THE GARDEN OF IGNORANCE

CHAPTER I

ON GARDENS

Lovat said to his wife one day, “Flowers! You don’t know the beginning of the meaning of flowers! When I see them they make a lump in my throat.” Now Lovat is ordinary enough to look at; by that I mean he is good-looking, young, with the alert hard look of the man of affairs, who wrenches from the world of men a living for him and his. To look at him, swart, vigorous, practical,—comfortable too, a little,—one would hardly suspect him of harbouring a heart susceptible to the still small voices of nature. Indeed, one would sooner suspect his wife, with her wonderful eyes like calm after storm, yet she is utterly and entirely deaf to all call of the country, and lives as completely social a life as anyone I know.
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People are very interesting. I sometimes feel as though I were passing my days in a huge bazaar where is an inexhaustible bran pie. I dip in, and dip in, dragging out now and again a bag of blood and nerve and muscle which is a new friendship; and slowly through the days unwrap the parcel to find what is hidden inside. The oddest shaped parcels frequently contain the nicest insides. I found one at a poker party once; a burly, industrious bluffer, who became distraught and silent at the critical moment when a heavy ace-pot had just been opened. He looked as though he could not hear for listening; and it transpired that a heavy gale which was whistling and roaring round the house held him in the toils of memory and fancy. I became so interested in him that I lost pleasure in the game, for I too am liable to soul seizure when I get caught by the rough side of the tongue of a gale.

Some people have that emotional feeling towards nature, and some have not. It is impossible from externals to tell who suffers from it and who is immune—it flourishes in the most unlikely breasts, and is absent in
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the most seeming likely. But I believe that generally it is the country-born urbans who feel it most. It is an extraordinary yearning; a sentimental pull at the heart-strings; a desire akin to the need of a lover for his mistress, a soul-sickness that leaves an intolerable ache. It finds expression in many ways—of some men it makes poets; some it only drives to linger and look long in flower-shop windows; some of the very poor it makes endure constant small sacrifices to buy flowers for the house; others it sends into parks to hear the tree-sounds, to feel grass under the feet, to look on growing flowers; of some it makes gardeners, of some poachers, of some pioneers. For myself (in the days when a garden to own was a beautiful dream beyond the wildest hope of fulfilment) it would send me scudding past the parks and squares with averted eyes, unable to endure the sheen of laburnum, the tossing guelder roses, the exquisite green of May... once a blackbird sang in Chelsea gardens on a Sunday evening, and I stood weeping in the dusty road as utterly unable to control the pain I felt as the bird his singing. I
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could not, in those days of stress and a City life, look into the face of Nature without tears.

People are built differently. To some the sound of traffic brings pleasure, to me the hum of the honey bee; to some the brilliant vitality of London, to me the wet wind over vasty downs; to some Covent Garden Opera House full of cultured music and the glitter of gems, to me the brown nightingale in the valley with moon and the stars for jewels. It’s a question of taste. