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Opening Extract from...

The Gardener

Written by Prue Leith

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PROLOGUE

To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
To rear the column, or the arch to bend,
To swell the terrace, or to sink the grot;
In all, let Nature never be forgot.
Consult the genius of the place in all.
That tells the waters or to rise, or fall,
Or helps the ambitious hill the heavens to scale,
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale,
Calls in the Country, catches opening glades,
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades,
Now breaks, or now directs, the intending lines;
Paints as you plant, and as you work Designs.

Alexander Pope (1688–1744), 'Of Taste'

Once the garden at Maddon had been all forest and only God chose what should live and what should die. Trees, old and broken, re-rooted where an elbow touched the

ground – and tried again, hoping for another life. No one cleared the undergrowth, cut out the dead wood, thinned the saplings, fed or watered. Sprouting acorns took their near-hopeless chances with rot, drought, wild boar, squirrels and a thousand competing seedlings. It was one long story of a million million fights to the death.

For centuries the autumn fall had sweated and mulched into the forest floor so that the leaf-mould gave a cushioned spring to the step. Under the microscope, or even without it, you'd have found the earth alive with creatures as bent on winning as the plants. A humus-rich handful would crumble lightly between the fingers, and you'd breathe in its rich, comfortable, deep smell, as satisfying as mushroom soup.

And hidden somewhere in the underlay were treasures that erupted, unbidden and unseen, and precisely on cue year after year. Drifts of aconites turning their faces to the feeble sun; snowdrops in January cracking the snow crust, to be followed by pale primroses in clumps so artful and perfect it would be hard not to believe in God. Then, one after the other, blue pools of scillas, wood anemones and great lakes of bluebells. As spring gave way to summer, more magic: explosions of campion and frothy seas of meadowsweet or cow-parsley.

A lull then, as though summer had exhausted the wood. But the underground store had richer and stranger secrets.

Overnight, giant puffballs would dot the grassy clearings like polystyrene boulders. Blewits and parasol mushrooms tucked up with fallen leaves, while Velvet Shanks, orange and slimy, preyed on fallen elms.

Even the monks from the Priory seldom disturbed the forest. They only approached the river to attend to their stew-ponds, dug near the bottom of the valley where the water runs shallow and slow. They were good at husbandry, hand-feeding the voracious eels on kitchen scraps, herding the largest tench through the underwater tunnel into the catchment, dropping the gate with precision, netting their supper with glee. The younger monks would sometimes caper about and laugh, revelling in brief escape from drudgery and penance. But in the winter those on fish-pond duty had a hard time of it breaking the thick ice, the sleeves of their habits freezing to the skin as they swept their nets after invisible fish.

But everything changed in 1538 when the King's men took the Priory. Then the chant of plainsong and the gentle tolling of bells gave way to sounds of screaming, the crack of fire, the gasping breath of fugitive priests.

The soldiers crashed through the forest, torching the charcoal burners' huts, drowning the monks in their own ponds, skewering others at their prayers, felling those tilling the vegetable garden. They sacked the Priory and left it roofless, silently smouldering.

Less than a year later Sir Francis Maydowne, with a wife and nine-year-old heir, and about to be made the Earl of Axtrim, was the forest's proud possessor. Given to him by a grateful King, the land was 'for plaisaunce and the huntynge of beestes'. The forest was about to become a garden. Or at least a park. It was to be tamed and managed.

Acres of forest were felled to provide a picturesque setting for the hunting lodge, which was built from the stone of the ruined Priory. The remaining forest was invaded by rides and paths. The Pond Yards were enlarged and stocked with fast-growing carp.

The stables, built from Priory stone, were larger and grander than the size of the house seemed to warrant. But then Sir Francis, now Lord Axtrim, would have to entertain the King. And the King's horses.

The house did not remain more modest than the stables for long, though. Francis's son John had the good sense to marry a rich seafarer's daughter, Mathilda. In truth, she was a pirate's daughter, but the Queen (for by then Good Queen Bess was on the throne) approved of pirates – provided they plundered for the Crown.

Mathilda built two double-storey Elizabethan wings on to the house, and laid out the terraces and a knot garden, planted flowers and shrubs and added decorative water gardens to the useful Old Pond Yards.

The garden blossomed or suffered along with the

fortunes of the Axtrims. In 1700 one of Mathilda's wings burned to the ground and could not be rebuilt. The Axtrim male line fizzled out and with it the earldom.

