

Knave of Spades

The Growing Pains of a Gardener

Alan Titchmarsh

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Stoughton and BBC Audiobooks.

Extract

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The growing pains of a gardener

**Written and illustrated by
Alan Titchmarsh**



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Whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before would deserve better of mankind and do more essential service to his country than the whole range of politicians put together.

Dean Swift

knave noun. Old English **cnafa** – boy,
servant

At the Beginning ...

‘I want to be a gardener.’ That’s what I told my parents. As aspirations go it was a pretty simple one. Compared with the desire to study Eng. Lit. or PPE (whatever that was) at Oxford it was off the bottom of the Richter scale. ‘The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for,’ wrote Oscar Wilde, emphasising the belief that gardening was a job for those who were a bit lacking upstairs to tackle more intellectual pursuits.

Back in 1964 gardening was something most folk did at weekends – down our end of town it consisted of Dad mowing the bit of grass ‘out the back’ and clipping the privet, while Mum scattered a few annual flower seeds over a grey ribbon of dust in spring – marigolds or love-in-a-mist – in the earnest hope that the dog would not scratch them up before they germinated. Up the posh end, where walls of sandstone replaced the privet, and striped greensward lay like a verdant Wilton carpet around the formal rose beds, gardening consisted, as Charles Barr put it, ‘of putting on a wide straw hat, holding a gin and tonic in

one hand and a trowel in the other and telling the man where to dig.' That sort of person could, for four guineas, have the initials FRHS after their name, indicating their Fellowship of the Royal Horticultural Society, like Mr Moffatt, who owned the florist's shop on The Grove and had those four letters in gilded copperplate after his name on the glazed front door. Me? I just wanted to grow things. The interest in quotations came later.

I liked growing things mainly because I found I could. And because it made me feel good about myself. And because it made my surroundings look better. Not that it impressed the other lads in the street, who clearly thought I was a bit odd. All except Mick Hudson who scattered seeds with me, in between games of kick-can and cricket against the bus garage wall at the bottom of our street. By and large they left me alone to get on with it. Best that way really. Apart from the one lad who called me Petunia. It should have left me scarred. It didn't. Not really.

Today gardening is infinitely more fashionable. Lawyers and bankers, worn down by the metropolitan grind and nervous of their future, sell the house in Primrose Hill and move out with Olivia and

Zac to an estate in Herefordshire to grow a new life. Rarely a month goes by without the ‘girl in pearls’ on the frontispiece of **Country Life** being described as a ‘garden designer’. She’ll have done a course at one of the fashionable London gardening schools and been booked to sort out the gardens of her friends ...

Oh, but that’s no way to start. It makes me sound bitter and twisted when, in reality, I’m thrilled to bits that gardening has become more popular, more acceptable, more revered. That’s **gardening**, rather than **garden design**. Becoming a garden designer before having been a gardener is akin to painting in oils without the faintest knowledge of the medium.

Enough. Time to get on with the story. I hope it will at least fire your enthusiasm for a way of life that I have found more rewarding than I could have ever imagined. I don’t mean financially – well, at least not in the first twenty years – but then as real gardeners know, patience usually pays off.

It’s curious that a miserable childhood is assumed to give a life more validity. That, I suppose, is why ‘misery memoirs’ have been so popular. I can’t claim that there was much misery in mine, apart from the

occasional deadly boring Sunday afternoon with aged relatives and an uncomfortable time at secondary school. I'm not exactly a prime candidate for top-drawer tragedy. And, anyway, if life had been miserable my mum wouldn't have let me drone on about it – a trouble shared being a trouble dragged out till bedtime. Get up and get on was her motto. It became mine, too. Luckily.

But, misery or not, we all have to battle. Nothing comes on a plate. I'm genuinely bewildered by the course my life has taken, but then I have stuck at it – tenaciously rather than ruthlessly – and been lucky enough to encounter just a handful of people who have said 'yes you can' at those vital moments when all I could say was 'no I can't'. I'm thankful for their intervention, and that in the end I did have the nerve to fly in the face of accepted wisdom – and critics – and battle on.

By leaving school at the age of fifteen and 'following my bliss', I have found, eventually, rather a pleasant place to be. Is it unfashionable, do you think, to be content? That's content, rather than smug or self-satisfied. I'm always ready for it to go wrong – at any second – but it would be churlish of me to pretend that I have

not enjoyed the journey so far. It's been a long and an unexpectedly varied one. I didn't imagine, back then, that I would end up presenting television programmes or writing novels, hosting the **Last Night of the Proms** or editing Percy Thrower. Well, I might have **imagined** it, but that was as far as it went. It is difficult to express surprise at the course of one's own life without sounding like a clone of Uriah Heep, disingenuous, falsely modest, or possessing the two attributes already mentioned – self-satisfaction and smugness. You need self-confidence for those two and in spite of outward appearances, there's not a lot of that in my store cupboard.

If I am honest I never really expected to get anywhere. Yorkshire in the 1950s and 60s – my part of it anyway – was not the hub of the universe, more of a distant outpost. Newsworthy things happened elsewhere. This was not something that worried me overmuch at the start of my journey, travelling hopefully, if realistically, on a route of whose direction I was uncertain and which would turn out to be peppered with frustrations, disappointments, irritations, worry, grief and all those other negative emotions that

occur, after all, in most people's lives.

I have been blessed with the kind of life I could never have dreamed of when I left school – a varied and unexpected series of events, many of them totally unrelated to gardening, but all of them built on a foundation stone that consists of a love of nature and a willingness to be interested. I suppose that is the secret. That and the fact that I had the knack of being able to grow things ...