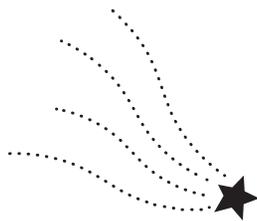


The Garden
of
Lost *and* Found



Harriet Evans

Prologue

I

June 1918

For the rest of her life, after it happened, she would wonder if she could have stopped it. If she'd checked on Ned earlier – he had been *so* peculiar since their return from London – if she had understood what her husband really intended to do when he spent every last penny they had buying back *The Garden of Lost and Found*, if she'd not been sitting at her desk staring into space, remembering, if she'd *noticed* more, could she have stopped it? But by the time Lydia Dysart Horner reached her husband's studio, it was too late to save perhaps the most famous – certainly the most beloved – painting in the world from the flames.

It was June. Liddy had been in the drawing room, the french windows open to the garden which was then at its most lovely, the perfume of jasmine, rose and lavender hanging faint in the air. Periodically, as she sifted listlessly through the ever-present pile of unpaid bills, she would inhale deeply, trying to catch the scent of the flowers over the smell of musty books and carpets, gas lamps and Zipporah's cooking: a leg of mutton studded with rosemary. Liddy had cut the rosemary that morning, and she had also dug up the new potatoes herself, smooth gold nuggets in the black soil. She had picked the flowers for the table: heavy roses, lilac, geums, in shades of violet, dusky-pink, dark red, all from her garden.

They had come to this house twenty-four years ago almost to the day, one bright hopeful June afternoon when the willow wept in the stream beyond and the thrusting young green oak, which now towered over the house, was still a sapling. The countryside was at the height of its glory and they were weary and sick with travel. Ned had handed his young wife – *they were both so young*, no more than children really – out of the cart, and then carried her down the drive. She had sprained her ankle back at their old cottage – the dear Gate House, how long since she had thought of it! and it was never quite right afterwards, not even now. Liddy could recall still how, as she was borne by Ned towards the threshold, she could feel the uneasy sensation of wanting to attend to her hair – the great coil falling down about her shoulders after the jolting of the cart on the uneven road – but his hands gripped her tight, his face shiny with exertion and with the furious conviction which drove him in everything, which killed him in the end.

‘Liddy – listen! There are nightingales in the trees, I’ve heard them at night. I’ve heard the songs they sing.’

The tall, strange house that welcomed you in but would not really ever be owned by people, merely inhabited by them. Lichen-flecked golden Cotswold stone that stayed cool in summer and trapped the sunshine in winter. A Virginia creeper smothered the south side, lime green in spring, raspberry-pink in autumn; lacy white hydrangeas flourished beneath the study and dining room windows. There were owls around the door, squirrels above and, perched proudly atop the house, four stone nightingale finials on the roof.

They were on her doll’s house too, and that is how she recognised where he had brought her.

The memories, you see. They caught in her throat, that time, all those times.

John’s first steps, unsteady, determined, so tiny, so world-

destroying, down the curved steps into the Wilderness, to find his sister singing her specially adapted song from *Mother Goose* that she used to sing him.

‘John John, the painter’s son, Stole a cake and away he rund.’

The frosted Christmas morning when Eliza crept out early and returned carrying trails of ivy and stiff sharp holly into the house, her face red with the cold.

The first time Mary came to stay, her sweet dark face at the door, tears in her eyes, and her honeyed low voice: ‘I can feel Mama here, Liddy – she’s here, isn’t she?’ But it had been eighteen years now and she did not even know if Mary was alive or dead.

The time of the painting – that golden summer when she sat for hours. The children – fairies, dancing in the garden, as the light fades, wearing their bird wings and Ned mad to catch it all, trapping the memories and the love, and setting it down on canvas...

The trundle of the bicycle that iron-cold morning bringing the telegram, the birds frozen dead on the branches. All dead. She had tipped the telegram boy. Quite calmly.

Liddy had dreams where another woman sat at the desk, this desk, her hair piled up like Liddy’s, and looked out down at the garden. This woman was not her, but she could never see her face.

It was hard to concentrate, that afternoon. The spring had been dreadfully cold and the sudden glory of summer that afternoon was especially welcome. Letting a butcher’s bill fall from her fingers, Liddy sat in near-content, drowsily listening out for the nightingales, the sound of a droning bumblebee at the glass only adding to her soporific state.

Then she caught the smell. Faint at first, sweetly spiced, the smell of winter.

But the fires were never lit in the house after Whitsun, at her direction. Nor was the smell in the garden. Darling, the gardener, knew better than to do so now when the birds might be nesting.

