THE BRIDE STONE

SALLY GARDNER



An Apollo Book

First published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Sally Gardner, 2025

The moral right of Sally Gardner to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781804541838
ISBN (XTPB): 9781804541845
ISBN (E): 9781804541814

Typeset by Siliconchips Services Ltd UK

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London, EC1R 4RG

To find out more about our authors and books
visit www.headofzeus.com
For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com

To my wonderful sister Lucy,
who has patiently listened to me read this to her.
For her support and love.

The Return

February 1796

The sky at the break of dawn that day was a pale pink mingled with grey. Ice floated on the water, and the banks of the Thames were white. It was snowing, which gave the landscape a beauty that no other season could claim.

The brig, the *Mary Jane*, was full of émigrés, all of whom were grateful to put the brackish British Channel between themselves and France. Everyone on board had paid one guinea for a six-by-two-foot cubicle lined with straw – no light, just swaying shadows and the splash of waves, the neighing of the horses, the creaking of the ship's timbers, the dip and rise of the sea. Three days of hell in the darkness of the icy hold.

Only one passenger that bitter, frosty morning had the strength to brave the weather, emerging into the half-formed day as the *Mary Jane* nimbly manoeuvred her way up the Thames. The traveller, a good-looking young man, was unshaven, his curly dark hair long, his brown eyes tired. He appeared little bothered by the cold. He put his head back to taste the snow and wondered what awaited him in London. There had been no news from home since his imprisonment;

he wasn't sure if his family believed him dead or alive. At Rotterdam, while waiting for a passage to London, he had written to his father, his aunt, and his solicitor. By the time he had set sail, there had been no reply from any one of them.

At Limehouse Reach, the waters became congested with ships' masts. By mid-morning, London could be seen in the distance. Its bells rang out, seagulls shrieked above him, and he found himself laughing in the winter air, his breath frozen before him. The snow-covered city of spires was the most magical place he had ever seen.

'Is it what you imagined?' asked one of the crew. 'London, I mean?'

'Nothing is what one imagines,' said the traveller.

'Been away long?'

'Six years. I went away a young man with a head full of dreams; I return ancient with a head full of nightmares.'

The sailor laughed. 'You still look to be young,' he said.

'Looks can be deceiving,' said the traveller.

'What kept you away so long?'

'The Revolution. Prison.'

'Which prison?'

'La Force,' said the traveller.

'Bloody hell,' said the sailor, his interest piqued. 'And you survived?'

'I suppose I did.'

The brig docked at a wharf on Lower Thames Street, near the Tower of London. The passengers surfaced into the wintry day with smiles of relief and nervous excitement at what lay ahead. They disembarked and proceeded to the Customs House, a grand building with an imposing façade. The French Revolution meant there was no more ease in travel between

the two nations. Suspicion of its neighbour's revolutionary zeal had made the British government fearful of spies and the Jacobean plots infiltrating England; the Aliens Act of 1793 had been brought in so that all émigrés would be accounted for.

The traveller waited in the large, noisy reception hall to have his passport checked. As he stood in line, he determined the first thing he would do once home would be to put to bed the argument he had had with his father before leaving London.

The Tall Hat

By the time the traveller emerged from the chaos of the Customs House, the day had taken hold. Despite the blanket of snow, he could hear the cacophony of the city. The wharf bustled with people and cargo; ships of all shapes and sizes were being made ready, rigging jangling, and coal-heavers were unloading the collier boats that brought the fuel to London. The February air was crisp, and the traveller thought, *This moment doesn't disappoint*. He hadn't imagined living long enough to hear the thunder of London again.

In among all the din, a boy was shouting the name of the traveller's father. Perhaps his lordship had come to meet him after all.

'Lord Harlington, Lord Harlington – is Lord Harlington here?'

He couldn't see who was shouting, neither could he see his father. But pushing his way through the crowd towards the traveller, red-faced and out of breath, was a young man in a tall hat. If he wasn't mistaken, it was the solicitor, Mr Gutteridge Jr.

'Mr Gutteridge,' called the traveller.

'Oh, Lord Harlington,' he said, stopping. 'Thank heaven, I have found you.'

The solicitor was saying his name, but the title he was using belonged to Duval's father. 'I didn't recognize you,' said Mr Gutteridge. 'It has been a while. I have a carriage waiting.'

