

Within the Glass

By Elizabeth Jennings

The sun reflected off the conservatory with blinding brilliance as Walter McCrary walked up the footpath. The winter air was dry and clear so that everything seemed to shine even though little snow remained on the ground. Walter began whistling "My Wild Irish Rose" and adjusted the gray scarf that was tucked into his herringbone overcoat.

As he unlocked the door of the conservatory, Walter felt the warm, humid air welcome him. He shut the door behind him and breathed in the rich fertile smells of the black soil, peat moss and the plants themselves before hanging his hat, coat and scarf on hooks beside the door, making sure the coat wasn't creased in such a way as to cause a wrinkle. Then he shook off his work smock and slipped it over his clothes. He was ready for work.

The first thing to do was add coal to the stove. Walter did this with precision, putting on gloves and using tongs to pick up each piece of coal and easing it onto the fire in just the right spot. He always did this himself, not trusting the

young boys Mr. Chandler sometimes sent to help in the conservatory. They worked with such carelessness, hurrying to be done and get out. Just because Mr. Chandler's visitors didn't come back here was no reason to make a mess of things, spilling peat moss and sand all over the place, leaving things out, splashing water onto everything. Sometimes Walter thought he was the only one who truly cared about the place. Even Mr. Chandler, who from time to time would focus the majority of his impressive energy on a rare plant specimen, was generally preoccupied with some other project. One time it had been a new yacht, another time a library renovation. With the library, he had gone a whole month without even stopping by the conservatory. Walter couldn't understand that.

He couldn't understand it, but he was glad for the time alone. He liked it best when it was just he and the plants. No mindless joking, no slaps on the back, no talk of politics. Just the almost silent sound of life stretching toward the sun, seeming to grow to the rhythm of his voice.

Walter began the morning rounds, starting in the tropical room, which was filled with glistening bromeliads, towering rubber plants and weeping figs.

"Good morning, Thomas," Walter said to one of the rubber plants as he inspected a pink sheath that would soon uncurl into a tender new leaf. "I see you're still hale and hearty. Keep it up my lad."

Walter didn't have names for all the plants, just the ones he himself had propagated as rootings and a few others that were dear to his heart. Like the violet orchid, Clarissa, that seemed to bloom just for him. Or the orange tree, Godfrey, that he had nursed through that bad time last winter. He didn't have names for them all--there were just too many--but he knew them all, even the tiny seedlings just starting out.

Clucking and whistling and humming by turns, Walter made his way through the entire conservatory, clipping off dead leaves, pulling out bits of trash, and mist-

ing the plants as he went from the tropical room to the succulents to the orchids and roses. Finally he came to the nursery in the back. He would spend most of his day in here where it was peaceful and quiet, mixing soil, planting seeds, nursing sick specimens.

But when Walter opened the door he realized something was wrong. A shock of cold air splashed against his face and crept down the back of his neck. He walked in and saw bright blue sky through the jagged edges of a broken pane. Shattered glass sparkled on the floor around a bird--a towhee it looked like--its head turned at a strange angle, its glassy eyes pointing toward nothing.

"Oh, the poor thing." Walter knelt down and cupped his hands around the bird. "My, my . . . what a sad departure," he said, scooping its limp form up. It was amazing how awkward birds looked in death, Walter thought. Their air-borne grace completely left them as their wings became useless, even ungainly. He took the bird outside and covered it with dry leaves. He felt he should say something. He thought for a moment and whispered as he stood up, "Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Back inside Walter surveyed the damage. One pane was broken, but none of the plants appeared to have suffered from the cold. He was sweeping up the glass when he heard Mr. Chandler come in. It was a quarter till nine, a good half hour early to be finished with breakfast and already on his rounds of the estate. That wasn't a good sign. Mr. Chandler must be worried about something, his new young wife, perhaps, or, more likely, his bank accounts.

Walter walked to the front of the conservatory, where Mr. Chandler sat on a bench facing the fountain.

"Good morning to you, Mr. Chandler."

"Morning, Walter."

