

The Lily Garden

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There is a wisdom to youth which later gives way to a different wisdom, of age. To have one usually precludes the other. Both are valid, and both, in their manner, sad. When Camillo was young, and a student at the great university of Ravenal, he took a room which overlooked, as it happened none of the other apartments in that building did, an ancient garden belonging to an impressive but ruinous house of very ill-repute. I do not mean it was a brothel, nothing so simple. No, a magician was said to live there, whose name was known but seldom spoken. For general purposes he was called The Alchemist, and his dwelling The Alchemist's House.

At first Camillo was only interested in the garden, which was overgrown by oaks, ilex, and a great pine, because it represented to his imagination, straying from his books, a wild forest. Late at night, when he had blown out his candle, he would stare upon the moon caught fast in the pine tree. If a dog howled from some neighbouring tenement, he would think of wolves treading the trackless undergrowth beneath the high wall. Sometimes strange sounds came from the garden itself. Doubtless owls, bats, rats, and hedgehogs caused them, but to Camillo, who had never left the city, they were the noises of a wilderness. He liked the garden very much, and if he had been four years younger, he would have found a way at once to get over into it. But now he was a student, a young man. Already responsibility had laid hold of him.

The Alchemist was reportedly never seen. But he had an elderly servant. One day Camillo saw this servant on the street leading from the marketplace, and recognized him from description. Accordingly he followed the servant, discreetly, and not unaptly, since he himself lived close by, back to the House. Sure enough the servant came to the building, but ignoring the great door fronting the street, went around to a smaller door set into the garden wall. This he managed with a key. As the door opened, Camillo was afforded a tantalising glimpse into the garden's

forest: Vast trees of darkest green and coppery black, some rotted statuary.

Thereafter Camillo, when free from his studies, would loiter between the market and The Alchemist's House—there was a convenient inn.

Came an afternoon when the elderly servant, returning, dropped in the street a great package of some unguessable nature. Camillo hastened to his side. "Good sir, pray let me assist you."

"That is very kind," said the old servant, who was hunched in the back. Camillo retrieved the package—which felt pliable in a most unpleasant way, perhaps being a portion of a body purchased from some graveyard dealer for alchemical experiment.

They came to the door in the wall.

"Allow me to carry this inside for you."

"Alas, young sir, I must return a churlish response to your courtesy. My master—you may have heard of him—" and here the servant spoke the forbidden name— "does not permit any but myself to enter here."

"At least let me bear your burden up on to that terrace there. Who will know?"

"My master," replied the servant simply. He spoke without fear, but it was the fearlessness of one who needs not fear as never does he trespass.

So Camillo was once again shut out. By now, of course, he was mad as the snake to enter the garden. On this occasion he had seen the terrace, mossy steps, a fountain of naked nymphs—and all about this clearing the enormous ravenous trees.

Someday I shall make my self rich. Such a garden, such land will be mine.

But he knew even then in his heart that these riches were unlikely, and here he was quite right.

Camillo began to brood on how he could get into the garden of The Alchemist.

He was not afraid of The Alchemist, this being an aspect of the wisdom of his youth. Yet also it was a figment of the *unworldliness* of his youth. There might have been much to tremble at. But Camillo discounted the dread name. He troubled only not to fall foul of the city's laws regarding property. And this meant that he must find a way to open the garden door by stealth, unseen, unknown, and doubtless by night.

Camillo therefore contrived to steal the key of the elderly servant. He did this by distracting the fellow at the wall with the gift of a pomegranate—a wicked deception, for the old man's eyes actually filled with tears at the supposed gift. The key was then removed from the door by Camillo, the old man ushered inside, already forgetting he had not retrieved it.

Camillo then took himself to a place where keys were copied, and had this service done for him.

Returning at dusk he cast up the original over the wall so it should land on the grass beyond—he had prudently locked up behind the servant—as if it had been dropped there.

Thereafter Camillo impatiently waited for one whole night and one whole day before daring his enterprise of invasion.

