

# The Garden Angel

Sarah opened her eyes to see the bright morning light streaming across the embroidered coverlet. She bounded from the high bed and ran over to the window, pushing it open wide. Finally, she thought, a day warm enough for tea in the garden.

The weather had been very gray and cold for most of the two months since she had arrived at Caverleigh. Naturally, at first she had been very sad when her parents left for their long voyage to her father's new posting in Jamaica. But they had promised they would return to fetch her when they were settled. She had already spent most of April and May with her great Aunt Alice, and their frequent letters said they would return for her sometime around the first of July and that Jamaica was a wonderful place. She missed them, but she had found a great deal to occupy her at Caverleigh.

Sarah was an inquisitive, active and cheerful child not given to long periods of subdued confinement. Soon she was exploring the great stone house with its long galleries and huge fireplaces and towering staircases and cupolas. Though the rest of the house was very grand, she loved the kitchen best. There were rows and rows of gleaming copper pots reflecting the firelight and it always smelled so good there. The cook, Mrs. Drummond, was very kind to her. Sarah often took her tea there with the household staff, her feet upon the fireplace fender munching on one of Mrs. Drummond's sweet buns, listening happily to the gossip in the country.

As the weather grew warmer, Sarah began to explore the gardens that stretched out around the house. Giant hedges created a leafy maze. It took an entire army of gardeners to keep them neatly clipped and tended. As the primroses began to open and the pear trees decked themselves in white blossoms, her excitement increased. Sarah asked endless questions of the patient gardeners and to her delight they responded by allowing her to hoe and dig and assist with the spring planting. Every day something new began to bloom.

In the short time Sarah had been at the great house, she had grown to love Caverleigh and would have been supremely happy there with her new friends and the wonderful, long regular letters from her parents - except for the problem of her great Aunt Alice. She seldom saw her aunt who lived in a secluded suite of rooms in the east wing. She was a soft-spoken, solemn and very solitary woman who preferred her books and her privacy to any social engagements. There were no parties at Caverleigh and no one came to call. Sarah, remembering her parents' instructions, tried very hard to keep quiet and be very polite to Aunt Alice. Occasionally, she was summoned for dinner with her aunt in the great hall where they sat at an enormously long mahogany table. Aunt Alice still looked very beautiful in her dark emerald velvet with lace around her pale face. She would ask Sarah how she was and Sarah would say that she was fine and the dinner would pass mostly in silence.

Sometimes Aunt Alice would arrange for Sarah to ride on one of the horses in the stable, but she never rode herself and she never even came to watch. Aunt Alice had taken the trouble to find out what Sarah's favorite dishes were and always had Mrs. Drummond prepare them for her dinner, but often Aunt Alice ate in her room and Sarah ate with the staff. Aunt Alice constantly sent lovely storybooks up to Sarah's room and sometimes a new game to amuse her, but when Sarah asked her aunt to read to her, her eyes were always too tired from doing needlework. So...eventually Sarah stopped asking.

Once Sarah had gathered her courage and visited her aunt uninvited in her dim, quiet rooms. Though her aunt was kind, Sarah felt that both of them were relieved when she quickly left. It seemed they had nothing to say to each other. Sarah tried not to feel as though her great aunt didn't like her. She began, instead, to observe her aunt carefully in the evenings when she sat in the drawing room with Aunt Alice and her aunt was intent upon her embroidery. One such evening Sarah was pressing some of the bits of leaves and flowers that she collected that day into her scrapbook. She was also trying to fend off the playful attention of her aunt's big fluffy gray cat, Bart, who seemed to want to help. From the corner of her eye, she saw her

Aunt Alice suddenly sigh very deeply and gaze out of the window. "Why she's really very sad," thought Sarah in surprise. "And so alone."

Thoughts like these were far from her mind when she skipped down the long drive after breakfast and ducked between some hedges on the south side of the lawn. A month or so ago she had discovered a hidden, magical spot in the vast gardens of Caverleigh. Already, Sarah thought of it as her very own. Concentrating intently, she counted and made the proper number of turns in the maze - 4 right turns, 2 left turns and then 3 right. She came at once into a walled garden still tended and beautiful. It was so beautiful and otherworldly that Sarah always felt she had just stepped into a church when she came inside.

The garden was filled with roses of every variety, most of which had begun to bloom. Roses climbed up very high and tumbled down across the hedges. Roses filled the gently curving beds and grew in clusters along the path. There were peach-colored roses, wide open and big as both your hands. There were elegant white roses, sweetly scented with golden centers. There were deep red roses scattering their petals when the breezes made them dance. There were tiny pink fairy roses peeking from the lush green bowers that climbed up the hedges on one side and yellow tea roses nestling themselves among the ivy.

The grassy lawn of the garden held a wrought iron table and four chairs. Two old stone benches nearly covered with moss sat in the shade on either end of the garden. Above one of the benches was one of the most beautiful rose bushes of all. It was deep pink and its branches made a natural canopy over the bench. Never had Sarah seen a more inviting spot. She perched on the bench, her arms wrapped around her knees, and planned her afternoon festivities, humming to herself.

