast to his original banking profession, is "otherworldly." His pen seems to have been dipped in an enchanted stream; it draws the reader away from reality to a suggestive realm of half tones and glimmerings of unexpected truth.

THE LOOKING-GLASS

FOR an hour or two in the afternoon, Miss Lennox had always made it a rule to retire to her own room for a little rest, so that for this brief interval, at any rate, Alice was at liberty to do just what she pleased with herself. The "just what she pleased," no doubt, was a little limited in range; and "with herself" was at best no very vast oasis amid its sands.

She might, for example, like Miss Lennox, rest, too, if she pleased. Miss Lennox prided herself on her justice.

But then, Alice could seldom sleep in the afternoon because of her troublesome cough. She might at a pinch write letters, but they would need to be nearly all of them addressed to imaginary correspondents. And not even the most romantic of young human beings can write on indefinitely to one who vouchsafes *no* kind of an answer. The choice in fact merely amounted to that between being "in" or "out" (in *any* sense), and now that the severity of the winter had abated, Alice much preferred the solitude of the garden to the vacancy of the house.

With rain came an extraordinary beauty to the narrow garden—its trees drenched, refreshed, and glittering at break of evening, its early flowers stooping pale above the darkened earth, the birds that haunted there singing as if out of a cool and happy cloister—the stormcock wildly jubilant. There was one particular thrush on one particular tree which you might say all but yelled messages at Alice, messages which sometimes made her laugh, and sometimes almost ready to cry, with delight.

And yet ever the same vague influence seemed to haunt her young mind. Scarcely so much as a mood; nothing in

the nature of a thought; merely an influence—like that of some impressive stranger met—in a dream, say—long ago, and now half-forgotten.

This may have been in part because the low and foundering wall between the empty meadows and her own recess of greenery had always seemed to her like the boundary between two worlds. On the one side freedom, the wild; on this, Miss Lennox, and a sort of captivity. There Reality; here (her "duties" almost forgotten) the confines of a kind of waking dream. For this reason, if for no other, she at the same time longed for and yet in a way dreaded the afternoon's regular reprieve.

It had proved, too, both a comfort and a vexation that the old servant belonging to the new family next door had speedily discovered this little habit, and would as often as not lie in wait for her between a bush of lilac and a bright green chestnut that stood up like a dense umbrella midway along the wall that divided Miss Lennox's from its one neighbouring garden. And since apparently it was Alice's destiny in life to be always precariously balanced between extremes, Sarah had also turned out to be a creature of rather peculiar oscillations of temperament.

Their clandestine talks were, therefore, though frequent, seldom particularly enlightening. None the less, merely to see this slovenly ponderous woman enter the garden, self-centred, with a kind of dull arrogance, her louring face as vacant as contempt of the Universe could make it, was an event ever eagerly, though at times vexatiously, looked for, and seldom missed.

Until but a few steps separated them, it was one of Sarah's queer habits to make believe, so to speak, that Alice was not there at all. Then, as regularly, from her place of vantage on the other side of the wall, she would slowly and heavily lift her eyes to her face, with a sudden energy which at first considerably alarmed the young girl, and afterwards amused her. For certainly you *are* amused in a sort of fashion when any stranger you might suppose to be a little queer in the head proves perfectly harmless. Alice did not exactly like Sarah. But she could no more resist her advances than the garden could resist the coming on of night.

Miss Lennox, too, it must be confessed, was a rather tedious and fretful companion for wits (like Alice's) always wool-gathering—wool, moreover, of the shimmering kind that decked the Golden Fleece. Her own conception of the present

was of a niche in Time from which she was accustomed to look back on the dim, though once apparently garish, panorama of the past ; while with Alice, Time had kept promises enough only for a surety of its immense resources—resources illimitable, even though up till now they had been pretty tightly withheld.

Or, if you so preferred, as Alice would say to herself, you could put it that Miss Lennox had all her eggs in a real basket, and that Alice had all hers in a basket that was *not* exactly real —only problematical. All the more reason, then, for Alice to think it a little queer that it had been Miss Lennox herself and not Sarah who had first given shape and substance to her vaguely bizarre intuitions concerning the garden—a walled-in space in which one might suppose intuition alone could discover anything in the least remarkable.

" When my cousin, Mary Wilson (the Wilsons of Aberdeen, as I may have told you), when my cousin lived in this house," she had informed her young companion one evening over her own milk and oatmeal biscuits, " there was a silly talk with the maids that it was haunted."