'My father—' asked Duval, his voice steely.

'Did you not receive my letter?'

'No, sir.'

'Then… I'm sorry to tell you, Lord Harlington, but... your father has died.'

There were many things Duval had imagined occurring in the time he had been away, but his father's death was not one of them. He stood, not moving, and tried to catch his breath. *Dead – dead?*

'I am sorry. It is shocking news,' said Mr Gutteridge. 'And I will tell you all when we are in the carriage and out of this biting wind.'

But fear had been ignited in Duval. 'My aunt – Lady Harriet – is she still alive?'

'Yes, yes, Lady Haslet is in excellent health,' said Mr Gutteridge. 'And in high dudgeon over your father's will.'

Before Duval could ask any more questions, Mr Gutteridge turned on his heels and walked off determinedly towards Thames Street. There, a coachman was waiting, holding the carriage door open. Duval climbed in and sat down, stunned.

'St James's Square,' said Mr Gutteridge, tapping the roof of the carriage with his cane.

'Tell me, sir,' said Duval, 'when did my father die?'

'He died in his sleep, just two days and seven hours short of a year ago.' Mr Gutteridge paused, waiting for the new Lord Harlington to say something. Instead, he was met by Duval's silence. Mr Gutteridge hesitated, then continued. 'If you had arrived any later, my lord, I would have been obliged to inform you that you had been disinherited. I cannot tell

you how relieved I am that you are back, but there are not as many hours as one would hope for.'

'I don't understand,' Duval said. 'Could you please explain what my father has done?'

The carriage set off with a jolt down Thames Street.

'I implore you, Gutteridge. Explain yourself.'

Mr Gutteridge cleared his throat. 'The argument you had with his late lordship, regarding your decision to study medicine in Paris, inclined him to instruct my father, Mr Gutteridge Sr., to alter his will. It now states that, unless you are married within a year to the day of his death, the estate in its entirety will go to your distant cousin, a gentleman by the name of Mr Ralph Carson.'

Duval paused for a few seconds, struggling to take in this new information. 'So, you are saying I am to lose everything if I am not wed in two days? This is insanity!'

'Two days, seven hours to be precise, my lord.' Mr Gutteridge paused. 'The alternative is that the will goes to probate. Thankfully, there is still time – albeit very little time – in which you can be married. I have done all in my power to make such a marriage possible, bar finding you a wife.'

Duval stared out of the window at the snow, which was falling heavily. In his mind's eye, he could imagine his father in the Sanctuary, planning the most lethal way to fire venom from beyond the grave at his only son.

The impossibility of the task ahead – marry, or lose everything he had been brought up to believe would one day be his – gradually began to dawn on him. In prison, the memory of Muchmore's tranquillity had kept him alive. He would imagine himself there and, for a while, escape the hell he was living through. For the estate had always been an oasis from the outside world; there was solace to be found in the beauty of the landscape, in the miles of rolling skies that led down to the sea, in the secrecy of the pond hidden in the woods

with its island where, as a boy, he had fought the monstrous pirate. A place where Oberon and Titania might have lived. And though he had been hesitant to return to his neglectful, contrary father, he had found comfort in the thought that he would soon see his Aunt Harriet again. She had protected him against her tempestuous brother, had been his rock. If he had returned to hear of her death, that might well have been more than he could have borne.

On the ship he had told himself that, once he was home, he could recover quietly in the country, would stay there, at his father's estate, away from everyone, until he found his balance. (He recognized the irony in this plan – he who had once believed in the French Revolution, with its principles of liberty, equality, fraternity.)

Mr Gutteridge was now discussing the wedding arrangements, but Duval knew it was all pointless. Even if he had the inclination for it, there was not enough time.

'Gutteridge,' said Duval, 'the sum of it all is that without a suitable bride, I am stuck deep in river mud.'

The solicitor paused momentarily and gave a little cough. 'I suppose it depends on how you look at the problem.'

'I am looking at the problem, and it is insurmountable.'

'Please don't lose faith just yet, my lord… May I continue?'

'If you wish.'

'I have arranged a special licence for these exceptional circumstances. The Archbishop of Canterbury's office has agreed that there will be someone at Muchmore to make sure that your chosen bride—'

'Muchmore,' scoffed Duval incredulously. 'Muchmore!' He glanced out of the carriage window at the relentless snow. 'I might have stood a chance in London. But to travel to Suffolk in this weather is knuckleheaded.'