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It was true that now and then a few dim lights might burn high up in The Alchemist's House, and on this night too they did so. Only when the last light, a very high and dim one in a narrow tower, was put out, did Camillo creep down through the lodgings and cross the street to the garden wall. It was by now three in the morning and from the old cathedral the wonderful clock with its figures of knights and maidens,imps and angels, was striking the dull dark hour. Camillo was not sleepy, he was wide awake, alert with a light supper and a little wine. And with his fiendish curiosity, his actual *lust* to enter.

The key proved difficult. It had not been very well made, or else some extra bar was on the door. If so, ultimately it failed, and Camillo finally pushed wide the barrier, closed it soundlessly, and was alone in the moonlit garden of the magician.

The trees towered like steeples, and the house was all but lost in them,

and anyway silent as death itself. But the terrace glowed under the moon, and the fountain of the nymphs with their grey-green night girdles of ivy.

Camillo crossed the terrace with caution, keeping to its shadow side. Something squeaked in the undergrowth, and Camillo did cross himself. But there again, though this was the wisdom of youth it was also a foolishness, for if any demons had been left on guard, what use that single lapsed gesture of a strong young mortal hand?

Then, besides, he jibed at himself. Only some little hog of the shrubberies was passing. And lo and behold up in the tall pine had begun to sing a golden nightingale. She was pleased to have a visitor, he had not heard her previously.

The garden had a night scent on it, but also now the perfume of flowers.

When he descended from the terrace, he found a new wall of yew, and in the wall presently an arch. Beyond lay a formal garden, as unlike the wild of the outer place as could be. It was a bower of flowers, of every sort of night-blooming lily known on earth, and perhaps the lilies too of Mercury and Venus and Saturn, so strange and fragrant was the odour of them.

In the middle of the inner garden was a patch of turf, with a sun dial, now a dial of the moon, and beyond this, under an awning of lilies, all of which were opened wide, sat a figure. Was it a statue—that of a young girl deftly tinted by paint, a faint rosiness to the lips discernible even in moonlight, a darkness to brows and lashes, and on the long and flowing locks, part plaited and part free, the faintest blondest hint of a colour almost pink? The robe of the being was fashioned like a dress, which gave proper evidence of all the feminine sweetness, yet slender and virginal. And indeed the robe flowed like the hair, down over the ground, decorously. The face was young and pure—Camillo thought—as that of an especially beautiful Madonna in the church.

Camillo stared some while, from behind the curtain of the yew hedge. He stared long enough that he expected no change, had come to the complete conclusion that the image was indeed a statue—when it moved. It moved actually very little. It raised one hand, and touched a lock of its own hair—no more, you might say, than the stirring of a petal. But Camillo jumped in his skin.

It must be remarked, there was something to the beautiful girl that was supernatural. Or so it seemed. After all, Camillo must have succumbed, in some form, to the idea of The Alchemist's House. He remembered now strange tales, most of them from books. The wizard in his tower. And in the bower, stolen forth by night, his daughter, or some princess in his thrall, who held the secrets of her slave-master's power.

Now, what should he do? In the story the hero stepped forth to confront the fair damsel. They were at once in love and in league. Camillo was not ready for either state. He therefore quickly, quietly, and, in later years he admitted, most cowardly, stepped away instead.

Camillo left the lily plot, hurried over the terrace, and let himself out into the street. Here he locked up the door of the whole garden again.

No sooner was he back safe in his room across the street than a band of drunken carousers went down the way below, as if he and The Alchemist's House were of no import. *Let that be a lesson*, he thought. For the idea that all over the wall was not worldly had fastened on him. His was this world, of stones, and drunks, ink and paper, bread and warts and human things.

Thereby he sealed himself to the lily garden of the magician as Eve did to the Apple Tree when first warned it was not for her.

Some days and nights then passed, and Camillo did not think of the garden. That is, he would not allow thoughts of the garden to remain. But thoughts of the girl did stick to him. What had she been? What? And some book-memory of a life-size doll, or statue enabled by magic to move, began slowly and insidiously to obsess him.