"I hate to bother you, sir, but I'm afraid a bird flew into the back room last night and managed to break a pane. We'll need to repair it today or the frost could damage the plants during the night."

Mr. Chandler absently broke a leaf off a ficus plant that leaned over the bench.

"I don't see how a bird could break the glass, Walter."

"Nor do I, sir, but that's what happened. Maybe it was cracked already and the little fellow hit it at the wrong place. It was really rather pitiful. I put the poor thing outside under some leaves in the sun. It should be happy there."

"I would have thought the bird was dead."

"Well he was, but I couldn't just put him out back with the garbage as if he weren't one of God's own creatures, could I?"

Mr. Chandler stared at Walter and shook his head.

"Christ, we can't afford new panes. The glassmaker robbed us blind when we had that section redone in the desert room last summer."

So it was the bank account after all. Normally Mr. Chandler operated on the money-is-no-object theory of property management, but from time to time he would retreat back to his ancestors' thrifty ways.

"Why did that idiot bird choose our conservatory to fly into? It was probably drunk from eating the berries off the holly bushes. That's all I need--holly bushes with no berries and drunken birds flying into my conservatory."

Without meaning to, Walter spoke. "Really, Mr. Chandler, I don't think the bird meant you any harm."

Mr. Chandler stood up, almost toppling the bench.

"Well, send Jimmy down to the warehouse." He brushed off his suit. "I know there's a box of old panes down there. They aren't clear enough to put out front, but they'll do for the back room."

He headed out the door and began walking down the path toward the horse stables. Walter pushed the ficus plant away from the bench.

That afternoon Jimmy, the white-haired handyman who had worked for Mr. Chandler's father even before he became rich, replaced the pane while Walter repotted several overgrown ferns. "I can't bear to watch you up on that ladder," Walter told him as he set things up. "I can't stand heights myself. Makes my stomach turn somersaults."

"Umph." Jimmy had never been a man of many words and had probably spoken less than a handful to Walter in the two years they had worked together.

"Please do be careful," Walter said as Jimmy leaned backward slightly to unclasp the pane. "I just can't stand to watch." But he did watch until Jimmy was safely down and was silently gathering his tools.

The next day Walter repeated his routine. As he entered the back room, he felt relieved that everything had returned to its normal tidiness. He began whistling a tune, "The Yellow Rose of Texas," as he settled into work. A few minutes went by before he stopped whistling and turned around abruptly. He scanned the room--nothing was out of place--but he felt somehow that something was different. He stood motionless for a few seconds before returning to his work, humming a few feeble bars of "Daisy, Daisy," before falling silent.

He turned around again, but all was in order.

Maybe speaking aloud would help, he thought. He considered what to say, cleared his throat and began: "And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good." He spoke purposefully, dispelling any disquiet, and yet after the words fell silent, the strangeness remained. He looked at each plant in the room, drawing comfort from their familiar presence, and still he

felt another and very different presence in the room. Not a new plant or a little creature, but something else.

Walter looked up to where the roof had been repaired. He closed his eyes for a moment, relaxing in the warmth of the strong morning sun that shone through in broad beams. He opened his eyes slowly, allowing the brilliant light to daze him for a moment before clearing his eyes.

And then he saw them. Not clearly at first, but as he changed his position to catch the light just right, the shadowy outlines became more and more discernible. Two eyes staring back at him from within the glass, two pupils, not blinking but looking out intently, looking at Walter. They appeared to belong to a young man, a boy even, yet so serious, so somber.

Several seconds went by as Walter stared up at the glass pane that Jimmy had installed the day before. He felt that he could not move but had to keep staring into those eyes. He felt himself being pulled--not physically--but pulled just the same, toward what he didn't know.

The back door clicked as Mr. Chandler came in. Walter felt a chill travel down his body as he broke his upward gaze.

"Mr. Chandler. Mr. Chandler, could you come here?" Walter called.

"What is it? Not another bird, I hope." Mr. Chandler stepped into the nursery.

