

## I AM COME INTO MY GARDEN

*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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Mr Thomas Filleul lived in the Old Rectory, just a quarter of a mile from the village of Bishop's Nancy. The Old Rectory was a small house with latticed and jessamined windows, a celestial and a terrestrial globe standing just inside the front door, one on either side where many other people place umbrella-stands, and handsome brick chimneys set on diamond-wise.

After passing the house the road runs for thirty yards or so under a high wall, a flint wall with courses and buttresses of small red bricks; and any sensitive and reasonably greedy passer-by would know that within this wall was the Old Rectory kitchen-garden.

Ever since the days of Solomon it has been known that the best gardens are gardens enclosed, gardens with four walls and a green gate; but there was never a better walled garden, not even in Scotland, where there are such hot hairy yellow gooseberries so unabashedly appreciated by ring-ousels, than Mr Filleul's sister and spouse; a garden with no nonsense about it, no pergolas nor peevish rarities, but four rich square beds, a row of frames, a potting-hut, a corner for the roller and a long south wall. There hung a rusty thermometer and there, amiably crucified, their branches held in place with strips of blue cloth and large peggy nails, grew three pears, three plums, three peaches, one quince, and two greengages.

\*The Filleul's pronounce their name Fill-yool.

Everyone his own fancy. Some people might have chosen a different arrangement, substituting a nectarine for the third peach, apples and cherries for plum and pear, or discarding the quince altogether—a fruit that is not universally admired because of its slight suggestion of onions—and trying a fig instead, though in such a kind soil they would do well in planting their fig to chasten its deep roots with some slates or brick-bats: but the existing arrangement of the Old Rectory south wall entirely suited Mr Filleul.

No bishop could have loved his Nancy better than he loved his fruit-wall. Every morning of the year from early February onwards he would stroll out of the breakfast-room, and having given a twirl to the celestial and terrestrial globes as though dallying with the idea of a visit to China, say, or Madagascar, or a flight to Aldebaran, he walked with decision through the shrubbery and through the green gate, and into the walled garden. There every week-day, and often on Sundays too, was old Mole the gardener, ponderingly engaged in something or other, potting, pottering, or what-not; all fine old crusty gardeners have the same grave and devious activities. After a few words on the conduct of Mole's God, the weather, Mr Filleul would proceed to the gravel walk before the south wall, and there he would pace up and down, observing his fruit trees, the plums and the peaches, the quince, the pears and the greengages.

These were his loves, these were his darlings. Other men watch with passionate attention wives or children, the growth of a philosophical system, the behaviour of some bacilli, migratory birds or the Stock Exchange. Mr Filleul watched his wallfruit—the bud rounding and swelling like a drop of dew, and then the blossom: the calyx, too, rounding and swelling in its time, and then the fruit.

These were his loves, these were his darlings; endeared to him by luring anxieties, exquisite surprises of relief. On March midnights he would wake up and hear the wind rumbling in the black chimney, trees cracking in the frost or the dense especial silence which tells of a heavy snowfall. "My poor fruit-trees," he would sigh into the blankets; and perhaps in less than a week's time he would walk into his garden and behold the first blossoms alighted here and there

on the bare twigs like stars. When he said farewell to them at twilight the few stars had become many and on the morrow there were as many again. The snow-white of pearblossom, the milk-white of plum—he could foretell from practised love exactly the tint of each tree, as astronomers know the hue of the stars, and he knew, too, how the colour of the blossoms would vary with the colour of the weather, the snow-white and milk-white on an overcast day deepening and solidifying, as it were, into muslin white and ivory; while on the contrary the pink of the peach-blossom rarefied under a grey sky. But though he knew their way so well his wall-fruit never dulled to him, and each blossom was a virginity. It made his heart stand still to see their innocent audacity, such pinks and whites at the hazard of black storm-clouds, biting winds, hail-stones like bullets, shrivelling frosts, an April sun “too rash, too unadvised, too sudden,” and to think how helpless they were, they and their fruit, in the interplay of elements as helpless as themselves.

