



The Garden of Lost Secrets

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News & Choice:

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I am not sure how many children going round a National Trust garden would stop to look at the greenhouses where fruit such as pineapples were grown in the past? In this accomplished first novel by A.M. Howell, Clara is sent to live with her father's sister who is housekeeper on a big estate, where her husband is the Head Gardener. But Clara is forbidden to go into the greenhouses where the pineapples are grown, and her aunt is not the warm and friendly lady she remembered. In Clara's pocket is her secret, an unread telegram which arrived just as her parents were sending her away for a few weeks. The moment to give it to her mother had passed and now Clara is unable to bring herself to open it. She shares this secret with the boy she glimpses in the moonlight by the greenhouses, and then together they determine to find out who is stealing the Earl's precious pineapples.

Set against the background of the Great War in 1916, the story recreates perfectly the life of a big estate where life has continued much as before, except for the need to supply the local hospital with fruit and vegetables for those soldiers convalescing and the presence of Robert, unable to serve because of the loss of his eye. But below the surface there is tragedy and poverty and another secret held to herself by Clara's aunt. All this is told in a measured prose which has the underlying mystery of untold secrets.

Clara and her friend Will are rounded characters, and the presence of Clara's uncle, the shy man who would have liked to be able to offer her more warmth, counteracts the unexplained coldness of the aunt.

There is enough mystery and drama to satisfy readers and yet impart the background of the Great War and life on a big estate, to make this a satisfying read for girls 10+. It is a pity however, given that the pineapple is the fruit of the story that it does not feature on the front cover!

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