"Mr. Chandler. There's something wrong with the glass that Jimmy put in, something terribly wrong."

Mr. Chandler stared upward, shafts of morning light streaming down and around his commanding body. "Looks fine to me. What exactly do you think is the problem?"

"There's something in the glass, Mr. Chandler. I saw something--somebody--in the glass. . . . They were staring at me." Walter felt the top of his shoulders began to droop as he mentally curled into himself.

Mr. Chandler stood straight up and looked at the glass again. Then he began to laugh, a silent chuckling laugh at first then turning into a deep belly laugh. He looked at Walter and slapped him on the back.

"So that's what this is all about. Ha ha. I guess I forgot to tell you, those panes were made from old glass plate negatives. You know, photographic plates. From the Civil War. There were so many negatives left over after the war they sold them dirt cheap. My father bought a whole truckload, as mementoes, in a way. They've been sitting in the warehouse for decades."

Walter, still slumping ever so slightly, looked at Mr. Chandler as if a cruel joke had been played on him. "Don't worry about it, Walter. . . . In a few months the sun will burn the image out and you won't be able to tell it from the rest." He gave Walter another slap on the back and headed out the door.

Alone in the nursery again, Walter felt awkward, self-conscious. He looked around at the plants for comfort, took a breath to calm himself, and began pinching the buds off the chrysanthemums. But the plants wouldn't cooperate, flopping leaves in his way, curling up into themselves, shying away from his touch. Walter avoided looking up at the glass, but the morning sun on his back reminded him of the stranger's eyes watching the intimate dealings between him and the plants. He couldn't blame the chrysanthemums for feeling shy.

He thought about going to Mr. Chandler and explaining that he couldn't work like this. He could picture Mr. Chandler's stare--a mixture of bewilderment and contempt. He could hear Mr. Chandler's booming voice as he explained--politely enough, but leaving no room for argument--that there was no reason Wal-

ter should be bothered by some faint image on a piece of glass. Walter sighed. He would just have to get used to it.

The next day Walter walked to work early, determined to get control over the situation. He would not let those eyes bother him. The only thing to do was walk right in and look at them directly, show everyone that he was in charge.

Walter went straight to the nursery without even taking off his coat. He stood below the new glass pane and looked up. The boy was still there, staring at him, but this time Walter made himself stare back. He examined the picture closely. The boy was holding a rifle on one side and a bugle on the other. Behind him were a rail fence and a field. Distant figures appeared in the background--men, horses, wagons.

Walter heard the clock chime the hour and realized he had been staring at the picture for several minutes. He looked into the boy's eyes once more and realized that the intensity he had felt yesterday was nothing more sinister than a deep loneliness reaching out from within the glass.

He surveyed the plants in the room. "Now today we're going to act pleasant as usual. We have a lot of work to do." He looked back up at the boy. Was it his imagination, or was there the faintest hint of a smile on his face? Yes, yes, there in the corners of the eyes was an expression of gratitude, Walter felt sure of it. He began humming his favorite, "Lavender Blue," as he started his rounds.

Over the next few weeks Walter developed a strong curiosity about the boy in the glass. He tried to find out where the box of panes had come from, but no one seemed to know anything more than they were surplus from the Civil War. He

even went down to the warehouse to look at the other pieces of glass, but they were unremarkable. Some of them had the barest hint of a picture in them, but they were dull and blurred. The eyes were completely lifeless, not at all like the penetrating gaze of Walter's boy. That's what he called him now--"my boy"--as if he were the child's father.

What was a child like that doing in uniform, Walter wondered. Of course he had heard of youngsters going off to war, especially during the Civil War, but his boy had such an air of innocence Walter could not imagine him witnessing the slaughter of combat. And yet there was that initial loneliness he had detected, a sadness so penetrating it had frightened him. What had he seen, this boy in the glass? He tried to remember what he had learned about the War--cannonballs flying through the smoke of battle, horses screaming as they fell to the ground, grown men crying for their mothers, amputations without chloroform . . . Then, after all that, to have your very soul locked up in a dark box year after year with nothing but memories of horror to dwell on. Walter was glad his boy was safe in here now, with the sun above and the peaceful green plants below, a haven from past terrors.

