

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Story of the day:

The Secret Garden

by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Jesus warns us that unless we become like little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Our salvation comes *from a child*, because Jesus was that child whom prophets and seers foretold. He was the son whose mysterious name is Immanuel, which means “God is among us.”

I wonder about married people who don’t want children. It is like not wanting to be alive. Or more dreadful still: it is like saying to the living God, “Please, don’t save me. I don’t want the trouble.” If you knew that the little baby would grow up and make you ten million dollars, you wouldn’t mind changing his diapers. But the salvation of your eternal soul? “Don’t bother me,” people say, as they change the channel on the television.

People have not always been kind to children. When the town where I grew up was settled, boys would go down the cold and wet coal mines, where the inside of your nose and mouth and ears and lungs would get black as soot, and they would roll big carts full of coal from far underground to the surface, ten hours a day, six days a week. Girls would later be put to work at sewing machines in the factories, where the dust from the cloth would float in the air

and stick to your sweat, while it was a hundred degrees outside.

But it should be in a Christian’s blood to think about children and how they can save you. There are a lot of stories in the Bible about how a child comes to the rescue of everyone. Jacob was saved by his son Joseph, after Joseph’s jealous brothers

threw him down a well and sold him into slavery. The children of Israel were saved by Moses, who as a baby boy was floated along the shallows of the Nile in an “ark” made of wicker, so that the Pharaoh’s sister would find him and take care of him. The young lad Samuel hears the voice of God when the high priest Eli does not. The boy Tobias sets forth with his angel protector and the family dog on a mission that will bring him a wife, and that will cure the blindness of his old father. It isn’t because children are always good. But God chooses to use their weakness and harmlessness to save the old and crabbed and sinful, “for the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the

weakness of God is stronger than men.”

That’s what happens in *The Secret Garden*, the famous novel for children, by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Mary is a girl growing up spoiled and neglected by her mother and father in India. They don’t love her. When they die of disease, she is sent to England to live in the country with her uncle, Mr. Craven. He doesn’t want to have anything to do



with her, either, and tells her so. He's a widower, and when his wife died, all the happiness went out of his life, and all his love went with it. There was a garden with walls all round it, a garden full of flowers and trees and fruit, and birds and animals, where Mrs. Craven used to sit and read, and one day a heavy limb from a tree cracked and came down upon her. She died from the injury. So Mr. Craven has locked the garden up. He doesn't care if it goes to weeds. He doesn't care about anything anymore. No one is permitted to enter.

Mary isn't a nice girl when she arrives in England. She has a lot to learn, and she too will have to be "saved" by a child, or by two children. At first she's a snob and won't have anything to do with the servant girl who is supposed to take care of her. The first time she's getting ready for bed, Mary stands in the middle of the room and asks the servant to dress her. But the girl laughs and says, "Don't you know how to dress yourself?" But she is kind to Mary and wins her over. Then Mary meets the girl's younger brother, Dickon. He is twelve years old, and he wanders the fields and the woods, and he knows all about living creatures and their ways. Mary and Dickon become good friends, and together they enter that secret garden, with a key that Mary has found by accident. There they plant flowers. They pull out the weeds. They restore the beauty of the garden. It is their secret place.

Meanwhile there's another child in the manor house with a hundred rooms. It is Mr. Craven's son, Colin. He too is like an orphan, because Mr.

Craven hates the house where his beloved wife died, and does not want to spend any time there. Everybody thinks that Colin is a cripple. He spends day after day in bed. He is as spoiled as Mary used to be, bossing around the servants and screaming when he says he is in pain. The local doctor, who is not very bright or very good, can't do anything to help him. But Mary can. When Colin screams at her she screams right back. When Colin calls her mean and nasty she tells him to his face that he's the mean and nasty one. She becomes his friend because she tells him the truth. Then she brings Dickon to see him, and they take him outdoors, in a wheelchair, to the secret garden.

Colin will walk, but that's not the greatest

"But somebody else in the novel needs more than fresh air. It is Mr. Craven himself, and he needs to be raised from the dead."

miracle of the book. There was really nothing terribly wrong with his legs, you see. They simply needed work. He is brought to the fresh air from his stale bedroom. But somebody else in the novel needs more than fresh air. It

is Mr. Craven himself, and he needs to be raised from the dead. He is dead inside. He has wanted to be dead inside. Salvation will come to him from three children: the niece and the son he ignored, and the local boy with the thick accent, whom he never knew. The movie that was made from the book in 1949 is in black and white, except for the scenes in the garden, which are in brilliant color.

Watch it, or read the book, and remember the joy of the shepherds when they obeyed the angel and found the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts is a joyfully Catholic, great books college located on a mountain in beautiful New Hampshire. The college offers a transformative liberal education of the whole person, ordered to human flourishing and communion, animated by the perennial questions, given shape by the classic books, and nourished by a vibrant liturgical and sacramental culture. Magdalen College calls all within her community to enter the great conversation of authors seeking wisdom that has unfolded across the ages, cultivating a life of virtue, poetic imagination, service, and life-giving fidelity.