And some instinct, some past muscle memory of disaster, made her rise and push past the desk out on to the terrace, where the smell of roses mingled more strongly now with the other.

It was the smell of burning. A fire.

Liddy ran towards the Dovecote, the ancient banqueting house on the edge of the grounds that was Ned's studio. Already she could hear the crackle and spit of burning wood, then a splintering sound, and an unearthly, almost inhuman cry. She picked up her pace, the heels of her small silk shoes sinking into the soft earth, the heavy dusky pink silk of her dress slick against her legs like water, and as she reached the small building and paused in the doorway she cried out, hands raised above her head.

Ned was standing in front of a leaping, greedy, orange fire. White sparks flew from the flames and he grabbed at them with his hands, clutching, waving, feet stamping on the ground.

'Gone!' he was shrieking, fingers manically plucking at the dazzling flashes of fire. 'Gone! Gone! Gone!' His voice, like a bird, high-pitched, screaming. 'Gone!'

'Ned!' Liddy cried, trying to make him hear her over the roar of the fire. 'Darling! Ned!' As she reached him, she grabbed his shoulders to turn him away from the flames but he pushed her roughly aside, with the strength of a madman.

'I'm going to do it,' he said, and he didn't look at her, but through her. As though she wasn't there. The apples in his cheeks shone red. 'I've made it vanish. A magic trick! It won't haunt us any more, Liddy! It can't hurt us!'

The heat made her face ache, but she stared, mouth agape. She knew what she would see even before she looked over.

The Garden of Lost and Found had been on an easel in his studio since Ned had bought it back, eight months ago. He kept it wrapped in brown paper fastened with string. This, she could see, had been undone, the seal broken, the paper roughly tied up again.

She could see too the edges of the painting's gold frame peeking out. And as she watched, Ned picked the package up and hurled the painting on to the fire.

Liddy screamed, as though in pain – the frame caught alight instantly. She lunged for the fire, eyes fixed on the paper, the gold frame melting, buckling away into nothing, disappearing before her very eyes, but he pushed her back.

Her children, their dear curved backs, the exquisite concentration, the wings that glowed golden in the setting sun – he had caught them, caught them perfectly and now they were burning. She could see no trace of them at all, only the plaque: '*The Garden of Lost and Found: Sir Edward Horner, R.A. 1900*' and the inscription underneath, licked by the greedy, hateful flames.

The noise! How could she have known a fire could roar, and scream, like this?

She strained against him. 'Ned,' she sobbed. 'Darling, how could you?' She managed to drag him back a few steps, pressing her hand to his forehead. He was icy, his eyes glassy. 'Oh dear God – why?'

'He won't come back again. I've burnt him. He's gone away. She's gone away. The little birds have all gone away,' was all he would say.

Liddy drew his shaking body towards her. He was trembling, slick with sweat, hardly aware of where he was. Fear plucked at her stomach, her throat.

'Darling, come into the house,' she said. 'You're not well.'

But he pushed her back. 'I am well. I am well.' He clasped her hands, as a thick, feathering black plume of smoke caused her to cough and her eyes to stream. 'Now we won't have to look at them again,' he said, quite clearly, one side of his face in shade, the other orange-pink, licked by the light of the fire. 'The fire has cleansed us. Now, Liddy, this too.'

He pushed her away, and reached for the little oil sketch of *The Garden of Lost and Found* that had always hung in the corner of the studio. With all her strength Liddy yanked it from him and turning, she pushed him out into the garden, setting the sketch down, then turned back to the fire. She grabbed all the clothes and rags she could, realising with increasing terror that the turpentine in them would send the studio up in seconds. Everything else in it would be gone, too. There was a carpet rolled up on the floor: she hauled it over the flames, its weight pulling her hands onto the fire and she felt the searing, white-hot pain of melting flesh, smelt the sizzling of her own skin and looked down in surprise to see her own hands, burning. With more presence of mind than she had ever known, and some act of preservation for a future she could not see, with one hand Lydia held her silk skirt away, with the other lifted one leg and stamped, heavily, down on the carpet, on the fire, as hard as she could.

Up at the house they had realised what was happening. She could hear the cries, echoing down to them. ‘Fire at the Dovecote! Water! Bring water!’

She staggered out of the little building, eyes streaming. Blinking, she peered at her own hands, red and raw, and could not feel any pain. Zipporah and little Nora appeared from the kitchen, racing towards her. Nora’s apron fluttered out in the breeze from the fire as Zipporah threw a basin of water on to the flames licking at the edge of the carpet. Darling materialised from the tangled garden, pushing a wheelbarrow with a metal bath in it, spilling over with water, his ancient bow-legged frame steadying the wheelbarrow’s progress.