" The house ? " Alice had inquired, with a sudden crooked look on a face that Nature, it seemed, had definitely intended to be frequently startled ; " The house ? "

" I didn't say the *house*," Miss Lennox testily replied—it always annoyed her to see anything resembling a flush on her young companion's cheek, " and even if I did, I certainly *meant* the garden. If I had meant the house, I should have used the word house. I meant the garden. It was quite unnecessary to correct or contradict me ; and whether or not, it's all the purest rubbish—just a tale, though not the only one of the kind in the world, I fancy."

" Do you remember any of the other tales ? " Alice had inquired, after a rather prolonged pause.

" No, none " ; was the flat reply.

And so it came about that to Sarah (though she could hardly be described as the Serpent of the situation), to Sarah fell the opportunity of enjoying to the full an opening for her fantastic " lore." By insinuation, by silences, now with contemptuous scepticism, now with enormous warmth, she cast her spell, weaving an eager imagination through and through with the rather gaudy threads of superstition.

" Lor, no, *Crimes*, maybe not, though blood is in the roots for all *I* can say." She had looked up almost candidly in the warm, rainy wind, her deadish-looking hair blown back from her forehead.

" Some'll tell you only the old people have eyes to see the mystery ; and some, old or young, if so be they're ripe. Nothing to me either way ; I'm gone past such things. And *what* it is, 'orror and darkness, or golden like a saint in heaven, or pictures in dreams, or just like dying fireworks in the air, the Lord alone knows, Miss, for I don't. But this I *will* say," and she edged up her body a little closer to the wall, the raindrops the while dropping softly on bough and grass, " May-day's the day, and midnight's the hour, for such as be wakeful and brazen and stoopid enough to watch it out. And what you've got to look for in a manner of speaking is what comes up out of the darkness from behind them trees there ! "

She drew back cunningly.

The conversation was just like clockwork. It recurred regularly—except that there was no need to wind anything up. It wound itself up overnight, and with such accuracy that Alice soon knew the complete series of question and answer by heart or by rote—as if she had learned them out of the Child's Guide to Knowledge, or the Catechism. Still there were interesting points in it even now.

" *And what you've got to look for* "—the *you* was so absurdly impersonal when muttered in that thick, coarse, privy voice. And Alice invariably smiled at this little juncture ; and Sarah as invariably looked at her and swallowed.

" But have *you* looked for—for what you say, you know ? " Alice would then inquire, still with face a little averted towards the black low-boughed group of broad-leafed chestnuts, positive candelabra in their own season of wax-like speckled blossom.

" Me ? *Me ?* I was old before my time, they used to say. Why, besides my poor sister up in Yorkshire there, there's not a mouth utters my name." Her large flushed face smiled in triumphant irony. " Besides my bed-rid mistress there, and my old what they call feeble-minded sister, Jane Mary, in Yorkshire, I'm as good as in my grave. I may be dull and hot in the head at times, but I stand *alone*—eat alone, sit alone, sleep alone, think alone. There's never been such a lonely person before. Now, what should such a lonely person as me, Miss, I ask you, or what should you either for that matter, be meddling with your May-days and your haunted gardens for ? " She broke off and stared with angry confusion around her, and, lifting up her open hand a little, she added hotly, " Them birds !—My God, I drats 'em for their squealin' ! "

" But, why ? " said Alice, frowning slightly.

" The Lord only knows, Miss ; I hate the sight of 'em ! If I had what they call a blunderbuss in me hand I'd blow 'em to ribbings."

And Alice never could quite understand why it was that the normal pronunciation of the word would have suggested a less complete dismemberment of the victims.

It was on a bleak day in March that Alice first heard really explicitly the conditions of the quest.

" Your hows and whys ! What I say is I'm sick of it all. Not so much of you, Miss, which is all greens to me, but of the rest of it all ! Anyhow, *fast* you must, like the Cartholics, and you with a frightful hacking cough and all. Come like a new-begotten bride you must in a white gown, and a wreath of lillies or rorringe-blossom in your hair, same pretty much as I made for my mother's coffin this twenty years ago, and which I wouldn't do now not for respectability even. And me and my mother, let me tell you, were as close as hens in a roost. . . . But I'm off me subject. There you sits, even if the snow itself comes sailing in on your face, and alone you must be neither book nor candle, and the house behind you shut up black abed and asleep. But, there ; you so wan and sickly a young lady. What ghost would come to you, I'd like to know. You want some fine dark loveyer for a ghost—that's your ghost. Oo-ay ! There's not a want in the world but's dust and ashes. That's my bit of schooling."

She gazed on impenetrably at Alice's slender fingers. And without raising her eyes she leaned her large hands on the wall, " Meself, Miss, meself's *my* ghost, as they say. Why, bless me ! it's all thro' the place now, like smoke."

