

The Enchanted Garden

GIOVANNINO AND Serenella were strolling along the railway lines. Below was a scaly sea of sombre, clear blue; above, a sky lightly streaked with white clouds. The railway lines were shimmering and burning hot. It was fun going along the railway, there were so many games to play—he balancing on one rail holding her hand while she walked along on the other, or else both jumping from one sleeper to the next without ever letting their feet touch the stones in between. Giovannino and Serenella had been out looking for crabs, and now they had decided to explore the railway lines as far as the tunnel. He liked playing with Serenella, as she did not behave as all the other little girls did, for ever getting frightened or bursting into tears at every joke. Whenever Giovannino said "Let's go there," or "Let's do this," Serenella always followed without a word.

Ping! They both gave a start and looked up. A telephone wire had snapped off the top of the pole. It sounded like an iron stork suddenly shutting its beak. They stood with their noses in the air and watched. What a pity not to have seen it! Now, it would never happen again.

"There's a train coming," said Giovannino.

Serenella did not move from the rail. "Where from?" she asked.

Giovannino looked round in a knowledgeable way. He pointed at the black hole of the tunnel which showed clear one moment,

then misty the next, through the invisible heat haze rising from the stony track.

"From there," he said. They already seemed to hear a snort from the darkness of the tunnel, and see the train suddenly appear belching out fire and smoke, the wheels mercilessly eating up the rails as it hurtled towards them.

"Where shall we go, Giovannino?"

There were big grey alocs down towards the sea, surrounded by dense impenetrable nettles, while up the hillside ran a rambling hedge with thick leaves but no flowers. There was no sign of the train still; perhaps it was running on with the engine cut off, and would jump out at them all of a sudden. But Giovannino had now found an opening in the hedge. "This way," he called.

The fence under the rambling hedge was an old bent rail. At one point it twisted about on the ground like the corner of a sheet of paper. Giovannino had slipped into the hole and already half vanished.

"Give me a hand, Giovannino."

They found themselves in a corner of a garden, on all fours in a flower-bed, with their hair full of dry leaves and moss. Everything was quiet; not a leaf was stirring.

"Come on," said Giovannino, and Serenella nodded in reply.

There were big, old, flesh-coloured eucalyptus trees and winding gravel paths. Giovannino and Serenella tiptoed along the paths, taking care not to crunch the gravel. Suppose the owners appeared now?

Everything was so beautiful: narrow turnings and high, curling eucalyptus leaves and patches of sky; but there was always the worrying thought that it was not their garden, and that they might be chased away any moment. But not a sound could be heard. A flight of chattering sparrows rose from a clump of arbutus at a turn in the path. Then all was silent again. Perhaps it was an abandoned garden?

But the shade of the big trees came to an end, and they found

themselves under the open sky facing flower-beds filled with neat rows of petunias and convolvulus, and paths and balustrades and rows of box trees. And up at the end of the garden was a large villa with flashing window panes and yellow and orange curtains.

And it was all quite deserted. The two children crept forward treading carefully over the gravel: perhaps the windows would be suddenly flung open, and angry ladies and gentlemen appear on the terraces and unleash great dogs down the paths. They now found a wheelbarrow standing near a ditch. Giovannino took it up by the handles and began pushing it along in front of him: it creaked like a whistle at every turn. Serenella sat herself in it and they moved slowly forward, Giovannino pushing the barrow with her on top, along the flower beds and fountains.

Every now and then Serenella would point to a flower and say in a low voice, "That one," and Giovannino would put the barrow down, pluck it, and give it to her. Soon she had a lovely bunch of flowers.

Eventually the gravel ended and they reached an open space paved in bricks and mortar. And in the middle of this space was a big empty rectangle: a swimming pool. They crept up to the edge: it was lined with blue tiles and filled to the brim with clear water. How lovely it would be to bathe in!

"Shall we have a dip?" Giovannino asked Serenella. The idea must have been quite dangerous if he asked her instead of just saying, "In we go!" But the water was so clear and blue, and Serenella was never frightened. She jumped off the barrow and put her bunch of flowers in it. They were already in bathing dresses, as they'd been out for crabs till just before. Giovannino plunged in; not from the diving board, as the splash would have made too much noise, but from the edge of the pool. Down and down he went with his eyes wide open, seeing only the blue from the tiles and his pink hands like goldfish; it was not the same as under the sea, full of shapeless green-black shadows. A pink form appeared above him: Serenella! He took her hand

and they swam up to the surface, rather anxiously. No, there was no one watching them at all. But it was not so nice as they'd thought it would be; they always had that uncomfortable feeling that they had no right to any of this, and might be chased out at any moment.

They scrambled out of the water, and there beside the swimming pool they found a ping-pong table. Giovannino at once picked up the bat and hit the ball, and Serenella, on the other side, was quick to return the shot. And so they went on playing, giving only light taps at the ball, though, in case someone in the villa heard them. But then Giovannino, in trying to parry a shot that bounced high, sent the ball sailing away through the air and smack against a gong hanging in a pergola. There was a long, sombre boom. The two children crouched down behind a clump of ranunculus. And at once two men-servants in white coats appeared, carrying big trays; they put the trays down on a round table under an orange and yellow striped umbrella, and off they went.

Giovannino and Serenella crept up to the table. There was tea, milk and sponge cake. They had only to sit down and help themselves. They poured out two cups of tea and cut two slices of cake. But somehow they did not feel at all at ease, and sat perched on the edge of their chairs, moving their knees. And they could not really enjoy the tea and cakes, as nothing seemed to have any taste. Everything in the garden was like that: lovely but impossible to enjoy properly, with that worrying feeling inside that they were only there from an odd stroke of luck, and the fear that they'd soon have to give an account of themselves.

Very quietly they tiptoed up to the villa. Between the slits of a venetian blind they saw a beautiful shady room, with collections of butterflies hanging on the walls. And in the room was a pale little boy. Lucky boy, he must be the owner of this villa and garden. He was lying stretched on a long chair, turning over the pages of a large book filled with figures. He had big white

hands and wore pyjamas buttoned up to the neck, though it was summer.

Now as the two children went on peeping through the slits the pounding of their hearts gradually subsided. Why, the little rich boy seemed to be sitting there and turning over the pages and glancing round with more anxiety and worry than their own. And then he got up and tiptoed round, as if he were afraid that at any moment someone would come and turn him out, as if he felt that book, that long chair and those butterflies framed on the wall, the garden and games and tea trays, the swimming pool and paths, were only granted to him by some enormous mistake, as if he were incapable of enjoying them and felt the bitterness of the mistake as his own fault.

The pale boy was wandering round his shady room with furtive steps, touching with his white fingers the edges of the cases studded with butterflies; then he stopped to listen. The pounding of Giovannino and Serenella's hearts, which had died down, now began harder than ever. Perhaps it was the fear of a spell which hung over this villa and garden and over all these lovely comfortable things, like some ancient injustice committed long ago.

Clouds darkened the sun. Very quietly Giovannino and Serenella crept away. They went back along the same paths they had come, stepping fast but never at a run. And they went through the hedge again on all fours. Between the aloes they found a path leading down to the small, stony beach, with banks of seaweed along the shore. Then they invented a wonderful new game; a seaweed fight. They threw great handfuls of it in each other's faces till late in the afternoon. And Serenella never once cried.