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Opening Extract from...

Recipe for Life

Written by Mary Berry

Published by Michael Joseph

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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I

In the words of my father, my birth caused no end of trouble. I arrived on 24th March 1935, two weeks before I had been expected, on the day that my parents, Alleyne and Margery Berry, had been scheduled to move house. Not at all convenient, as you can imagine! When my mother went into labour in the bedroom of their maisonette on Park Street in Bath, the removal men had to be sent packing and the disgruntled new tenants persuaded, by Mum's doctor, to delay their own move. Years later, in his memoirs, my father would record my birth as follows: 'After coming to Bath, for a short time we lived in a converted half-house [maisonette] and Mary had the confounded cheek to be born there when she should have arrived a fortnight later.' It was certainly not be the last time that my father would have cause to despair of his only daughter's flightiness.

Thanks to the inconvenient timing of the arrival of Mary-Rosa Alleyne Berry it was a week behind schedule that my family moved into their new home at 5 Park Lane, opposite Bath's Victoria Park. My father, who was a surveyor, had designed the house himself to accommodate his growing family, which as well as troublesome week-old me also included my five-year-old brother Roger. My younger brother, William, would arrive four years later, and one of my earliest memories is of seeing him as a chubby baby sitting in a high chair in the kitchen at Park Lane, tied in with a loop of woolly blue fabric of the type used in school to show whether you

were in the red team or blue team. In those days it was thought to be clever financial planning to have your children spaced so widely apart, but it's not a bit good growing up as you have absolutely nothing in common with your siblings. We're the greatest of friends these days, but as a child I was just beaten up all the time by my big brother.



Blowing bubbles with Roger.

Although we only lived there until I was seven, I still have vivid mental snapshots of the house at Park Lane: the steep drive, the nursery painted with lions, tigers and elephants that gave you the thrilling feeling of sleeping in a zoo, the tiny family bathroom and the enamel-topped kitchen table with the crank-handled mincer screwed to its edge, which was used to grind Sunday's Roast Beef into mince for Tuesday's

Cottage Pie. But it is the garden that I remember the most clearly, almost down to each individual plant, as we played outside endlessly. I would spend hours building dens amongst the tangle of shrubs at the bottom of the garden. My friends and I would huddle together in our makeshift camp: talking, planning and making up stories. By the time we had moved to our next house, South Lawn, our dens had become so sophisticated that we could cook in them. We'd build a fire at the back of the den and fry whatever we could get our hands on in a little pan. Usually bread, but we sometimes went up to the hens and would sneak an egg. One of our dens even had its own supply of hot water. We would light a fire, contain it within a border of bricks and run a curved pipe through the middle. You poured water in one end then it came out the other into a bucket, warmed by the flames. Can you imagine what the Health and Safety police would have to say about that these days? I'm not sure if our parents even knew about it!

At Park Lane we were great friends with the Dakin children who lived next door – Tony, Bobby and baby Janet – and whose garden was linked to ours with a five-bar gate. My mother would often send me through the gate with messages for Mrs Dakin. On one occasion it was Mr Dakin who greeted me and told me that 'Ivy's in the bath.' That seemed so funny to me, because I never knew Mrs Dakin as Ivy!

The boys would often beat me up; one time I remember Bobby Dakin pushing me into our ornamental fishpond – I emerged spluttering amongst the dark green water lily leaves. But having grown up with brothers I was a bit of a tomboy and would sometimes give as good as I got. I once challenged my younger brother to a boxing match, convinced I would win – although William managed to get in the first punch and landed the biggest whack on my nose. I just stood there,

too stunned to cry, as the blood gushed from my nose. I remember my horrified fascination at seeing it splatter on to my jumper, shockingly bright against the pale blue wool. The tears came soon enough, though; I made an awful fuss about it because the only way to get any attention from the grown-ups was to make a huge scene. And so it was William who got the ticking off, even though I was the one who had started it.

