

The Silent Shore (Sarah's story)

The Beckoning Hills (Frances's story)

The Dividing Sea (Julia's story)

Beyond the Orchid House

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WALKER BOOKS

AND SUBSIDIARIES

LONDON • BOSTON • SYDNEY

Part One

Antony

Chapter One

Mr Whitelaw frowned as he dug his knife deep into the bark of the tree. "Seen healthier ones than this before now," he grunted.

"I know," Gwen said unhappily. "What should I do? Cut it right back? Or grub it up? What do you think?"

After years of neglect the apple tree was a sorry sight, its branches, knotted and scarred, irremediably intertwined, the few leaves remaining curled and brittle. While neighbouring trees were heavy with fruit already beginning to flush, this one showed no signs of an apple.

The head gardener lifted his bowler hat and wiped his forehead with a large handkerchief. Gwen could feel the perspiration trickle down the back of her neck. The sun, high in the sky, cast no more shadow than a small circle round each tree. Its light had drained colour from the landscape; its heat silenced the wildlife. Only Willis's hoe made any sound as she stood watching Mr Whitelaw move from tree to tree. Willis was scratching the soil beyond the bramble hedge with uncharacteristic zeal. Trying to eavesdrop, no doubt, Gwen thought; anxious to learn in advance of any criticism

Mr Whitelaw might make.

"Don't know why you set such store on his opinion," Willis had said when told of Mr Whitelaw's visit. "We can manage well enough without the likes of him telling us what's what."

Willis had resented Gwen's taking control of the garden at Hillcrest on the death of her mother three years previously. Whether his resentment was due to her age – she had been thirteen at the time – or to her sex Gwen had never been able to decide. Whatever the reason, relations between them had never been good. She would have replaced him long ago had her sisters let her.

"He means well," Julia would say when Gwen raged yet again about Willis's complacency, while Frances pointed out that anyone else might turn out to be worse. "More expensive, certainly. Better the devil you know... We must have someone, Gwen. You can't manage two and a half acres on your own. Willis is all right."

So Willis remained at Hillcrest, and when in need of advice or encouragement Gwen went instead down the road to the Manor, home of Sir James Donne, to consult with Mr Whitelaw, Sir James's head gardener. Which was why Mr Whitelaw was at Hillcrest this morning, going from tree to tree in the orchard, examining each in turn and making notes. Gwen thought the orchard could be made more productive; she needed Mr Whitelaw's help.

The quiet was broken by the sudden *thwack* of croquet mallet meeting croquet ball on the other side of the sandstone wall. A whoop of triumph – from Antony, who else? – was followed by laughter.

Mr Whitelaw looked across at Gwen. "You should have told me you had friends in," he said. "I'd have come

another day."

"It's all right," Gwen said. "It's only the Mackenzies – from the Rectory, you know. It doesn't matter. They spend most of their time here during the holidays."

She was conscious of the fact that Mr Whitelaw was giving up his morning to her. He would not be hurried, however, but continued to give each tree meticulous attention. His recommendations when he came to the end were both helpful and thorough. "Just one thing," he said when he had finished. "Grass could do with a cut. I'll send Jenkins up with a scythe."

"There's no need," Gwen said quickly. "We prefer it like this. Frances does, at least. She'd rather have the grass long, with plenty of flowers. For her painting, you know."

It was not fair to blame Frances when Gwen and Julia felt the same, but it was easier. The inhabitants of Huish Priory, unaccustomed until recently to having a painter in their midst – a professional painter, what was more, and female at that – regarded Frances as so extraordinary that any eccentricity of behaviour among the sisters at Hillcrest received less comment if attributed to her. Besides, Frances cared nothing for the opinion of others.

"Which reminds me," Gwen said now. "Frances wanted to have a word with you before you go. Would you mind? Have you the time?"

"Of course," Mr Whitelaw said. "A pleasure."

