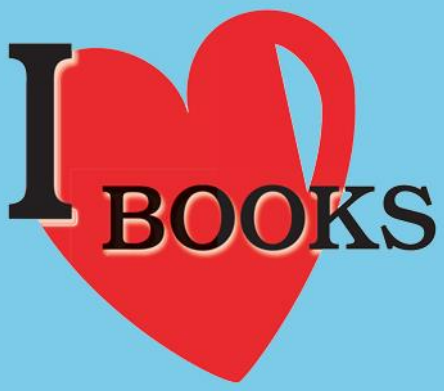


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Opening extract from

A Song for Will and The Lost Gardeners of Heligan

Written by

Hilary Robinson

Illustrated by

Martin Impey

Published by

Strauss House Productions

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Please print off and read at your leisure.



For our editor Jackie Hamley,
who first brought Martin's art and my words together.

HR

For Emilie.
Thank you for showing me the magic of Heligan all those years ago.

MI

Produced in partnership with
The Lost Gardens of Heligan,
and with the generous support of
Trounce Guy, Ken Paynter and Penelope Willis.

first printed February 2017

STRAUSS HOUSE PRODUCTIONS
www.strausshouseproductions.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
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ISBN - 978-0-9571245-3-0
The author and illustrator would like to thank Heligan Archives
for permission to reproduce the photographs and painting on pages 66 & 67
Printed in the UK

A Song for Will

and the Lost Gardeners of Heligan



Written by
Hilary Robinson

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Martin Impey

STRAUSS HOUSE
PRODUCTIONS

"I never remember Will as anything but content.
He was a gentle man.
After the war I went to see an uncle of ours
and I noticed he had a linnet in a cage on the kitchen table.
I asked him about it and he said,
'It was your Will that found it, crippled in a hedge.
He nursed it back to health.'"

Philip Guy

The last four years have changed all our lives.

When war was declared in 1914, I was a young errand boy at Heligan and keen to sign up like the gardeners, but I wasn't old enough.

That day, all the outdoor staff wrote their names on the wall of the outdoor toilet, which we jokingly call the Thunderbox Room. I can't remember whose idea it was, it could have been the gardener William Guy's, as his name is near the top. Underneath their list they recorded the date: August 1914.

"One day, Alfie," said Fred Paynter, the stonemason, as he etched his name on the lime plaster, "people might look at our names and remember what courageous young men we were!"

What we didn't know was that this would be the last time we would all be together.

And now it's 1918, war is over and we have a new beginning.

Looking at the names on the Thunderbox wall, thinking about who is coming back and who isn't, I know that life at Heligan will never quite be the same again.

This is our story.





March 1915
Salisbury Plain



Dear Alfie,

Well, we finally left St Austell with a real sense of adventure. There wasn't as much cheering and hat throwing as on the day The Naval Reserve left last August. It was good of so many to turn out though. I looked for you, Alfie, but couldn't see you.

Few of us have ever travelled away from home before and now we have arrived on Salisbury Plain to begin training.

I know they said the war would be over by last Christmas, so I can understand how anxious you all must be at Heligan. We are keeping our spirits up though and perhaps we will be home for the herring season next winter. If not, and with so many fishermen in the forces now, you may have to go and fish for them yourself!

The good news is that William Guy and I are still together at the moment. Will asked me to remind you to take care of Willow. He says, "She is a horse in a million", and he can't wait to see her when he returns.

We look forward to hearing your news of Heligan and the gardens, Alfie. Make sure Mr Griffin doesn't let anyone whitewash over the Thunderbox wall where we wrote our names. We hope they will stay there forever.

Yours, *Fred*



May 1915
Heligan Gardens

Dear Fred,

We were all excited to hear your news. Mr Griffin read your letter to all the outdoor staff and then Daisy read it to the staff in the Mansion. It made me proud to think a real soldier had written to me. I tried to write back but found it difficult so my old school teacher, Mr Hunkin, is helping me now.

I tried to catch up when you took the bus up the valley but my bike had a puncture. I ran up to the cliff top though and saw you disappear into the distance.

I do wish I had been old enough to join up. Mother says I mustn't get my hopes up for the future as I am pigeon-chested and that could mean I fail the medical. The war could be over by then though. Mr Griffin has put a map up on the wall in his office so that we can see where you all are when you write to us from Europe.

Everyone has extra jobs to do at Heligan now, with so many away at war. So, as well as being the errand boy, I help in the Kitchen Garden too. I got a bonus this week for catching four rats! I think of them as the enemy and lie in wait to capture them.



