retold by
Geraldine McCaughrean

illustrated by
Margarita Kukhtina



the SECRET GARDEN

Frances Hodgson Burnett



For Bill and Margaret – G. M.
For Svetlana and Julia – M. K.

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Mary Lennox was born under a jewel-coloured sky in a land of dusty gold. But she was not an adorable baby and nobody was glad. Her beautiful mother loved beautiful things – dresses and parties and fun. She did not want a squalling little daughter. She gave Mary to a nursemaid to look after. Mary's father was too busy to think about babies. In fact, nobody cared much for Mary Lennox.



An Indian sun beat down outside. Big hibiscus flowers smiled at the sky. But Mary stayed in the cool house and turned a sickly yellow, like something kept too long in a drawer. Her face was thin; her body was thinner. She yelled in a thin shriek, "Get me this . . . Get me that . . . Go away. Come here. I want . . ." The servants dared not say no; Mary's mother hated the sound of a crying child.

Mary's nursemaid – her ayah – was gentle and patient and sang Mary to sleep with soft, soothing songs. But she was too afraid to say, "Now, now, Miss Mary. Be kind. Be polite. Behave yourself." So Mary grew into the most horrible, selfish little girl you ever saw.



One day Mary woke and her ayah was not there to dress her. Nobody came when she called. Sickness had come into the house and, like a poisonous snake, slithered from room to room. Servants lay ill. Others had run away. Mary could not hear her mother's tinkly laugh or her father's gruff voice.

Doors banged.

Then silence.

Mary waited angrily for someone to come and tell her what was happening. She wandered into the gardens and broke the heads off the big hibiscus flowers. But the hot sun made her sleepy. So she went back to bed and hid under a blanket of sleep, because what else could she do?

Soldiers arrived at the house. Nobody greeted them at the door. They went from empty room to empty room, opening the window blinds, letting in the sun. When they opened the last door, they found a little girl in a nightdress and bare feet, who glared at them.

"Who are you?" said Mary. "Where's my ayah?"

The officer was astonished. "A child! Can you believe it? They forgot all about her!"

He was a gentle, kind man. He hated having to say, "Your mother got ill and died, dear. Your father, too. As for your ayah . . . I just don't know. I'm sorry."

But Mary did not cry. Her mother was a pretty stranger she had liked to watch from the top of the stairs. Her father, too, she hardly knew. She felt as empty as the big, beautiful house.



A kind English family took Mary in – "just until we can tell your relations in England. You will have lots of children to play with here."

But this house was small, crowded and *full* of children. Mary had never had children to play with before. They did not do as she told them. They did not bow to her as if she was a little princess. They did not like her bad temper or her sour face. They laughed at her hoity-toity ways and called her "Contrary Mary", like in the nursery rhyme:

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?

Then Mary stamped her foot and clenched her fists. "I'm not contrary. Not, not, not!" And the children laughed even more.



"What will happen to me?" she asked their mother and father.

"You are going home to England, dear. You have an uncle there."

"Home?"

But England was not "home". Mary had never been there. Home was the beautiful house under a blazing jewel-coloured sky, where her ayah had sung soft songs to soothe her to sleep.





The ship came – big as a whale – swallowed Mary Lennox, and set sail with her for England. For a while, the sea glittered and the sun shone. Then the waves began to heave and the sea turned grimy grey.

England came into view, with cliffs like white teeth ready to bite.