‘Mrs Horner! Madam!’ Nora was pointing in horror at the ground behind Liddy. Ned had collapsed to the floor, quite white. He half opened his eyes and there was some reason in them then. He beckoned her, and as she crouched down beside him, he said,

quietly, in his old voice:

‘Liddy,’ he said. ‘I don’t feel well, my bird. I don’t feel well.’

He had been in the studio all that previous day, then out for a long walk most of the afternoon, not returning till evening, when they had dined with Lord and Lady Coote. He had barely said a word then, nor afterwards. He had been distracted, volatile: last night, he had come to her bed and taken her, the first time he had claimed her in many months, though she thought he barely knew who she was. That morning as she considered the passion of his late-night visit, how he cried as he reached his crisis, her heart ached for him, even though after all these years so much had happened to separate them. She knew he was at his lowest ebb, since John had been lost.

He had not been as close to John as Liddy, but it had seemed to affect him more than her. He was utterly diminished, these last few months. Sir Edward Horner was out of fashion; it was years now since the Royal Academy had hired guards and put up cordons to control the crowds around his paintings. He was popular but had grown staid, producing patriotic works of Empire. He was not the same Ned Horner who had set the art world alight, nearly thirty years ago now. And this business with buying the painting back . . .

She knew he had grown to hate what *The Garden of Lost and Found* had come to mean, how it was mocked by so many now as a symbol of late-Victorian sentimentality. There had even been a *Punch* cartoon about it. ‘*Edna! Edna! I insist you come away from that painting. We can’t afford to launder any more handkerchiefs, do you bear?*’ It ate away at him. Not at Liddy. Liddy could not be hurt any more.

Now she put his head on her lap. He murmured something.

‘He’s gone now,’ he said. ‘It was right, wasn’t it?’

‘What?’

But his eyes were fixed, unseeing. *I wish you’d tell me*, she whispered in his ear. *I love you. I will always love you. Don’t leave me alone here. Tell*

me why you did it.

But she was never to know. Ned never regained consciousness. He slipped away a week later, one of millions to die from the influenza which would ravage the country, the continent, the world. It killed more people than had died in the Great War. It killed ten in the village, dear Zipporah, Farmer Tolley, their neighbour at Walbrook Farm, Lady Coote and Lady Charlotte Coote, leaving old Lord Coote alone, his two sons having already fallen in the war. It killed Nurse Bryant, she was to discover, and so finally Liddy was free. But she was all alone.

*

The day after Ned died Liddy swept the stone floor of the Dovecote. The fire had left a dark grey-red stain upon the golden-grey flagstones. She did wonder whether to keep the ashes as some kind of memorial but instead she brushed them into a sheet and, standing on the steps that led down to the Wilderness she shook them out into the garden. They fell, showering the sloping tangle of colour far and wide, like black and grey snow in June, as Liddy stood and watched, turning the small brass plaque in her hand.

By some miracle the plaque had remained intact, all that survived of the most famous painting of the age. In the year after its first rapturous reception at the Summer Exhibition it had gone on tour: Paris, St Petersburg, Adelaide, Philadelphia. Millions around the world had queued up to see it, to stare hungrily at the sight of that beautiful English country garden in the late afternoon, the two children, one with those curious birds' wings, crouched at the top of the lichen-and-daisy-speckled steps, peering into the house, watching their mother writing.

The children were long gone. The painter was gone and the painting. Only the sketch, and Lydia herself, remained – and Nightingale House, nestled in a fold of the ancient English wold, fringed by trees where birds sang all day and owls at night.

When she was a child, always afraid, she had dreamed of her own home, hidden away where no one could find her. Where she could be safe. Then Ned had brought her here and for a few years everything had been perfect. Utterly perfect. As summer soared into the garden and then faded away again, the silken light of golden September giving itself to the mist and damp of autumn and the darkness of winter, the question that had haunted Liddy kept coming back to her. Do you pay for happiness like that? Perhaps, yes, perhaps you do.