She took him from the kitchen garden through the gate in the sandstone wall to the flower garden, pausing for a moment to take in her favourite view of Hillcrest. Roses in the foreground clustered round the stone sundial, the flowers heavy, velvety, filling the air with their scent. Beyond, the lawn, studded with the white arches of croquet hoops,

stretched up to the house. Apricot-painted walls, a roof of grey-green slates. Hillcrest. Solid, comfortable. Home.

The croquet players had retreated from the sunlight and taken refuge in the shade of the wisteria on the veranda where they were now lying in deckchairs or on the flagstones, refreshing themselves with Annie's lemonade. Purcells and Mackenzies, so close that they might have been one family – Frances, Julia and Sarah Purcell (Sarah with her nose in a book as usual) and Gabriel, Geoffrey and Antony from the Rectory across the road. Only Lucy Mackenzie was missing.

Frances saw Gwen standing with Mr Whitelaw at the gate, and came across the lawn towards them, dangling her sun hat from one hand. Her feet, clearly visible below her skirt, were bare, but if Mr Whitelaw saw them he gave no sign.

Not knowing why Frances wanted to speak to Mr Whitelaw Gwen was nervous, anxious that her sister should not offend with some casual remark. "Frances can charm the birds off the trees when she wants," Gabriel sometimes said, in the tone of voice that implied it was a pity she didn't want more often. Today, presumably, she did, for Mr Whitelaw was clearly charmed as she thanked him for the help and encouragement he had given Gwen over the past three years.

"I don't know what she would have done without you," she said, head tilted back, tendrils of chestnut hair curling round her face. "Or the rest of us for that matter. We'd have starved, no doubt."

"Her doing, not mine," Mr Whitelaw said. "She's a hard worker, your sister. I'd take her on my staff at the Manor any time."

He repeated his words when he said goodbye to Gwen at

the front gate. "Your sister's right. You've done well, Miss Gwen. Your mother'd be proud of you, no doubt about it."

"So that's Mr Whitelaw," Gabriel said when Gwen returned to the veranda. "What a nice man."

"Haven't you met him before?" Gwen was surprised. "I thought your family knew everyone there was to know in the village."

"Not if they don't come to church. Which he doesn't, so far as I'm aware. He must be chapel. Was he able to help?"

"Oh, yes." She gave a sigh of relief. "He always does. It'll take a couple of years, he says, but then I should have the orchard in as good shape as the kitchen garden. I've neglected it, you see. We've always had plenty of fruit, of course, but I knew we could do better. Annie says Mother was fussy about apples, and if she didn't like a particular variety she didn't give the tree any attention. There are a couple Mr Whitelaw thinks I should dig up. If I do that and prune the rest he says the orchard will be as productive as the kitchen garden, given time. Thank goodness."

Gabriel laughed. "You are wonderful, Gwen. So serious, always. And such a perfectionist."

"Let me help with the digging up," Antony said eagerly. The youngest of the Mackenzies, fifteen to Gwen's sixteen, he was enthusiastic about everything he took on, always bounding with energy. His face was still scarlet from his exertions at croquet, fair hair dark where it was plastered against his skin. "We'll organize it like a tug of war – first us and then you lot, taking turns. I bet we get the trees out of the ground before you do. Do let's. It'll be fun."

Fun. How well that word described life at Hillcrest and the Rectory when Gabriel came home from Cambridge, where he was a fellow, and Geoffrey from school. Today was

the first time the Purcells had seen Gabriel these holidays; he had returned only the previous evening from a visit to Germany.

"Staying with my dreary German professor," he said, making a face. Then he smiled. "But he has a charming young wife. And two lively sons, who took me up into the mountains and taught me how to walk in the Alps."

"Are the Alps any different from the Quantocks?" Frances asked. "Yes, of course I know they're higher, but apart from that?"

Sarah tugged at Gwen's arm. "Guess what we've decided to do tomorrow."

Gwen looked down at her youngest sister. "I can't guess. You tell me."