It was no use. He must return, and look for her, and see of what sort she was.

Probably, thought he, some pretty servant of the house, perhaps the magician's secret mistress, who mooned herself by night for fear of the prying eyes of day.

So Camillo took the key from where he had hidden it from himself,

which was up the chimney, and on a night of no moon at all he went down, a little cool and unsettled, hearing the cathedral clock strike only for two, but all the lights out, as it seemed not only in the two houses, but everywhere in the city.

Oh, it was like a night of the dead. Such utter blackness. And Camillo commended his own bravery, and opened the door to the forbidden garden.

The key went more easily on this occasion, as if now it were familiar with the lock.

Beyond was a darkness that might have been black space itself, if space were filled by leaves, and spotted only here and there with the blue-white specks of stars. Nor did the nightingale sing. Nor did anything squeak in the undergrowth. The garden too had been put to bed.

But Camillo resolutely crossed the sombre terrace, glad of its concealment and uneasy at it, and came down on the black prickles of the yew hedge.

In the faint starlight, scent alone might have guided him. How glorious, how overwhelming, how almost rotten the exquisite perfumes of the lilies were. They were like a fermenting wine no mortal would dare drink—nectar.

And there among the pale forms of the flowers, the pale shape of the sun dial. And there, in her arbour, as before, *the girl*.

He saw her lighted as if by holy rays and almost cried out. Until it came to him that a little lamp was burning on a hook in the arbour wall just behind her head. And by this glimmer, she was sewing a piece of white cloth with purple and rose and red. He caught the flash of her needle. It was so ordinary—a thing he had seen women at since he could recall—and yet, how strange.

And then, she looked, it seemed, straight at him. The look, although not she herself, said: *I know you are there. Come forth, or do you wish to frighten me?*

No! Never, thought Camillo, and got into the archway as fast as he might, for he was afraid in that moment she might scream and summon

what help he could only guess at.

She must indeed have seen or sensed him, for now she did not start. Her large eyes, blue-grey as irises, gazed up at him.

"You must pardon me," said Camillo. But she was young too, it would be best to try her mercy. "I should not be here. But—curiosity. I saw you once before. Forgive me if I offend."

"No," said the girl, "you do not offend."

Her voice was very strange. It was as if she seldom used it, husky, dusky, a whisper, a shadow. But then she said, "How did you come in?"

"Oh, I have a key to the door." This bluff pleased him. If he had a key, as a visitor he was legitimate. But then, she did not seem to mind that he was here by night.

"Do you seek him?" she asked simply.

"Your—The Alchemist?"

"My master," she said.

A slave then, a *slave*. Just like the fearful, foolish, and fascinating books.

"I would not dare," confided Camillo. And thought himself a fine fellow, fit enough to dazzle her, and so perhaps he was. "I came here for another glimpse of you."

"Well you have it now."

"So I do." Camillo was at a loss. Honesty was a new game. He said finally, "But why are you out here in the garden by night? Does he allow you no freedom by day?"

"I am always free," she said. "At any hour after dusk you may seek me here. But," she hesitated, she was modest, "by day I sleep."

"I must change my habits," said Camillo.

"But you too are awake by night. And I have heard others in the streets.

And there is a great clock. He told me of it. It wakes all night and strikes the hours."

"But the clock is not alive."

"But it has men and angels on it."

"They are clockwork," said Camillo. A shiver of cold ran down his back. He thought, *Truly, like knows like. She is The Alchemist's doll.*

Just then a moon rose up in a tree. It was arched in shape and high up it had a pane of ochre glass: A window come alight.

The girl looked away at it. "He has woken too," she said.

Camillo said passionately, "If he finds me, he may punish me. I must leave you at once."

She seemed dismayed. He was pulled back and forth between panic and pleasure.

He left her with a pledge of return. "Tell him *nothing.*"

"If he asks, I must," she said. "But he will not ask."

Camillo fled, imagining all the while the sounds of footsteps behind him, slow, onerous, and sure. A bramble snagged his sleeve and almost he shouted. He escaped the garden a second time, unscathed, except perhaps by Cupid's arrow, the worst scratch of all.