What was all through the place now like smoke Alice perceived to be the peculiar clarity of the air discernible in the garden at times. The clearness as it were of glass, of a looking-glass, which conceals all behind and beyond it, returning only the looker's wonder, or simply her vanity, or even her gaiety. Why, for the matter of that, thought Alice smiling, there are people who look into looking-glasses, actually see themselves there, and yet never turn a hair.

There *wasn't* any glass, of course. Its sort of mirage sprang only out of the desire of her eyes, out of a restless hunger of the mind—just to possess her soul in patience till the first favourable May evening came along and then once and for all to set everything at rest. It was a thought which fascinated her so completely that it influenced her habits, her words, her actions. She even began to long for the afternoon solely

to be alone with it; and in the midst of the reverie it charmed into her mind, she would glance up as startled as a Dryad to see the "cook-general's" dark face fixing its still cold gaze on her from over the moss-greened wall. As for Miss Lennox she became testier and more "rational" than ever as she narrowly watched the day approaching when her need for a new companion would become extreme.

Who, however, the lover might be, and where the trysting-place, was unknown even to Alice, though, maybe, not absolutely unsurmised by her, and with a kind of cunning perspicacity perceived only by Sarah.

"I see my old tales have tickled you up, Miss," she said one day, lifting her eyes from the clothes-line she was carrying to the girl's alert and mobile face. "What they call old wives' tales I fancy, too."

"Oh, I don't think so," Alice answered. "I can hardly tell, Sarah. I am only at peace *here*, I know that. I get out of bed at night to look down from the window and wish myself here. When I'm reading, just as if it were a painted illustration—in the book, you know—the scene of it all floats in between me and the print. Besides, I can do just what I like with it. In my mind, I mean. I just imagine; and there it all is. So you see I could not bear *now* to go away."

"There's no cause to worry your head about that," said the woman darkly, "and as for picking and choosing I never saw much of it for them that's under of a thumb. Why, when *I* was young, I couldn't have borne to live as I do now with just meself wandering to and fro. Muttering I catch meself, too. And, to be sure, surrounded in the air by shapes, and shadows, and noises, and winds, so as sometimes I can neither see nor hear. It's true, God's gospel, Miss—the body's like a clump of wood, it's that dull. And you can't get t'other side, so to speak."

So lucid a portrayal of her own exact sensations astonished the girl. "Well, but what is it, what is it, Sarah?"

Sarah strapped the air with the loose end of the clothes-line. "Part, Miss, the hauntin' of the garden. Part as them black-jacketed clergymen would say, because we's we. And part 'cos it's all death the other side—all death."

She drew her head slowly in, her puffy cheeks glowed, her small black eyes gazed as fixedly and deadly as if they were anemones on a rock.

The very fulness of her figure seemed to exaggerate her vehemence. She gloated—a heavy somnolent owl puffing its

feathers. Alice drew back, swiftly glancing as she did so over her shoulder. The sunlight was liquid wan gold in the meadow, between the black tree-trunks. They lifted their cumbrous branches far above the brick human house, stooping their leafy twigs. A starling's dark iridescence took her glance as he minced pertly in the coarse grass.

"I can't quite see why *you* should think of death," Alice ventured to suggest.

"Me? Not me! Where I'm put, I stay. I'm like a stone in the grass, I am. Not that if I were that old mealy-smilin' bag of bones flat on her back on her bed up there with her bits of beadwork and slops through a spout, I wouldn't make sure overnight of not being waked next mornin'. There's something in me that won't let me rest, what they call a volcano, though no more to eat in that beetle cupboard of a kitchen than would keep a Tom Cat from the mange."

"But, Sarah," said Alice, casting a glance up at the curtained windows of the other house, "she looks such a quiet, *patient* old thing. I don't think I *could* stand having not even enough to eat. Why do you stay?"

Sarah laughed for a full half-minute in silence, staring at Alice meanwhile. "'Patient'!" she replied at last, "Oo-ay. Nor to my knowledge did I ever breathe the contrary. As for staying; you'd stay all right if that loveyer of yours come along. You'd stand anything—them pale narrow-chested kind; though me, I'm neether to bend nor break. And if the old man was to look down out of the blue up there this very minute, ay, and shake his fist at me, I'd say it to his face. I loathe your whining psalm-singers. A trap's a trap. You wait and see!"

"But how do you mean?" Alice said slowly, her face stooping.

There came no answer. And, on turning, she was surprised to see the bunchy alpaca-clad woman already disappearing round the corner of the house.