At the back of the house Dad had built an aviary to keep budgerigars, one of his many hobbies, and there were always chickens for eggs. Dad used to cook up potato peelings and kitchen waste, to mix with bran to make chicken feed, in an industrial-sized pressure cooker he kept in the garage – a huge contraption that looked like a giant's saucepan. One day, without warning, the cooker suddenly exploded while my big brother Roger was nearby. He was rushed to Forbes Fraser Hospital, and I remember going to visit him and being immensely shocked because my brother seemed to have turned purple. At some point someone must have explained to me that he had been covered with ultra-violet blue – a bluish-purple lotion that was used to treat burns at the time.

Another awful drama occurred when Dad set up an incubator to hatch a clutch of the eggs. Every day we went to look at them, to check how they were doing, but the heat from the lamp must have been too fierce and to my horror some of those dear little chicks got burnt and died. Gosh, it was traumatic. You really remember the childhood dramas, don't you?

If we weren't running around in the garden we would be across the road in Victoria Park, playing on the swings, or on an afternoon walk with Mum. And when anyone came to visit, whatever the weather, we would go on picnics. That

was a real treat. Mum would pack egg-and-cress sandwiches, sausages and biscuits – perhaps a bit of cake if you were lucky – and there would be games and friends and running about.

We would usually picnic with a purpose. On the early days of spring we would go primrosing, gathering up posies of the pale yellow flowers, while in summer the picnic activity would be swimming. We would often drive to a village called Freshford where there was a weir, and I remember slipping down its mossy side into the green depths, my knitted woollen swimming costume soaking up water like a sponge and dragging me down. In autumn we would hunt for wild mushrooms and scour the hedgerows for blackberries, taking home whatever fruit escaped our mouths to be made into jam.

Another favourite destination for family picnics was the village of Lacock, famous for its grand house, Lacock Abbey, where we would set out our feast by the most beautiful stretch of the River Avon. Dad was a keen photographer and every time we went there he would tell us about a former resident, the Victorian photography pioneer Fox Talbot. 'The first ever photograph was taken of this very window,' he would say, pointing at the house. And we would all line up on the bridge and look obediently over towards the famous window, even though we'd done it dozens of times before.

I suppose one of the reasons we spent so much time outside when we were young was because there wasn't a great deal of incentive to stay indoors. I had toys, of course: my rocking horse and a Little Black Sambo doll were particular favourites. But I was never the sort of child who would sit prettily and read a book or do a spot of needlework. When we got back from school we would always cluster around the

radio at five o'clock to listen to classic stories like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swallows and Amazons* on *Children's Hour*, but in those days, like most people, we didn't have a television. I still remember the excitement when, in my mid-teens, our friends the Wills family acquired a television set. On alternate Sunday evenings we would go to their house to sit in reverent silence in front of a quiz programme called *Animal, Vegetable or Mineral?*, which consisted of art historians and archaeologists trying to identify museum artefacts. It was a hugely popular programme and one of the panellists, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, became quite a star. I can't imagine a moustachioed archaeologist being named 'TV Personality of the Year' today, as he was in 1954!

Another compelling incentive to stay outside, particularly in my early childhood, was the grim spectre of Nanny. In that era it was very usual to have help in the house and so we had a maid to take care of the housework and a succession of nannies to take care of us children. They were at best tolerated and at worst despised. The only one I can remember with any clarity, probably because she was the worst of the bunch, was Nanny Denier. Banish any thoughts of a rosy-cheeked Mary Poppins and her spoonful of sugar: Nanny Denier was an ogre of a woman, fiendishly strict and relentlessly bossy, whose sole purpose in life was to keep her charges silent and spotless. 'You must always wear clean underwear in case you get run over by a bus,' she would boom. We had as little to do with her as possible.

To be fair, we probably tested Nanny Denier to her limits: I have been told I was quite a naughty little girl. We would often get smacked, although not brutally, just a tap on the leg – if they could catch you, that is! While life inside our home was quite strictly regulated, you could get up to all

sorts of mischief in the garden and most of the time nobody would find out. My parents never came out into the garden to check on us. They would shout out to us for meals, but they wouldn't have ever come down the garden to ask what we were up to; they just let us get on with it. Nowadays everybody seems to want to know what children are doing the whole time. We had a goat shed at South Lawn where I tried smoking my first cigarette, supplied by Roger, but it was so disgusting I never did it again. Another time, bored at home during the school holidays, I spent a whole morning picking flowers from the garden and tying them into bunches, then set up a stall outside our front gate to sell them, with no permission whatsoever. Well, everybody was out or busy, so why not? The maid or someone would have been meant to be looking after me, although most probably they'd have been chatting in the kitchen. Business was brisk and I was doing really rather well – until Dad arrived home unexpectedly. He was not in the least bit happy about my business venture and as punishment sent me straight round to one of our neighbours, Miss Jackson, who raised money for charity, and made me donate all my profits to the Red Cross, which I grudgingly did.