"We're going up to the Quantocks to see how far we can walk. We're going for the *whole* day, Gabriel says."

"We?"

"All of us. Me as well." She was bursting with importance.

"You can't call it a walk when there are eight of you doing it," Antony said. "It becomes an expedition then, not a walk. Why don't we pretend we're exploring the Alps? No, not the Alps. The Himalayas. Everest. We'll climb Everest, that's what we'll do."

"Really, Antony," Frances said. "How can you possibly pretend the Quantocks are the Himalayas? The top of the Quantocks is a ridge; Everest's a peak. Anyway, it's not settled that we're going. I still think it's too far for Sarah. Three miles across the valley, for a start, and then the climb up to the ridge, not to mention coming back again afterwards – she won't be able to do it. She's only eleven."

"I will. I will. And anyway, Gabriel's promised to carry me if I get tired."

"Why don't we stay at home together, just you and me?" Gwen said quickly, detecting a wobble in her sister's voice. "You can help me in the garden. We'll keep each other company."

Sarah stuck out her lower lip. "I don't want to stay at Hillcrest. I want to see the Quantocks."

"And so you shall," Gabriel promised. "Don't be so hard on the child, Frances. It must be rotten being so much younger than the rest of us. Let her come this once. We don't have to go far. As for you, Gwen, I'm not having excuses from you. We're all going, and that's that."

"What about Lucy?" Gwen asked. Lucy, the Mackenzies' only daughter, was expected by her parents to spend her time helping in the parish; the Purcells saw less of Lucy than they did of her brothers.

"I'll make sure she does," Gabriel said.

Frances laughed. "Really?"

"Care to bet?" Gabriel challenged her.

"Not if you're determined," she said.

Gwen, watching, would not have cared to bet either, knowing Gabriel's powers of persuasion. By the time the Mackenzies returned to the Rectory – Mrs Mackenzie had organized a tennis party for that afternoon – Gabriel had not only gained Frances's agreement to Sarah's inclusion in tomorrow's expedition but had persuaded the Purcells to provide food for the day as well.

"You know how it is. Annie's picnics are so much more delicious than the dreadful dry sandwiches Cook thinks walkers want."

Annie grumbled as she weighed out butter for pastry. "I never heard the like. Taking Miss Sarah with you, indeed."

How does Mr Gabriel think she'll keep up with those long legs of his? Tell me that. There'll be tears before sunset, you mark my words."

Sarah's eyes were anxious as she sat at the kitchen table watching Annie cut the fat into the flour. She knew that not even Frances would contradict Annie if Annie said no to tomorrow's expedition. For Annie was more than cook and housekeeper to the Purcells: she was one of the family. She had been with the Purcells for longer than any of them could remember; indeed, it had been her presence at Hillcrest that had persuaded Mr Mackenzie, the Purcells' guardian, to defy convention and let the four sisters remain in the house on their own after their mother's death in 1910.

Julia, always the peacemaker, smiled now at her youngest sister. "Why don't you go and ask Willis for some baby carrots, Sarah? They're always refreshing for a picnic." She waited until Sarah had left the kitchen before turning to Annie. "Do let her come," she begged. "You know how Gabriel dotes on her. He'll make sure she's all right. And it is true, what he says. She does get left out. If only she weren't so much younger than the rest of us." She looked across at Gwen. "You'll come too, won't you, Gwen?"

Gwen concentrated on the potatoes she was dicing. "I don't know. There's so much to do here. If we don't get the plums picked within the next day or two the wasps will eat the lot."

"That's just an excuse," Julia said. "One more day won't make any difference. We'll all pick when we get back. You know Geoffrey's always ready to help and I'm sure Gabriel won't mind if we ask him. Neither will Antony if we can persuade him that it was the Greeks' favourite occupation."

"I'll think about it," Gwen said.