The Squire and his mother are here whenever they can be. The Squire is often in London enlisting men for The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. Mrs Tremayne wants to support the local people as much as possible. She says, "This is a terribly worrying time for many families."

Would you tell Will that no one stays up all night in the bothy above the Thunderbox Room anymore, to watch out for the manure in the Pineapple Pit self-combusting! Mr Griffin says that our time now can be better served and the last thing we want is explosions at Heligan as there's enough of that going on in Europe. He says, "Pineapples are a luxury to grow and a time of war is not a time for luxury."

Yours,

Alfie





June 1915
Heligan Gardens

Dear Fred,

I bumped into Joe Pengelly when I was out doing errands yesterday. Joe and I were at school together and he looked really smart in his new uniform. He says he wishes he could have volunteered too but he is enjoying his new job as a Telegram Messenger Boy. We made a pledge that we will try and enlist together as soon as we are old enough. He is worried he may fail a medical too because he has asthma. Tell Will that Joe is learning to play the accordion. I remember Will was saving all his rat-catching money to buy a harmonium and Joe says he hopes to be good enough to play with Will when the war is over.

Tell Will also that Daisy works with us in the garden now as well as helping Ida cook in the kitchen.

Do you remember the injured linnet that Will found by the little Handkerchief Tree in the Sun-Dial Garden? Daisy says she sings every morning. We tried to get her to fly away but she wouldn't go. The Handkerchief Tree still hasn't flowered. Mr Griffin says it may take a few years yet.

We have called the linnet Hope, as we hope that you will all return, safe and well. She likes to fly around the Peach House where Will sometimes used to work and she seems quite happy.

Yours, Alfie





July 1915
Salonika

Dear Alfie,

Thank you for your letters. It is good to hear about the gardens and stories from home. We do miss everyone.

I have been posted to The Balkans and things are not as peaceful here. I had been working as part of The Royal Army Medical Corps at the Valetta Hospital in Malta. Mr Griffin will be able to show you on the map. The days were long and hot and the palms reminded me of Heligan so, in some ways, it felt like home. There are 27 hospitals in Malta, all full of injured soldiers. Many of them are ANZACs, soldiers from Australia and New Zealand. They've travelled thousands of miles to support us and so many died when they attacked Gallipoli.

I sometimes hear from Will who is now in France and being trained to fight on the front line. Through the Army we are able to get messages to each other. The last time I heard from him he said he was sitting in a tent listening to the rain as there was no drill. He said he keeps thinking about the fine food we grew at Heligan. All he has now is ten ounces of meat and eight ounces of vegetables a day, and they only have two vats to cook everything in, so their tea often tastes of onions!

Will said weeds and nettles are being used in soup and stews there. It makes me laugh to think how he cleared the gardens of weeds and now he is having them for supper!

Will also said he doesn't hear many different birds singing on the battlefield now, just the song of the skylarks. He said the corn poppies that thrive in the battlefields remind him of home.

Yours,

Fred

October 1915
Heligan Gardens

Dear Fred,

It was good to hear from you. Daisy and Ida are using weeds in cooking now too, as food is in short supply. They made nettle soup yesterday and we all thought it was tasty. Daisy talks a lot about Will. I think she misses him. Ida keeps teasing her about him and she goes all red and says, "Stop it, Ida, you're making me blush."

The Squire likes to sit in the Italian Garden with Pip and Pepper. All but one of his five nephews have gone to war now. Ralph is still too young and must stay at Eton, but apparently he can't wait to follow his brothers and will be going to Sandhurst to train next year. Hugh is serving on the submarines. Ida says she doesn't think the officers will be any safer than our staff though, as she says, "War knows no rank." Please keep safe Fred. We worry that you are now in more dangerous territory and we are all praying for your safe return.

Yours,

Alfie





October 1915
Heligan Gardens

Dear Fred,

Joe popped by yesterday to collect some flowers from Mrs Tremayne for a family in Mevagissey whose son was killed in battle. He says he really dreads delivering telegrams to families with the terrible news that a member of their family has died, and he has an arrangement with Mrs Tremayne to take flowers from Heligan to them all.

Mrs Tremayne cuts the flowers herself when she is here. She says that, "Every soldier lost is a mother's son."
Ida says, "Mrs Tremayne is a font of wisdom."
I delivered bramblings to the vicar in St Ewe for the Harvest Festival. He asked me to tell you that you are both in his prayers.

I saw Diggory Abbott while I was there too. He said he is enjoying his new gardening job but misses Heligan. I told him he is still there as we have a scarecrow in the Kitchen Garden named after him! I'm not sure how he felt about that! I will keep you posted on news from Heligan and in the meantime, stay safe.

Yours,
Alfie