But in 1730 Maddon struck gold. Lord Augustus Fernley, who had made fortunes in both shipping and banking, inherited the estate. And he was a great gardener.

He splashed out as no one had since Mathilda, whose crumbling Elizabethan wings he demolished to build a new house round the old hunting lodge. He dammed the river to make a lake, garnished the stables with classical pediments and columns, built an ice-house, follies and a great artificial mount, a hermit's cave and a grotto. He enclosed the entire 400-acre park within a high dry-stone wall.

Proud of his achievements, he hired a map-maker. The Maddon Park Map is a beautiful thing. Made of two calf-skins sewn together, it measures 5 feet by 5 feet. There is a compass rose in the corner. On the back at one end, visible when the map is rolled up correctly, is a decorative cartouche, within which are a few lines of writing, the title words elaborated with ornamentation and strap-work. The words read:

Mapp and Survey of the Domaine and Landes of Lord Augustus Fernley, Seventh Earl of Axtrim, knowne as Maydon Park, lying in the Parish of Osley in the County of

Oxfordshire. Survey'd by my Lord's most Humble and Obedient Servant, Thomas Hely of Bladon, in the Seventeen Hundred and Forty Seventh Year of our Lord.

The mediaeval hunting lodge is discernible in the embrace of an elegant, symmetrical Georgian manor house. Three of the old lodge's eight sides form the bay of the central hall, facing the viewer. Presumably three more face the back. In front of the house quaintly drawn deer roam the park. A double avenue of elms and oaks marches each side of the long straight drive to the front door. The main gate has stately pillars each side, with plain balls on top.

Areas of the garden are labelled North Shrubberies, Rose Walk, Arboretum, and have illustrations to match. All the plants and trees are drawn not from above, as a modern artist might, but from the side, as one would see them from the ground.

The mount is to the west of the house, in the park, and the Hermit's Dwelling is on high ground to the east, above the woods.

The artist has drawn the paddock fences behind the circular stable building, with a mare and foal inside, and there are tiny rows of cabbages in the vegetable garden. To the west, beyond the meticulously drawn boundary walls, is the beginning of Home Farm, which is so labelled

although its buildings are off the parchment. Mayddon Meadows hug the river. The spelling is erratic: Maddon, Mayddon, Maydon, perhaps indicating later additions to a working document.

There is an avenue of trees, labelled Oake Avenue, leading a mile across the park towards the woods on the east side. The avenue gives way to a lane in the woods, leading first to the grotto and the Merman's pool (complete with a drawing of a merman seated on a rock), and then on to the Pond Yards. A stream, its source marked with a drawing of a spurting fountain and the words 'Diana's Spring', rises on high ground to the north-west and flows through the woods to join the river, feeding the three fishponds and the Merman's pool on the way.

The goddess of hunting is further honoured. In a round clearing in the woods is a circular colonnaded building, labelled the Temple of Diana.

The garden's glory days did not last long. Augustus's son spent most of his father's fortune at the gaming tables, and what his son did not lose at cards his grandson lost in speculative ventures. The last of the Fernleys died young, unhappy and childless, and left the estate to St Aldwyn's College, Oxford, where the Maddon Archive is still kept. But somewhere along the road Mr Thomas Hely's lovely map was lost.

And subsequent owners did not make maps or keep

drawings or plans. Or if they did, they've never been found. The garden's only Victorian archive was the garden log and diary kept by Mr Ferguson, head gardener for forty years from 1840 to 1880.

But the garden's history is there, under the bracken, under the soil, under the forest, under the water. It needs an ardent lover to find it.

1. SPRING

When light slants before the sunset, this is
The proper time to watch fritillaries.
They enter creeping: you go on your knees,
The flowers level with your eyes,
And catch the dapple of sunlight through the petals.

Anne Ridler (1912–2001), 'Snake's-head Fritillaries'

Charlotte Warren, one-time architect and would-be horticulturalist and plantswoman, glanced at her watch as she approached the Maddon Park entrance. She was early. She drove slowly through the great stone pillars and pulled up at the start of the drive, out of sight of the house. It was twenty years since she'd presented herself to a prospective boss and she was as nervous now as she'd been then. More perhaps. She *had* to get this job.

She flapped the sun-visor down to check her face in

the mirror. I'll do, she thought. No spinach on the teeth anyway. She ran her comb through her short brown hair and took off her sunglasses. Gardeners, she thought, don't wear shades.