The idea of having a tea party there had come to her upon her second visit to the place. She knew that she wanted to have tea there as soon as the weather was warm enough. It seemed very important. She would bring her stuffed animals and Aunt Alice's friendly cat, Bart, to the tea party. They would spend the afternoon. Mrs. Drummond had already agreed to make a proper tea for her and loan her some cups and saucers. She went over the details in her head, growing sleepy in the warm spring sun. Lovingly, she touched the deep pink roses above her head. Their sweetness seemed to grow stronger. Then from somewhere not too far away she heard someone singing. Her hand stilled. The singing grew closer. It was a song Sarah found strangely familiar in a voice so clear that she found herself barely breathing to listen. Sarah opened her eyes slowly to a garden ablaze with light. Walking toward her was a lady with long red hair in a rich blue gown that gleamed as it trailed behind her along the grass. She was the most beautiful lady that Sarah had ever seen. Her dress was like the ones in the storybook about knights and ladies, but she had shining white wings that seemed filled with light.

Sarah stood up very slowly, wanting to make sure she was awake. The angel's eyes were gentle and loving and Sarah found that she was not afraid at all. "Is this your garden?" she asked.

At first the angel didn't answer and when she did it was only to ask Sarah a question: "What do you want most of all, Sarah?"

It seemed a strange question. Sarah knew she had to answer the angel, but a hundred possible answers flooded her mind. Some of the answers were about things - I want a new doll; I want more drawing pencils; I want chocolate pudding for supper - but somehow these answers didn't seem right. Other answers were more about wanting to see her parents or to be taller, or to have red hair like the angel. Still, she knew, much as she wanted these things, these were not the answer either. Then the answer came. It came so clearly in her mind that Sarah let out a little gasp and the angel smiled and nodded.

"I want my Aunt Alice to come to my tea party. I want her to like me. I don't want her to be alone anymore." How had the angel known? "Do you love your Aunt Alice, Sarah?" the angel asked. And suddenly Sarah knew that she did - it was hard to understand why exactly, but she did. She loved the sad, quiet woman fiercely, protectively. Sarah took a deep breath - "Yes," she said. "I do".

The angel smiled a smile that lit up the whole world and plucked a deep ink rose from the bush above Sarah's head, placing it in her small hands.

"Give this to your Aunt Alice with your love," she said. "And invite her to your tea party."

Sarah sat looking in wonder at the beautiful rose in her hands. When she looked up, the angel was gone.

The heavy curtains were drawn in Aunt Alice's bedroom when Sarah crept inside. She could barely make out the sleeping form of her aunt on the big bed. She was taking a nap. Perhaps she wouldn't even feel well enough to come to tea. Remembering the angel's words, Sarah placed the rose and a note on her vanity table. The note said:

Please come to tea at 3:00pm in the garden.

Come because I love you.

Sarah

As she turned to go, she saw how bright the rose looked in the dimness of the room.

Excitedly, Sarah organized her tea party in the garden. The afternoon was warm and the breezes were gentle. She listened to the angel's song as she sat her teddy bear in one chair and coaxed Bart into another. He was looking very fine indeed in the bright blue ribbon she had placed around his fluffy neck. He sat expectantly while Sarah laid out the snowy tea cloth and set the blue and white china cups and plates at each place. She unpacked the hamper, delighting in the lovely warm scones with raisins, the watercress sandwiches, the tiny cakes with pink icing. Bart licked his whiskers. Sarah placed the cozy over the brimming pot and placed a small vase in the center of the table with a few fairy roses. It had to be very special for Aunt Alice. Finally she sat down to wait. Bart looked at her questioningly. "I hope she'll come," Sarah said.

They waited together for what seemed to them both like a long, long time.

Sarah looked up quickly when Aunt Alice came into the garden, looking around her as if in a dream and holding the rose in her hand. Her eyes rested on Sarah and she moved with some hesitation to take her seat. Sarah thought her aunt looked very pale, but her eyes were filled with something...something fragile like the tender shoots of growth in springtime. They looked at each other for a moment not knowing what to say.

"I'm awfully glad you came," Sarah said and she poured her aunt a cup of tea, hoping it hadn't gotten cold. She poured some milk into Bart's saucer and as he began to drink, she put the pitcher down very carefully and faced her aunt again. Aunt Alice sat very still, holding the rose pressed against her chest and looking into Sarah's eyes.

"It was a long time ago..." Aunt Alice began. Sarah folded her hands in her lap and sat very still.

"...We were very much in love and we used to meet here..." Her eyes drank in the garden... "In this very place." Sarah watched as a tear slipped down her aunt's lined cheek. "You see he was lost at sea a few months before we were to be married. I loved him so much and I lost him...her voice trailed off. "And then," she said, "Somehow I got lost, too." Aunt Alice's eyes searched Sarah's face and found the courage to go on. "You see, Sarah, I have chosen to live all these years shut away with my memories and my grief, letting no one near me. Gradually without realizing...I even forgot how to care...how to open my heart...how to love...until you came..."

But Aunt Alice never finished speaking for Sarah had already slipped from her seat and was reaching out to her and Aunt Alice opened wide her arms and drew Sarah into her lap. They held each other very tightly as though something that was lost had at last been found. It was then that Sarah again heard the angel singing somewhere close by. It was a song about God's great love and how nothing, nothing could separate us from God's love. It was a wonderful song that went on and on. And after a great long while, Sarah got down from Aunt Alice's lap. Aunt Alice poured the tea for Sarah and for her teddy bear; she poured another saucer full of milk for Bart, and they ate the pink iced cakes and the watercress sandwiches and the raisin scones and celebrated all the long, golden afternoon.