Every morning when Walter came into work he went directly to the nursery. Even when the weather was gloomy there seemed to be light shining through under the glass. He looked up at the glass and drew comfort from the happiness he saw there, from the calmness and certitude he felt so vividly. A sense of well-being entered his lungs along with the air as he stood basking in the light.

Then, as the crocuses began to burst through the cold earth outside, a hint of uneasiness crept into Walter's soul during this morning ritual. For several days he could not say what it was exactly, but something--some little thing--was amiss. He stared into his boy's eyes and still saw gratitude and happiness, but something else was there as well. Foreboding? Sorrow? What was it? Finally, one day late



in February, Walter came in, looked up at the glass and realized what was happening.

His boy was fading.

It wasn't something immediately obvious, yet Walter had no doubt about it. In fact, he couldn't believe he hadn't figured it out before. Mr. Chandler had even told him the sun would burn the image out of the glass. How could he have been so stupid? The boy had been trying to tell him, but Walter hadn't understood.

Walter stared up at the boy, whose calm sweetness remained constant.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you," Walter told him.

Yet how on earth could he keep such a promise? He could hardly stop the sun from shining, and the glass was up there to stay. Mr. Chandler would never replace it.

Unless . . . unless there were some reason, some convincing excuse Walter could create. Walter felt desperate. He had to do something. There was no telling how much longer the boy could last up there in the burning sunlight.

"Well, one way or another I'll do it," he told himself.

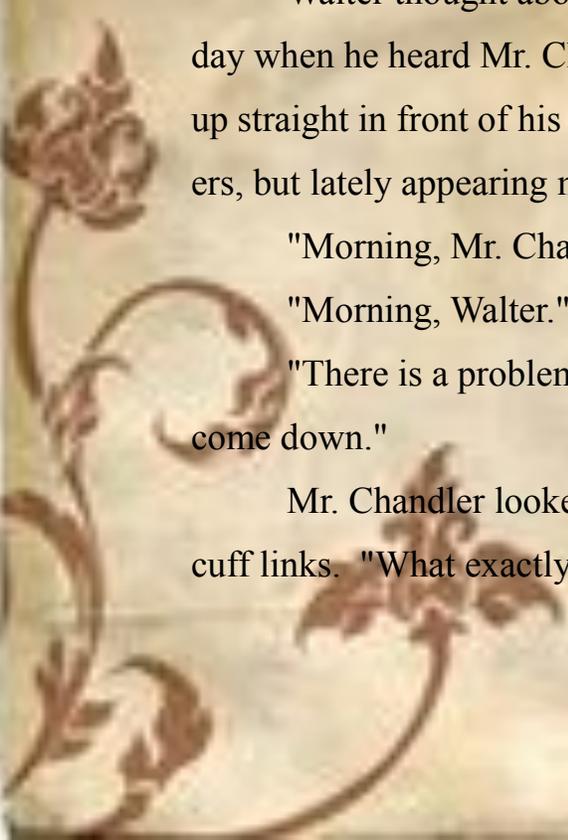
Walter thought about his plan for several days and then, the following Monday when he heard Mr. Chandler come in, Walter went directly to him. He stood up straight in front of his boss, a man often surrounded by a small group of followers, but lately appearing more and more by himself.

"Morning, Mr. Chandler."

"Morning, Walter."

"There is a problem with the new pane in the nursery after all. It has to come down."

Mr. Chandler looked at Walter for a moment, then began fiddling with his cuff links. "What exactly is the problem?"



"The old glass is unstable--it's bound to break any day now with all the snow and ice we've been having. And if it goes, then I'm afraid some of the surrounding panes will go as well. I'm quite certain, it has to be replaced."