She looked down the drive, marvelling at its dereliction. It was almost bare of gravel and badly potholed, with grass and weeds growing in a patchy line down the middle. Either side of the drive, dead tree stumps three or four feet across testified to a once magnificent avenue of elms. Some stumps were jagged, some sawn off like picnic tables, some were now just weedy hummocks at ground level.

Lotte frowned, shaking her head fractionally. How could three successive owners have just left them there? It must be thirty years at least since Dutch Elm Disease took almost every elm in the country. How could anyone live with these ugly reminders? She'd never forget the epidemic because a huge old tree in her parents' Yorkshire garden had been one of the early victims. Every weekend through the summer she'd come home from university to have her father ask her, almost beg her, to agree with him that the tree was getting better, the leaves greener. Or at least not yellower? He had spent £80, a huge sum in 1976, having it injected in a vain attempt to save it.

But the following year the tree was down. He'd sawn the trunk into slices and Lotte and her mother had helped

him set them in the grass to make a meandering path. It ran from the back door to the end of the garden, skirting the lush hosta bed on the left, the rockery and pond on the right. It was back-breaking work, but Lotte had enjoyed it.

It was that tree, and its memorial path, that marked the beginning of her interest in gardens. From then on she'd astonished her parents by willingly visiting National Trust houses with them, roaming the grounds while they toured the mansions.

When she met Sam, she'd dragged him round gardens too. He'd proposed to her in Kew, under a double white flowering cherry – he'd pinched a sprig and stuck it in her hair. When Annie was a baby and they were both in their first jobs – she drawing standard windows for cheap-as-possible council housing, Sam a Civil Service trainee – they'd spent Sundays pushing Annie's buggy round Syon Park, Cliveden, Kenwood, the Royal Physic Garden or the Tradescants' in Lambeth. Even when Christo and Jo-Jo had swelled the family to five, they would be more likely to have a day out at Hampton Court than the Zoo.

Lotte smiled suddenly. It's taken twenty-five years, she thought, but at least I'm finally applying for a job I really want.

She restarted the engine and drove slowly up the drive, counting the tree stumps. At least eighty.

Ten or fifteen years ago someone had replanted the avenue with ornamental cherries, placed between the elm stumps. But half the cherries had died and none of them were healthy. Looks like bacterial canker, Lotte thought, peering closely at trunks and branches.

The lawns weren't much better. She noticed how badly the mowing had been done, the grass scraped bare in places and left uncut round the stumps where it fought for space with the buttercups. The grass had not been edged either so it flowed wavy-fringed over the drive.

I hope Mr Keegan is a big spender, thought Lotte. The drive alone will cost a packet.

She was trying to keep cool. All the time she'd been thinking about the elm avenue, she'd been avoiding the thought that this could be a pivotal moment in her life. She'd begun to think architecture might not be right for her while she was still at university. She had thought it would be about making beautiful places for people to live. Her head was full of elegant buildings in elegant settings. But the dominant ethic of the time was minimalism, and the dominant demand efficiency. The high priests of architecture were the steel-and-glass masters like Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Libeskind – men she admired, but did not see herself following.

She'd dismissed her student anxieties as normal – few of her friends were certain they'd stick to their chosen

field. But she was a stayer, the kind who finished what she set her hand to. And her parents had invested so much sacrifice and pride in her. How could she quit?

Several things had finally shaken her into action: she'd turned forty and found her first grey hair; her 'baby' daughter Jo-Jo had followed her brother Christo and big sister Annie to school; above all she'd discovered that Sam, her nice, reliable civil servant husband of fifteen years, was an unfaithful bastard. He'd been having a two-year affair with his researcher.

She'd forced a complete split with Sam, left her job and gone back to school, this time to study horticulture and garden history. Three years as a mature student had been really tough, having no money, juggling child-care and study, being on her own. Relations with Sam had been horrible at first – frosty sentences hiding a well of misery as she handed the children over at weekends, acrimony purveyed in lawyers' language. But as she slowly accepted that her preoccupation with the children and work might have had something to do with her broken marriage, she would sometimes catch herself missing Sam, though never her old career.

Lotte parked with care, tucking her little Subaru discreetly into a corner of the great courtyard. She climbed out, took her lace-ups out of the boot and put her handbag into it.

She walked briskly to the front door, carrying the shoes.

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