She was still thinking when she went out at dusk to shut the hens up for the night. She had never been further than Dunkery St Michael, the village that lay below the Quantocks, though she felt that she already knew the hills well from Frances's many paintings of them. She was tempted. She would like to climb up the bracken-covered slopes, look down into the tree-filled combes and over the vale of Taunton Deane, see the scenes that she knew only in oils. But August was one of the busiest months when it came to cropping, and though she could work all day in the garden without tiring, she was no more of a walker than Sarah.

The smell of warm pastry lingered in the courtyard as she went by the open kitchen window. Tomorrow's picnic was already waiting on the marble shelf in the larder – hard-boiled eggs, lettuce and scrubbed carrots, tomatoes, plums, the first of the season's pears, straw wrapped, and, most delicious of all, Annie's meat pasties. A feast indeed. Did she really want to miss the fun?

Beyond the lamplit cobbles below the window it was darker than she had expected, the path up to the stables no more than a pale ribbon between the dark grass.

"Boo!"

She shrieked, recoiling from the figure that had jumped out at her from the blackness of the fig tree. "Antony!" She waited until the trembling had stopped. "Must you do things like that? Such a fright."

"Sorry." But his voice was unrepentant. "I've been waiting for ages. What have you been doing? I thought the hens had to be shut up before dark, so the foxes wouldn't get them."

"Yes, well. They make such a fuss about being shut up

these light evenings that I tend to leave them... I hadn't realized it was so late, as a matter of fact. What are you doing here? Does your mother know?"

"Of course not. She thinks I'm in bed. I climbed out of my bedroom window. I often do."

There was a swagger in his voice. She did not know whether to believe him. "What happens if she finds out?"

"I've put a pillow down my bed so she'll think I'm fast asleep. Come on – what about the hens? Can I help?"

It was so late that most of the flock had already put themselves to bed. They perched on bales of straw and the remains of winter clamps in the stables, clucking together like members of a parish working party. A quick count – not easy in the darkness of the stable interior – was followed by a hunt over the brow of the hill for the missing birds. Antony shooshed the flapping and cackling recalcitrants through the grass with shouts loud enough for Annie to hear from the kitchen.

"That's done," Gwen said as she shut the stable door and dropped the bar in place. "It's surprising how much easier it is when there are two of you. Sarah helps when the days are shorter, but she went to bed ages ago. Now – what do you want?"

"Are you coming tomorrow? You are, aren't you?"

"I don't know. I haven't made up my mind."

"I don't understand you, Gwen." He sounded exasperated. "You don't ever leave Hillcrest."

"I do, sometimes."

"Not often."

"No. Well. There's so much to do always." She knew that no explanation would satisfy Antony. The youngest of an affluent family, he could never understand what it had been

like to be suddenly orphaned, left with an uncertain income and the fear that Hillcrest might no longer be theirs. And though problems of income had been sorted out long ago and life at Hillcrest was now secure, Gwen's compulsion to keep the kitchen garden productive and the larder and store cupboard filled still remained.

"You know what it is?" Antony said at last. "I think you're frightened."

"Frightened?" She was astonished. Outraged too. "Don't be so silly. Why should I be frightened?"

"I don't know. It's the only reason I can think of, that's all. And Gabriel said something, once... Because you don't leave Hillcrest, Gwen. Oh, I know Lucy doesn't leave the Rectory much either, but that's not because she doesn't want to. Mother expects her to help in the parish, that's why."

"Is she coming tomorrow?" Gwen said.

"Of course. Gabriel promised she would, didn't he? Everyone's coming. Except you, that is. You must, Gwen. Please."

"Is that why you're here? To persuade me?"

"I was afraid from what you said this morning that you might not. I knew it would be easier to make you see how important it was if I talked to you alone. That's why I waited till now."

"Important?"

"To me it is. I want you to come."

She was baffled. "Why?"

"Because I like doing things with you. It wouldn't be any fun without you."

He meant it. He wanted her. She felt a flutter in her stomach. It mattered to Antony that she should be there. How extraordinary...