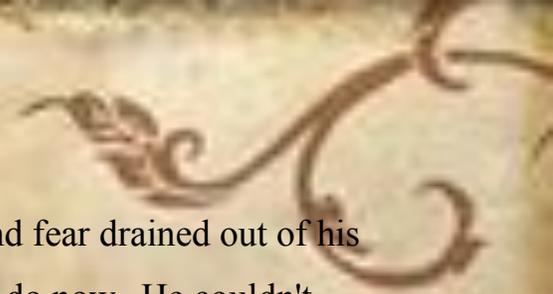
Mr. Chandler hesitated for a moment, a touch of irritation on his lips—or was it a smile? "Well, we still have the same problem--no money to buy a new pane. Plus, Jimmy is out for the month with a bad back. It will have to wait."

"No sir, it can't wait." Walter was surprised to hear the resonance in his own voice. "I found a good used pane in the box in the warehouse. It's much sturdier--Jimmy didn't know what to look for before. I'll have young Calvin come over and we'll put it up together. I know how to do it since I watched Jimmy last time. It will be fine." He turned and left before Mr. Chandler could respond, but he knew there would be no objection.

As he and Calvin positioned the ladder, Walter tried not to think about his fear of heights. A feeling of unrealness had overcome him, and he seemed to watch the proceedings from the side. "Sure you don't want me to go up?" Calvin asked. He was about fourteen, with sandy hair that fell into his blue eyes a bit and an air of recklessness about him.

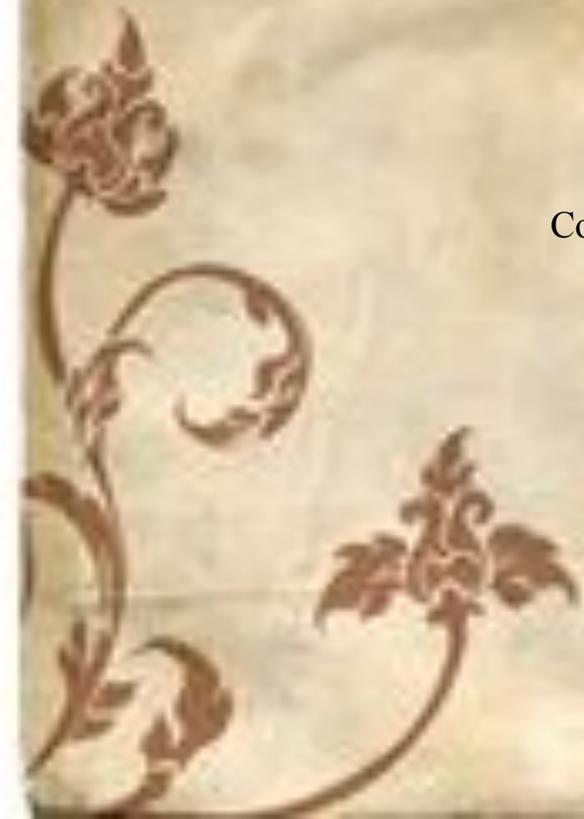
"No, no. I need to do it myself." Walter would never trust Calvin with such a delicate task. He stepped onto the ladder and looked up. His boy's eyes, full of concern, seemed miles away. Holding a box full of tools and the new glass, Walter climbed up the ladder steadily, his gaze never wavering.

Finally he was at the top. Everything else became a blur as he unfastened the glass, wrapped it in a soft cloth, put it in the box and then quickly installed the new pane. For one moment he looked below and saw Calvin's upturned face, the rows of seedlings, the green, burnished foliage. Then he climbed down, put the box in his desk, helped Calvin put the ladder up and gave him fifty cents.



He walked to his desk and sat down. Exhilaration and fear drained out of his body and left him empty. He thought about what he would do now. He couldn't save his boy forever--he couldn't banish him to complete darkness again. But maybe they could fade slowly together. He'd make a frame for him and keep him by his bed at home, next to the Sensitive Plant his mother had given him. Every morning and every evening he could hold him up to the light and stare into those wonderful eyes.

Finally a sense of calm filled him. Walter opened his desk drawer and unwrapped the glass. His boy stared back at him, smiling.



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