Herrick deplored to see the blossoms fade away so fast, a lyric that perhaps was inspired by somebody else’s fruit-trees, for surely in his own orchard at Dean Prior the petals fluttering to the ground would suggest other and more cheering expectations than a grave. Mr Filleul, at any rate, beheld the blossoms falling with an equal mind. He looked forward to the harvest of these disappearing virginities which had been fertilised by brown bees and soft winds, or in bad seasons by a camels-hair paint-brush. March like a lion, the Blackthorn Winter, the Feast of the Ice Saints—these perils being past there came the summer months, May, June, July, the comfortable seasons of Sundays after Trinity, with day after day, week after week, the small green fruit rounding, colouring, ripening, hidden at first, modestly, behind a screen of young leaves, then growing rounder, growing bolder, seeking the sun, seeking the approving glance of Mr Filleul pacing up and down the gravel path in a Panama hat.

No fingering, no pinching, for him; he was too wise for that. He walked up and down, walked and waited, how much happier and wiser than Solomon among his brides and concubines! How much safer, too!—for though he could hear the little Whittys, the naughtiest children in the village,

morning and evening running to and fro from school, the wall was high and coped with glittering glass, they could not climb over to pill and raven. And old Mole would never steal the fruit, he did not like fruit except as something to grow beyond the achievement of other gardeners. With his pruning-knife, his squirt, and his tarred brown netting he was like a comfortable eunuch tending and guarding Mr Filleul's Segaglio.

The bees hummed along the borders, and every seventh day the sound of bells, the voice of a holy swarming, came floating over the flint and brick wall from the village of Bishop's Nancy, telling of yet another Sunday after Trinity. Rhubarb and green gooseberry and morella cherry with a dash of brandy in it, raspberry and red-currant and blackcurrant—such were tarts that Mrs Looby cooked for her master's Sunday luncheon as spring warmed into summer and summer waxed into harvest. And all the time the fruits of Mr Filleul's loves along the south wall grew rounder and riper, becoming at last the virgin brides themselves, supplanting their virgin April mothers.

Throughout the year, from early February onward, Time walks beside anyone who walks and waits in a garden, step for step pacing up and down a gravel path; but towards the close of July Time begins to take longer strides, he outsteps his companion, he goes before him and trampling boldly over the border goes up to the wall-fruit and gives the boughs a shake, saying: "See, it is ripe, it is ready to pull!"

However tenderly and reverently, however much like a Bishop cherishing his Nancy (for after all she may have been his god-child, why should we always think evil?), a country gentleman may admire the ripening fruit along his south wall, these long loves must come at last to consummation, and there arrives a Sunday after Trinity when it is proper that he should pick and eat. Indeed, if it be a good season, he must eat quite industriously, or the wasps will get at the greengages before him and the pears, neglected, will, like any other ripened lady left an hour or so too long, begin to grow sleepy.

Mr Filleul was, in his quiet way, as greedy as you could wish. He had the knack of taking pleasures with that cer-

emonious piety which increases any pleasure an hundred-fold, he kept, for instance, a little silver-bladed pocket-knife for this express pleasure only; and yet as year followed year he recognised with distress that there was something which made him feel rather sad when the time came to eat his fruits which he had loved so long. Two or three bites, a sweetness in the mouth, a cool sufficiency slipping down the gullet, a core or a stone to throw away—that is what it is to eat fruit. The consummation did not satisfy him; he did not really enjoy his enjoyment as much as he meant to. And worst of all, he felt, was it to know that it was not the fruit's fault. No, it was he who failed his brides when the moment came to eat them.

“Taking them one with another, pears with peaches, plums with 'gages,” said Mole, standing beside him in his Sunday waistcoat and in the *ex cathedra* manner he allowed himself on a non-working day “Taking them one with another (for as for quince, I don't make no account of he, be year what it may, corn or roots, wet or fine, quince don't falter) this be the best show I reckon to have seen on south wall.”

Mr Filleul made no answer. A feeling such as saddened Augustine among the courtesans welled up in him, and as he looked at his fruit-trees the tears were not far from his eyes. The sun which had ripened his brides and would soon undo them flashed among the glass which topped the flint wall. From behind the wall came the sound of small sturdy boots, of scuffling and graceless frolic: it was the little Whittys on their way to Sunday School.

The noise grew fainter as they trailed past.

A light came into Mr Filleul's eyes. He dashed like a madman to the green gate, he ran violently through the shrubbery, denting the smooth turf with his long strides and startling three woodpigeons, two blackbirds and the tortoiseshell cat, he whisked past the kitchen window and cleared the begonia bed. The Whittys were just passing the house.

“Come in,” he cried, pulling open the front gate; “come in, all of you, and eat my fruit!”