

A Secret Garden



by Theodore Dalrymple

One of my few remaining ambitions is to catalog my library—if that is not too grand a word for my accumulation of books. Certainly, I have known municipal libraries with fewer volumes, especially now as they can't wait to dispose of those encumbrances and obstructors of computer terminals.

After my death, what Victorian graveyards would once have called my *relict* will find a bookseller who will give her *yardage*—that is to say, a small amount of money for each shelf yard of books—having first spied the fact that within each yard there is a book that will make his efforts worthwhile (financially worthwhile, that is).

It is true that the majority of the books are of no value, or even of negative value, in the same way that bank deposits in

Switzerland recently attracted negative interest rates. You could not even give away most of the books, and so (for anyone not interested in their content or as physical objects in themselves) they would be liabilities rather than assets.

But for me, my library is a kind of autobiography, or at least a record of serial obsessions. It is undecipherable for anyone but me, which of course is part of its charm: Everyone needs a secret garden of one kind or another.

But not all the books I have accumulated are a product of a fleeting obsession with one subject or another. Some I bought only for a charm of their own that they had. I could not resist a short book with the title *Lunacy Law for Medical Men*, dated 1894 and inscribed by its author two years later, alas to a person whose name I cannot make out. The author was Charles Mercier (1851–1919), a considerable figure in his day, a forensic psychiatrist who devoted a lot of energy to debunking spiritualism. The first chapter of his *Lunacy Law* deals with those whom he calls *idiots*; a word for persons of defective intelligence that has been put through a number of terminological revolutions with which I have not kept up. We think that, by changing the name, we change the thing; suffice it to say that nowadays we use the word *idiot* only to describe politicians and other important persons.

As I go through my library, I am surprised by some of its contents, whose place and date of purchase I have entirely forgotten. They are, however, often delightful, and this explains why I bought them. For example, there is a lovely little green-covered book with the title *How Shall I Word It?: A Complete Letter Writer of Men and Women*. The title page says it is by *One of the Aristocracy*; on the cover is a young lady (not just a woman), wasp-waisted in a red-spotted bow, sitting at a desk holding some kind of writing instrument up to her lips in a gesture of deep reflection at to what to write.

A previous owner has written in pencil that the member of the

aristocracy was Ronald M. Pelham, about whom I have found nothing but the authorship of this book, which was first published (this is a first edition) in 1901, according to the same writer in pencil. I was surprised to discover that the book was published, no doubt with changes, right up to the late 1940s at least, by which time membership of the aristocracy was probably less impressive to the multitude than it was in 1901. Speaking of aristocrats, I rather like those whom I have known (now that they have lost their power and prominence), and certainly I have preferred them to most of the politicians whom I have encountered. But that is another subject.

The book, which is only 103 pages long, contains quite a few delights and is highly instructive—as, indeed, most books are in one way or another. Who, for example, could not wish to learn how to write a reproach to a fiancée for being a flirt? This model letter, by Arthur to Helen, begins:

I feel a few words of explanation are due to you as to my attitude towards you last night, though I cannot help feeling in my heart that you knew or guessed at the cause of my coldness.

I was not cold by any means, but the great restraint I had to put on myself made me appear so. The words “flirt” or “flirting” are hateful to most self-respecting women, and you will probably resent my applying them to you, and deny my right to do so, but I can find no others that will fitly describe your conduct last night.

Arthur is a bit of a prig: One cannot imagine laughing with him much. He ends his letter:

The line of conduct you are choosing to pursue in spite of what I have once or twice said to you is one that will soon shatter my faith, and would wreck our happiness if we were to marry.... [It] is the last time I shall ever mention the matter

to you....

Helen does not appear to be a woman of spirit, for she replied to this ultimatum, *inter alia*:

Can you forgive me, dear, and will you? I promise that I will never so displease you again.

One foresees many years of misery for them ahead.

I prefer the young lady who writes "reproaching her lover with coldness":

I scarcely think you will be surprised at receiving such a letter as this from me.... I do not blame you; it is probably your nature; but do let me advise you to take your nature into account before you again set yourself deliberately to win the affection of any women.

The book might have been written in Nineveh or Tenochtitlan, so far removed from the civilization from which it emanated are we now. Here is how a young authoress ought to approach a publisher:

I am sending you the MS. of a novel I have just completed. It has a religious tendency, and might prove, I think, a suitable book for girls from twelve to sixteen years of age. I have often been struck by the difficulty in obtaining books for girls....

In enlightened jurisdictions, such as that of Scotland, the writer of such a letter could probably nowadays be arrested for the grossest sexual discrimination and sent to reeducation camp.