

THE WIND IN THE WALL

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At that time I believed that, by degrees, I would rise up through the ranks, eventually attaining the position of head gardener. But the duke's admiration for the amaryllis waned and was replaced by a passion for the pineapple. To me the pineapple was a prima donna of acidic fruits, yet all the nobility in England and Scotland had taken up the challenge to produce the finest pineapple specimen in the northern hemisphere, a climate decidedly unfavourable to the growing of this herbaceous perennial. The gardener who possessed the most skill with the sun-obsessed fruit was considered an artisan and in great demand.

Perhaps it was as consolation for the loss of my beloved wife and child to fever that the duke suggested I was put in charge of the pineapple house. Here, in huge plant pots, among a mass of spiky foliage, the monsters grew. It was an honour to be given the job, I know, but – not that I told anyone – I loathed those cursed, scaly dragon eggs. I loathed the heat of the hectic hot-house.






The duke and duchess had taken up residence in Paris. It was said that His Grace astonished the continental nobility by the size of his entourage, the lavishness of his furnishings and by his flamboyant generosity. The fruits of my labours, if successful, were destined to be admired at his dinner table, and even presented to the King of France.

I was permitted to read every book in His Grace's library on the subject of the *Ananas comosus*. I learned that in its native climate, hummingbirds and bats propagate the fruit. But here no such help was to be found and despite all my efforts the pineapples remained small and stunted, refusing to grow in abundance. Those that grew at all tasted bitter, as bitter as the grief I felt for the loss of my child, my sweet wife.

I began to wonder if it was despair that stunted my efforts with the pineapple, though I was certain that if only I had been allowed once more to grow the amaryllis all would have been well. Perhaps the French king would have delighted in the beauty of the flower, the perfection of its petals, the symmetry of its stem. I had read that in Greek mythology 'amaryllis' was the name given to a shepherdess who shed her own blood to prove her love. Had I not lost my heart when my family died? I believed I had much in common with the amaryllis.

For all my hours of study and the sweat of my work in those heated hot-houses, the pineapples failed. Failure was the one thing the duke would not abide. Such was the severity of his disappointment that I feared I might lose my job and my cottage.


The *tap tapping* shakes my whole being. Or rather, it shakes the wall and therefore it shakes me. It isn't the wind. The wind is a wheezy breath devoid of speech; it seeps through the crevices, torments one with the possibility of freedom. No, not the wind. I can hear words and, to my parched mind speech is water. But the voices drift off. I long to be washed away in language, not sprinkled with meaningless sentences.



The duke's head gardener announced that he had found a specialist in the growing of the pineapple, a Mr Amicus who had travelled the world as far as Brazil, seen the pine of the Indies growing in its native land where the sun shines hot and there is no need for glasshouses.

The dust of old stone has made a rusty merry-go-round of my memory so forgive me for not recalling the exact date Mr Amicus arrived. I would check if I could only reach my notebook. I believe it was a Wednesday, Wednesday, 4 March 17—.

Mr Amicus was a stunted plant of a man, prickly in nature. His fingernails were dirty, his beard an untrimmed hedge. He wore a feather in his hat and hummed rather than spoke.



I knew a charlatan when I saw one. I felt it to be nothing short of my duty to point out to the head gardener that Mr Amicus was a cheap trickster, the kind you may find in any country fair.

Unfortunately, what I had to say was not taken well. The head gardener told me that Mr Amicus's reputation as a grower of exotic fruit was second to none and that from then on I would be working with flowers. Flowers were the duchess's domain, the head gardener continued, and therefore of lesser consequence than the pineapple. I was undermined, my artistry standing for nothing, and did not speak again about Mr Amicus to anyone.





Mr Amicus was given one of the largest tied cottages on the estate. That in itself was a source of great irritation to me and illustrated my demotion more perfectly than any one action could.

He brought with him a cartload of furniture – nothing remarkable about that. But it was the large birdcage covered in black cloth that caught my eye, and I wondered if he owned a parrot.

A cruel April that year turned into a bitter May. The rain poured, the wind blew and still the garden was a skeleton of bare sticks, without a green shoot to give hope that spring had not forsaken us. My attempts to talk to Mr Amicus were hummed away by him. He ignored me and any suggestion or crumb of conversation I made would always be turned to my disadvantage so that I appeared to be in the wrong or, even worse, ignorant about the growing of certain plants. He had the other gardeners mock me. I am not to be mocked at. I am a well-read, self-educated man and there is nothing I don't know about plants. It was his rudeness that made me suspicious. I began to make notes on his behaviour.

Note 1. He has a birdcage but he laughed when I asked if he owned a parrot.



Note 2. He has had locks made for all the doors of the pineapple house and allows no one else to enter.

Note 3. He wears the keys on a chain around his neck and is never seen without them.



Note 4. From morning until night he is to be found at the Angel Inn, morose and drunk and speaking a language no one understands.