We were really very frightened of Dad. If I was naughty my mother's warning – 'I'll tell your father' – was usually quite enough to get me to behave. Apart from reading us the occasional bedtime story (a particular paternal favourite was *Tom Brown's Schooldays*), Dad had very little to do with our day-to-day care; in fact, I'm sure he viewed us as a bit of a nuisance. For a while Mum had to give him breakfast in bed, as he would get so exasperated by our time-wasting and general sloppiness first thing in the morning. He would address me as 'Mary-Rosa' in a stern voice if I was naughty and call

me 'Scruffy' whenever I appeared from the garden looking like I'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, which more often than not I probably had been.

Dad was very strict and seldom affectionate; praise and encouragement were equally rare. The only time I can remember him rewarding me for anything was when I made a rag doll. 'Where did you get that from?' he asked. When I told him that I'd made it myself he was clearly impressed and gave me a shilling – about 5p – and I was really chuffed about that. But I think Dad was immensely disappointed that I wasn't at all academic, and in the early days of my career, I was very much motivated by a need to win his approval. Even nowadays I often think, 'Well, Dad would be pleased,' when there's been some achievement or success in my career.

My father was a great man who was awarded an OBE for his services to Bath. As the city's Chairman of Planning, and later Mayor, he was a key figure in Bath's development and was instrumental in establishing the University at Claverton Down, from where he would be awarded an honorary MA degree for his efforts. Without his determination and vision, there probably wouldn't be a university there today. A newspaper report on his retirement from the council paid tribute to Dad's work: 'He has been a controversial figure, but even those who have not loved him cannot deny that he has been the most outstanding figure in Bath's local government in the last fifty years. For a quarter of a century he virtually directed the city's planning policy. He has always done what he believed to be right, no matter how unpopular that might be.' I think that last comment leaves little doubt as to his single-mindedness!

My father was born in 1904, the son of a vicar, Arthur Berry, who would go on to become Canon of York. His



Today, Pa's portrait hangs in the Guildhall in Bath.

mother, Annie, died when he was only two, leaving him in the care of housekeepers, nannies and maids. Dad wrote in his memoirs: 'Mother, I gather, never recovered from my birth and was confined to a couch upstairs in the drawing room for the next two and a half years, the remainder of her life . . . I scarcely remember anything of her, but was always told she was a very beautiful, artistically accomplished woman. I only remember three things connected with my mother: Father peeling grapes for her, making soup in the best brown dinner service and my building sandcastles with prayer books at her funeral.'

When my father was five, a governess joined the Berry household. Years later Dad recalled their first meeting: 'Miss Atton, as most unmarried women of the upper classes, had to be a governess, and she happened to be out of a job . . . I

met her at the station and we walked to the vicarage hand in hand, exchanging information and starting a relationship, which influenced my life for some forty years. She was never more than a housekeeper, although gradually she assumed the duties of a vicar's wife. Father was faithful to his Annie until his death.' Miss Atton was a devout Christian and one of the many ways in which she took up this role was by organizing sewing days with other ladies to make tea cosies, patchwork blankets, pin cushions and aprons for church sales when at Drypool Vicarage in Hull with Grandpa.

Despite his bond with Miss Atton, growing up without a mother must have been terribly hard for Dad, as his own father didn't understand children at all. Although my father was a Christian man, he never went to church because my grandfather had always made him go when he was young. Indeed, my own memory of Grandpa Berry, who came to live with us in a cottage at the back of our house after his retirement (together with Miss Atton, who lived with him until his death, although their relationship was only ever purely platonic), is of a terribly stern, Victorian figure dressed all in black with a dog collar, who was of the firm belief that children should be seen and not heard – preferably neither seen nor heard. He was very remote, not warm in any way. While he was still working he would sometimes take services at St Stephen's, our local church on Lansdown Road, when he came to stay, and his sermons were notoriously severe. I remember Mum asking us one Sunday, 'Would you like to go to church? Grandpa will be preaching today.' And my little brother William replying, quick as a flash, 'No thank you, Mother, I've already been.'