'The ceremony,' continued Mr Gutteridge, 'will be held in the private chapel at Muchmore House. It is imperative it

takes place on Monday, the 22nd of February, before the final hour of seven o'clock, by your father's timepiece in the great hall. I will be there at the appointed time.'

'I never wanted to be married,' said Duval flatly, feeling the same ancient anger – that his father should have the conceit to try and control his life even from beyond the grave – rise within him. He remembered again their fearful row on the eve of his departure for Paris. Lord Harlington had told Duval exactly what he expected of his only son, which certainly did not equate to studying medicine in Paris. 'Your job is to find a bride from a rich, titled family. A bride with good, childbearing hips that will give the estate an heir or two. What you feel for her is of little consequence; it is her dowry that matters – and her inheritance.'

Duval, revolted by the notion, had responded, 'If that is all that is expected of me, then I have no intention of ever being married, and every intention to study in Paris.'

His father's last words to him had been bitter. 'You, sir, don't possess the brains or the intellect to be a physician.' These words, full of spite and fury, had stayed with Duval, and they came back to him now.

'Why wasn't I told of my father's will?' he asked Gutteridge.

'We received news shortly after his lordship's death that you were on the list of those who had been guillotined,' said Mr Gutteridge. 'It has been a time of much grieving. I informed the executrix, your aunt, Lady Harriet Haslet, that you were believed dead. She wanted to delay the reading of the will, but in light of your father's death and the tragic news of your, her nephew's, own demise, there was no other course of action.'

'Too many violins, Mr Gutteridge,' said Duval.

The solicitor straightened his back. He was uncertain what to make of the new Lord Harlington, but eager to keep his mind on the subject at hand. He continued, 'As long as

you are married, the estate is yours. I should add, my lord, that all those who work at Muchmore have been praying that you are successful.'

The Viper – that was what Duval used to call his father. It had been the servants' nickname for their troublesome master. To Duval, the word had perfectly represented the coldness and distance between the two. The late Lord Harlington had always been thought eccentric; there was no doubt he was difficult, with an exaggerated sense of his self-importance and an arrogant demeanour.

Duval felt no grief at his father's death, just relief. Theirs had been a miserable relationship, with little affection, and his father had become more a figure of tempests and fogs as he aged.

Now Duval wondered what his mother would have said if she were still alive. He smiled to himself. When life became painful, he always thought of the mother he had never known, certain that she had taken a bit of his soul with her. She had died only hours after he was born, and it was her death that had sprained the Viper's brain. His grief had been so morbidly extreme that he exiled himself from London society. He bought land in Suffolk, built a house in the grand neoclassical design, and moved there. Named it Muchmore, because his life would have been much more had Lady Harlington lived. He left his numerous clubs and friends behind and became a hermit, occupying a wing he called the Sanctuary. His groceries, though, were still sent to him from Fortnum & Mason. Relishes and condiments couldn't be trusted outside London.

'How long until we arrive?' Duval asked, impatient as they came to a halt. The traffic was bad in Fleet Street and they had hardly moved for the past half-hour.

'Another hour, I reckon,' said the coachman.

'If I am going to undertake this challenge, I will be faster on my feet,' Duval said.

'Would you like me to accompany you, my lord?' said Mr Gutteridge.

'Thank you, sir, but no. I will see you at Muchmore – with or without a bride.'

Mr Gutteridge handed him a valise. 'This contains a copy of Lord Harlington's will, plus all the information I have gathered about Mr Carson, which I thought may be of use.

'There is one more thing to mention, a stipulation in the will that you must be aware of. You cannot marry anyone who has anything to do with the Muchmore Estate.'

Duval laughed. 'This is a farce that only my idiotic father could have thought up.'

'And finally,' said Mr Gutteridge, 'here are sufficient funds for—'

'Two days and seven hours?' said Duval, opening the carriage door. He set off towards St James's Square. This world of the ton, that fed off gossips and scandal, the who-will-marry-who and the meat market of it all, repulsed him. Had he really been in prison for all that time, in solitary confinement for nearly thirty days, to come out to this mess of a fantasy?