Camillo sought the worst help he could find, that of strong drink and old volumes.

For three days and three nights he did not venture to invade the garden, and all this absence fed his senses, as the wine and the books did. Soon he was in love with the mysterious maiden, the magician's doll; lost. For he was in the story now, and what else might happen? I can make no further excuses for him. He was young and life had not been unkind. Those are two weak schools in which to learn the first reality.

On the third night, Camillo returned to the garden, and his plan was made. He would seduce the affection of the maiden— already he suspected her enamoured of him—and then he would induce her to flight. How he should shelter her God knew, he did not. What would become of them, likewise. Some instinct told him that if only he could get her out of the garden, vengeful pursuit would not travel beyond the wall. In this he was partly correct.

It was now a night of new moon, a slender silken light, like thin water.

The key turned with ease, the garden opened. There was no nightingale, but as he descended from the terrace Camillo saw all the lights of the house were out for sure, and the lamp in the arbour lighted.

The girl sat reading from a great book. He was impressed and pleased she had been lessoned in the wise arts. Probably she too had powers.

"Lady," he said at once, "I'm here to entreat you. To come away with me. My heart is yours!" (Oh, did he not even once tremble at the fulsomeness of those special words!—No he did not.) "You must leave this place of your captivity."

"I cannot," said the maiden.

"Yes, if I am your protector. Fear nothing. The holy church is stronger than any dark gambit *of his*."

"But all I need is here," replied the obstinate girl, turning another page idly. "Here I first saw the light, and grew, and here I live."

"His slave."

"Perhaps. I do not mind it."

"Mind it! You must. We are made free by God. Only trust in His name." (He meant in the name of Camillo, which he had not even told her.)

"Trust, and I can take you from this loathsome spot."

This too was a lie. Never had the lily garden seemed so mystically fair or smelled so lovely.

The girl looked sad. She put the book aside and clasped her hands.

"Tell me of the world beyond the garden."

Camillo then became the book. He told her of the world—or all he could, for he too had never left the walls of the city.

He spoke of the streets and houses, the mansions of the rich, the churches with their goldwork and the great cathedral. He spoke of the university of Ravenal, its courts and chambers and the library. He spoke of hunting on the hills, which he had never done, the racing of horses and sailing of hawks. He went further. He described vast blue seas with ships on them, and dusty tracks, and deserts where one tree marks a well, and of the caravans of the Road of Spice, and the distant East where obelisks tower, lamps are rubbed to produce demons, girls dance with their faces veiled but otherwise naked, and carpets fly through the air. He spoke of lands where men are black and men are golden, and where men are blue and carry their heads under their shoulders. For Camillo had read what he had not done.

And when he had finished, the maiden sat enraptured, and he thought it was as much with him as with his tales. In the pine the nightingale did not sing, but a vast planet, silver-green, had come between the oaks and stared on them like the eye of a cat.

"These are the dreams of day," said the maiden.

"You will learn to endure the day," said Camillo. "Only the evil things of night fear sunlight, and you are pure and good."

"No, the day is not my time. I do not think I could bear the sun. It is a ball of molten matter about which the earth spins."

"No, no," Camillo hastened to reassure her, "the sun moves about the earth, passing over, and under us during the darkness."

"I must shield myself from day. I must cover up my head and sleep."

"Then so you shall," decided Camillo magnanimously. "I will guard you. And by night I will show you the world."

"It is not to be," said the girl sorrowfully.

And as if summoned by her words, a second planet, small and dully red,

lit the wall of The Alchemist's House.

"*Damnation.*" Camillo moved rapidly towards his prey. "I shall be discovered. Come now. Am I to live life without you? I offer you my heart, I offer you holy marriage."

"What is that?"

Disbelieving, Camillo reached her and raised her gently to her feet, and her long gown spilled upon his shoes, and he thrilled at the touch of it even as at the touch of his hands upon hers. How smooth and *douce* she was. No doll, surely, though magical.