Later, when Grandpa Berry lived with us, I spent very little time with him. Although I would often visit the cottage

to play the card game bezique with Miss Atton, the only time I remember going there with the sole purpose of seeing Grandpa was when I was given a homework project to create an 'illuminated' alphabet, in which the letters were embellished with flowers and intricate designs of the sort you'd see in religious manuscripts. 'You'd better go and see Grandpa, he'll be good at that,' Dad told me; sure enough we spent a long time working on that together and it was one of the rare times I felt relaxed around him.



Me on my first pony, Susan, with Grandpa and Miss Atton.

My parents first met at a mutual friend's twenty-first birthday party in St Albans and for my father at least – who recalled declaring to friends that he had just seen the girl he was going to marry – it was love at first sight. For her part, my mother, Margery, remembers her first encounter with her future husband in rather less starry-eyed terms than he: 'Alleyne said he would give me a box of chocolates if I spelt his name correctly and I did. From then on presents kept

arriving, from pheasants to a doll which he had won in a raffle by correctly naming it Margery.'

I barely remember Granny Wilson, my mother's mother, who died just after we moved to South Lawn, but her father, William – Grandpa Wilson – would sometimes come to stay with us. Through my childhood eyes I remember an extremely tall and very sporty man; it seemed to me that he played golf all the time. He was quite hearty and always wanted us to go on walks, but I wasn't very keen on walking anywhere unless there was motive, like blackberry picking. When I was young, walking for walking's own sake was to be avoided if at all possible. Grandpa Wilson wasn't keen on small, rowdy children and I remember he would reward whichever of us was the best behaved at the breakfast table with the first spoonful from the lid of his boiled egg.

As well as my grandfathers, my parents' maiden aunts often came to stay. There were quite a lot of these middle-aged, unmarried ladies in my family, and they always seemed to come in pairs. On my father's side there was Gertie Hawes (my godmother), who lived with Anne, and Mabel, who lived with Winifred; I believe these four were all cousins and worked as teachers. There were three more maiden aunts on my mother's side but I'm afraid I can only remember the name of Reebie, who also worked as a teacher while the other two stayed at home to keep the house and look after her, as they would have done a husband.

Whenever a pair of aunts came to stay they would take us for walks and play snakes and ladders or cards with us. I don't remember them being stern or unapproachable, but they weren't warm and cuddly either. They were just . . . nice. And, to a tomboy like myself, a little bit boring.

In 1929, my parents were married in Manchester Cathedral

and three years later they settled in Bath, where Dad became partner at a surveying firm called Powell and Company based in the back of an old post office on George Street. The early thirties was a bleak time for Britain: the Slump saw profits plunge and unemployment skyrocket as the effects of America's Great Depression spread worldwide. There wasn't much money about and people weren't buying houses, so Powell and Company were struggling, but under Dad's leadership over the following years the business would flourish and eventually became a successful estate agency, valuation and auctioneering firm called Berry, Powell and Shackell. At the age of eighty-five he was still going to his office on most days, in his words, 'occasionally to advise, but mostly for a cup of coffee'.

By the time I was old enough to remember it, Dad's company had taken over the whole of the old post office. It was a big operation that employed around forty people (all of whom used to come to our house for a Christmas party every year, for which Mum would do all the catering). Dad's office was on the first floor at the top of an awfully long flight of slate stairs and I can see him in there now, working away at his imposing antique partners' desk, the wall directly behind him covered in framed family photos. There were numerous other offices arranged over several floors and at the top were the living quarters of the housekeeper and her caretaker husband. My favourite place to visit, however, was a tiny, narrow room at the back of the building that smelled of sawdust and glue. Along with all its other services, Dad's firm also sold furniture and so there were a number of craftsmen based at the Old Post Office, including Mr Maynard, who was a carpenter. I used to love going to that little room to watch him at work while I was waiting for Mum or Dad to finish whatever they were doing. Mr Maynard always kept a can of runny

glue (that reminded me of golden syrup) sitting in a bucket of water on the side and would give me off-cuts of wood to stick together to make little boats and shapes. He was such a dear man and a wonderful craftsman. Every Christmas he would make a piece of furniture as a present for my mother; I remember one year he made a beautiful tray with a hand-painted surround. It sat on her dressing table for years, but I'm sorry to say I have no idea where it is now.