The talk softly subsided in her mind like the dust in an empty room. Alice wandered on in the garden, extremely loath to go in. And gradually a curious happiness at last descended upon her heart, like a cloud of morning dew in a dell of wild-flowers. It seemed in moments like these, as if she had been given the power to think—or rather to be conscious, as it were, of thoughts not her own—thoughts like vivid pictures, following one upon another with extraordinary

rapidity and brightness through her mind. As if, indeed, thoughts could be like fragments of glass, reflecting light at their every edge and angle. She stood tiptoe at the meadow wall and gazed greedily into the green fields, and across to the pollard aspens by the waterside. Turning, her eyes recognized clear in the shadow and blue-grey air of the garden her solitude —its solitude. And at once all thinking ceased.

" The Spirit is *me* : *I* haunt this place ! " she said aloud, with sudden assurance, and almost in Sarah's own words. " And I don't mind—not the least bit. It can be only my thankful, thankful self that is here. And that can *never* be lost."

She returned to the house, and seemed as she moved to see—almost as if she were looking down out of the sky on herself—her own dwarf figure walking beneath the trees. Yet there was at the same time a curious individuality in the common things, living and inanimate, that were peeping at her out of their secrecy. The silence hung above them as apparent as their own clear reflected colours above the brief Spring flowers. But when she stood tidying herself for the usual hour of reading to Miss Lennox, she was conscious of an almost unendurable weariness.

That night Alice set to work with her needle upon a piece of sprigged muslin to make her " watch-gown " as Sarah called it. She was excited. She hadn't much time, she fancied. It was like hiding in a story. She worked with extreme pains, and quickly. And not till the whole flimsy thing was finished did she try on or admire any part of it. But, at last, in the early evening of one of the middle days of April, she drew her bedroom blind up close to the ceiling to view herself in her yellow grained looking-glass.

The gown, white as milk in the low sunlight, and sprinkled with even white embroidered nosegays of daisies, seemed to attenuate a girlish figure, already very slender. She had arranged her abundant hair with unusual care, and her own clear, inexplicable eyes looked back upon her beauty, bright it seemed with tidings they could not speak.

She regarded closely that narrow, flushed, intense face in an unforeseen storm of compassion and regret, as if with the conviction that she herself was to blame for the inevitable leave-taking. It seemed to gaze like an animal its mute farewell in the dim discoloured glass.

And when she had folded and laid away the gown in her wardrobe, and put on her everyday clothes again, she felt an

extreme aversion for the garden. So, instead of venturing out that afternoon, she slipped off its faded blue ribbon from an old bundle of letters which she had hoarded all these years from a school-friend long since lost sight of, and spent the evening reading them over, till headache and an empty despondency sent her to bed.

Lagging Time brought at length the thirtieth of April. Life was as usual. Miss Lennox had even begun to knit her eighth pair of woollen mittens for the annual Church bazaar. To Alice the day passed rather quickly ; a cloudy, humid day with a furtive continual and enigmatical stir in the air. Her lips were parched ; it seemed at any moment her skull might crack with the pain as she sat reading her chapter of Macaulay to Miss Lennox's sparking and clicking needles. Her mind was a veritable rookery of forebodings, flying and returning. She scarcely ate at all, and kept to the house, never even approaching a window. She wrote a long and rather unintelligible letter, which she destroyed when she had read it over. Then suddenly every vestige of pain left her.

And when at last she went to bed—so breathless that she thought her heart at any moment would jump out of her body, and so saturated with expectancy she thought she would die—her candle was left burning calmly, unnodding, in its socket upon the chest of drawers ; the blind of her window was up, towards the houseless by-road ; her pen stood in the inkpot.

She slept on into the morning of May-day, in a sheet of eastern sunshine, till Miss Lennox, with a peevishness that almost amounted to resolution, decided to wake her. But then, Alice, though unbeknown in any really conscious sense to herself, perhaps, had long since decided not to be awakened.

Not until the evening of that day did the sun in his diurnal course for a while illumine the garden, and then very briefly : to gild, to lull, and to be gone. The stars wheeled on in the thick-sown waste of space, and even when Miss Lennox's small share of the earth's wild living creatures had stirred and sunk again to rest in the ebb of night, there came no watcher—not even the very ghost of a watcher—to the garden, in a watch-gown. So that what peculiar secrets found reflex in its dark mirror no human witness was there to tell.

As for Sarah, she had long since done with looking-glasses

once and for all. A place was a place. There was still the washing to be done on Mondays. Fools and weaklings would continue to come and go. But give her *her* way, she'd have blown them and their looking-glasses all to ribbons—with the birds.