"Trust me and trust in God. We must fly at once."

"I cannot."

"Yes!"

"No, it is impossible."

"In love, all things may be!" cried Camillo softly, between fright and dominance. And he moved his hands to her waist meaning to lift her straight up in the air and off the spot, meaning to carry her if needful.

But when he lifted her he heard the oddest sound. It was a sort of snapping, like the noise a vegetable makes when it is broken. And then the girl gave such a dreadful scream, a scream of such horrible agony, that only once had he heard anything like it, and then from a square where an execution had been taking place.

Camillo let her go. And for a moment he forgot what her scream might bring upon him, for he saw something that made all his organs change to ice.

From below her gown, long streams of thick blood were running out.

Then she fell, directly down, like a branch, and her gown tore open. And he saw that she was a maiden to the knees, and from beneath that juncture she grew together and she was a stem, a stem like that of a lily, greenish and furred, and where the stem went into the ground below the arbour were the roots of her, and like entrails they had been torn up. They

writhed there, ripped in half, dying, and the blood ran from them.

And in the house other lights lighted.

But Camillo saw the face of the girl, and it was white and empty and already dead.

He spewed once, and then he choked himself to contain it, and he turned and rushed away.

Nothing did he afterwards remember of his journey through the garden, save that he must have left wide the door in the wall. Nothing did he remember of the streets he ran through. Not until he heard the great voice chime above him for five in the morning, the hour before the dawn. And looking up he saw the iron angels pass over his head with their swords upraised, and the iron knight upon his iron unicorn. And then Camillo hammered on the penitents' door of the cathedral and after many years it seemed they let him in, and he fell in a sort of swoon under the altar of the Virgin.

For a month Camillo lay very sick in his sister's house. But he told no one, beyond the first priest, anything of why, or of what he had done, or seen. His sickness was the war in him between revulsion and guilt, and not understanding either, he was ill for longer than a wiser man would have been.

Then, when he had recovered a little, he went to his lodging to take back his few possessions, and when he passed the wall of The Alchemist's garden, he grew so faint that a passerby helped him into the lodging house.

There he recovered, drank some wine with the landlord, and for the first time said to himself, *I must not think of this any more.*

Then Camillo hurried to put together his books and papers and the other items that had been kept for him in his room. While he did this, up came the landlord again.

"Young sir, there is a priest below who wishes to speak to you."

"Yes, send him up then, if you will," said Camillo, thinking the church had come to collect its fee for a kindness to him, and glad enough to pay, for the payment of dues seemed a part of his healing.

Presently then into Camillo's room, which overlooked as the other apartments did not the tall trees of the wild garden, there came a robed and hooded figure, that Camillo might also have taken for a priest or a friar, except that there suddenly looked out on him, as if from behind a mask, a face entirely remarkable. It was a face centuries old, yet unlined. It was a face young as morning, with the no-eyes of a skull. It was cruel, and compassionate. It was like, Camillo dared to think long, long after, the face of God—or the Devil. It was the face of The Alchemist.

"Camillo," said The Alchemist, and Camillo did not wonder how his name was known, "I am not here to rebuke you. What was mine you wantonly destroyed, and took from it also its own life, which I had given it, but which it valued for itself. This you realize, I believe. I only ask you that in future you do not meddle. Do you suppose that you have learned a lesson?"

And in Camillo's mind there was a sort of shudder, or crash, quite mild and painless, but as if all the jumbled pieces of his doubts and fears had fallen home into their proper places. And suddenly he wept, but without shame, eight burning tears. And he said: "Yes."

"Then I am content," said The Alchemist. And with no more than that, he left him.

I am old today, and can write of Camillo who was my younger self, now as unlike me as a summer tree to a winter stick, with distance and perhaps with fortitude. He is almost a stranger, and it is easy to speak of *he* and *him*, of *Camillo*, as though truly he were another. But the lesson has remained of the venture in the garden. And even now my old body would weep, if it had moisture left enough, at the wrong it did, in total innocence, as so many wrongs are done. But there is no more to say.