Perhaps as a result of his own difficult childhood, my father absolutely adored my mother. Not that he was particularly demonstrative – especially in front of us children – but he never liked to leave Mum's side. He was passionately possessive of her; she had been a keen amateur actress when she was young, playing leading roles in musical comedies at the Manchester Opera House and Prince's Theatre, but as soon as they were engaged my father immediately put a stop to it, wanting to keep her all to himself. In 1951, Dad was invited on a three-week trip to America as part of his mayoral duties to open the Pump Room in Chicago's Ambassador Hotel (named after the famous Pump Room in Bath), but he told them he never went anywhere without his wife – and, to my mother's incredulous delight, they agreed to pay for her to go too!

By Dad's own account, this was an incredibly lavish trip during which he was deemed an important enough guest to appear on TV chat shows, be ferried around by Rolls Royce and attended by the President's own bodyguard. He wrote in his memoirs: 'We found ourselves in one of the old piston planes on our journey to the United States where we were treated like royalty, taken into the cockpit, went downstairs for drinks and went to bed in sheets . . . The highlight of our visit was a special affair called "Two Hundred Years Late for

Lunch''. Millionaires only were invited and everybody was issued with eighteenth-century costume. All the plate, mugs, cutlery, etc., were in gold. During lunch an enormous pigeon pie was brought in which, when opened up, released a bevy of white pigeons which flew around the room and the guests made efforts to catch them in the nets provided.' I can't imagine Americans going to such a special effort for the mayor of Bath today!

If Dad was the head of our household, my mother was its heart. A slim and very beautiful woman, she was the one who I'd go to if my brothers were beating me up, or I'd been scared by a creaking floorboard at bedtime. I can vividly remember that wonderful feeling of security and contentment at being tucked up in bed listening to Mum reading *Peter Rabbit* to me: 'Once upon a time there were four little rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter . . .'

Mum was always beautifully turned out, even in wartime when clothes were rationed along with everything else. She refused to wear flat shoes to her dying day, which annoyed me immensely as she grew older because I was so afraid of her falling. I would take her shoe shopping and pick out a really pretty pair of flats, but she would always insist on heels, which I'm sure you can appreciate wasn't entirely sensible at the age of 105! Along with her pride in her own appearance, she always made sure that the house was looking the best it could too. Although my own domestic standards aren't quite as exacting, like Mum I can't bear a house without fresh flowers in it and I wouldn't dream of getting out of a bed without making it soon after.

My mother was always busy. On Fridays she worked in my father's office, doing the staff wages, otherwise she was

looking after us – and, of course, a large part of her time was spent in the kitchen. There were few gadgets in those days – mincers, sharp knives and that was about it – so a lot of work went into preparing meals. My mother wasn't a cook by trade, but we always had home-cooked everything. I was a chubby child because Mum made such good meals: boiled salt beef and carrots, steak and kidney, and hot ham with mustard sauce. From a young age I enjoyed helping her in the kitchen: chopping vegetables, laying the table, mincing orange and lemon peel for the marmalade. Nowadays when I have that first, fresh taste of my new season's marmalade it always takes me back to the days of Mum making her own. Before she got started, she would always spread out sheets of newspaper to protect the table and would usually get distracted by a story on one of the sheets and end up reading the whole thing. I remember Dad teasing her, saying, 'It always takes your mother far longer than it should to make jam because she has to catch up on last week's news first.'