II

Ham, Richmond, June 1893

Dalbeattie – my dear fellow –

Will you come and see Nightingale House with me? I have found the perfect home for us – a rectory – built c. 1800 and lived in by Liddy's mother as a child, there's a thing – now sorely dilapidated, no stairs, no windows, no cupboards and doors, a shell – but it is a fine place with large rooms & full of light – in the garden there is a banqueting house, a relic of the old original manor built in Elizabeth's time for the partaking of ices and sweetmeats after a stroll across the lawn (the lawn is now a wilderness) – such a curious thing, but I shall use it as my studio. Will you remodel the rest of the house as you wish, to make a home for us? For you understand what we need –

Somewhere I might work in peace without disturbance and the noise of town – the jabbers, the agents, the critics

A home for our child and children yet to come, a place with clean fresh air so little Lizzy's cough vanishes

A place for my dear sister-in-law – sweet Mary must be cared for, for the situation in Paris has become intolerable and she cannot continue to live with Pertwee – Our old friend is lost to himself and others, the drink holds him utterly in its grip, my dear fellow – Mary must be welcome to live with us, for as long as she wants.

'Build for yourself a house in Jerusalem and live there, and do not go out from there to any place' –

My sweet late father was as you know not a great one for the Good Book – but he liked an aphorism, as do you, and this is apt ... for finally it must be a place my Liddy can be free – she must escape London, she must leave the ghosts behind! They continue to persecute her most cruelly. What those three children have suffered, at the hands of those who should have cared for them most of all! Daily I work to expunge the horror of

*what they did, though I begin to understand I shall never fully succeed.
My poor darling bird. She loved her mother – to come here would do her
so much good. Finally*

*– A home for our family that endures until the final nightingale is gone
from the trees behind the house – oh it is a beautiful spot, most strange,
mystical one might say – in the heart of forgotten countryside – I know
not yet whether it is Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire or Worcestershire or
another county entirely new! There is something in the air and the trees,
something of seclusion, of magic – but I am running on. Do come soon
Dalbeattie – we must see you, all of us – do build us the house, there's a
good fellow – let us begin a new story, a glorious one!*

*Yours in chestnuts and chicken –
Horner*

III

Lost masterpiece rediscovered: sketch of ‘World’s Favourite Painting’ goes on sale

An extremely rare sketch of *The Garden of Lost and Found*, the masterpiece destroyed by its creator the Edwardian painter Edward Horner, comes up for auction today. The painting is a preparatory work in oils of the artist’s two children, Eliza and John, in the garden of the family’s — shire home, peeking into the house where a mysterious figure — generally believed to be the artist’s wife Lydia Dysart Horner — sits writing at a table.

There are no other versions of the painting beyond a handful of contemporary photographs, all of poor quality. *The Garden of Lost and Found* has, therefore, acquired an almost mythic status due to the fate of the artist’s children and the painting itself. It was a sensation at the time of its unveiling, a work which the great art critic Thaddeus La Touche called ‘perhaps the most moving representation of childhood and lost innocence yet committed to canvas’. It toured the Commonwealth and Americas, at the end of which it was said that it had been viewed by up to eight million people.

It later fell out of favour when, along with his later more jingoistic works, such as *The Lilac Hours* and *We Built Nineveh*, the once seemingly infallible Horner was rejected by the critics and public. Horner himself famously grew to loathe his most famous picture and bought it back from the art dealer Galveston at £5000 guineas, thus bankrupting

himself. He died shortly afterwards in the first wave of the Spanish Flu epidemic.

By the time the painting was destroyed by its creator days before his death, its reputation had been somewhat restored, and over the years the mystery of *The Garden of Lost and Found* has grown until it is regarded as one of the great lost works of art. The sketch for the painting is in oils, on commercially primed canvas, and shows signs of pen and ink underneath the paint. It has been rapidly executed, crammed with detail and notes to be used on the final canvas, and is dazzling in its assured technique and use of Impressionism, as well as the language of classical structure for which Horner was so admired. One unexplained detail in the upper left hand corner is the addition of a gold streak, thought to be a shooting star, which is not shown in photographs of the original painting or the sketch. Experts cannot explain its presence, though Jan de Hooerts, ex-director of Tate Britain, has poured scorn upon the upcoming auction saying it had obviously been tampered with. 'Horner did not "do" streaks of gold. This is not his addition. The sketch has been compromised, rendering the circumstances of the whole sale murky.'

The work, measuring only 32cm x 25cm, is being sold by an anonymous collector who acquired it from the artist's late daughter, Stella Horner (born after her father's death). It is estimated to fetch between £400,000 and £500,000 at today at Dawnay's. Juliet Horner, great-granddaughter of the artist, who is also the Victorian and Edwardian Painting expert at Dawnay's, said: 'For years *The Garden of Lost and Found* was the most famous painting in the world.'

Millions queued up to see it wherever it was shown. Its loss is a tragedy and to this day we have no idea why Horner destroyed his greatest work. So to have discovered this astonishing preparatory sketch has been a lovely surprise for us all.'

The Guardian, 10 May 2014