Mum ran a tight ship. Bedtimes were strict and non-negotiable, and every meal was taken at the dining-room table with all of us together (apart from Dad's breakfast-in-bed period) with my father, as leader of the family, always served first. She would never dream of eating in the kitchen – and would certainly never eat on the hoof. One of the changes to society that I think is a huge sadness is that more families don't eat their meals together these days. It's very important to enjoy food together as a family. When you all sit round the table and children's tummies are full, they feel content and relaxed enough to talk to you about their lives; you miss out on those special moments if you're eating in front of the television. I appreciate that it isn't always possible because we're all so busy, but Friday night or Sunday lunchtime should

be designated as a time to have a meal together, as it can be the only opportunity in the whole week you have to sit down together and talk. Without this, it's no wonder families break down. As you can probably tell, this is something I feel very strongly about, and I was heartened to see that Chris Evans, who I think is a wonderful man, and great on the radio in the morning for cheering the day, recently dedicated his newspaper column to this very subject. He wrote: 'Dining room or not, we need to maintain the tradition of having dinner properly: opposite each other, not in front of the telly (at least, not too often). My wife and I make a point of doing this at least five times a week.' Well said, Mr Evans!

While Dad might not have been the most affectionate of parents, he was wonderful at doing things with us. A hugely practical man, he always had a hobby; if he wasn't working he was busy building or creating. One summer he built a rowing boat and I remember watching him steaming the timbers so they were pliable enough to be bent into shape for the hull. We kept the boat on the river just outside Bath and would go out on it every weekend, taking a packed lunch and a Primus stove so we could boil the kettle for tea. In order to get the Primus going you had to use a little gadget – a sort of fine wire with a small handle that we referred to as the 'pricker' – to clear the hole that the gas came out through. This was frequently lost, amid much bad language from Dad. That was great entertainment.

Photography was Dad's great love: he had a real talent and took some wonderful pictures, although it's a shame that because he was usually behind the camera, he doesn't feature in many of them. Our family outings were regularly punctuated by Dad herding us into a group, saying, 'For goodness sake smile, you lot!'

Some years ago I was shopping for a birthday card and as I looked along the racks in the High Wycombe branch of John Lewis I was amazed to see a very familiar image. It was a black-and-white picture of a woman crouched on a beach with a makeshift see-saw on her back, on either end of which sat a laughing boy and a very chubby, giggly little girl in a knitted swimsuit. I recognized it instantly, because it was a photo my father had taken of my mother, Roger and I on the beach at Tenby, which had subsequently won first prize in the *Daily Mirror*'s Photograph of the Year competition in 1938. The prize was £100, quite a lot of money in those days, and Dad was delighted. Mirror Group Newspapers owns the copyright of the photo, but I still have the original framed in my kitchen and it brings back such happy memories every time I look at it.



Sunny-side up: Dad's award-winning photo.

We always had assorted pets because Dad absolutely adored animals. I think it was animals before children, really! Dad was Secretary of the Bath RSPCA – his father before him was Chairman of the Hull branch – and it was quite a part of his life. First thing every morning he would draw up a list of jobs for the day, which the uniformed RSPCA inspector would then come to his office on George Street to collect, and on Saturdays I would usually go with him to the kennels at Claverton Down (which he designed himself and are still there) to check on how the strays were being cared for. At home there was usually a stray cat or two, and we always had a dachshund. Rupert was the first; I remember Dad setting off on his motorbike for work every morning – in wartime there was no petrol for a car – and as he roared off this little dog would be tucked inside his Harris Tweed jacket with just his head poking out, the bottom two buttons done up to keep him secure. Rupert was extremely well behaved and whenever any clients came into Dad's office he would always wait at the top of the long flight of stairs in his basket and wouldn't come down until it was time for Dad or one of the secretaries to take him out. Dad always came home for lunch, and would take Rupert back with him then.

Later we had a miniature dachshund that had back problems and lost the use of its hind legs, so Dad bandaged its legs in old socks to protect the skin as they dragged along the floor. He then came up with the bright idea of taking the dog swimming to try and develop its muscles. As he was Bath's Chairman of Planning at the time, Dad was very involved with the city and had free access to the Roman Baths. He gave Mum the keys to the Great Bath, the magnificent central pool that was the jewel of the ancient complex – now too precious for public use – and every day she smuggled

in the dachshund when no one else was around, to give it swimming lessons. Under the gaze of the statues of Roman Emperors and Governors that lined the historic hot pool, our little dog would furiously paddle away in the warm water until gradually it regained use of its legs and started to walk again.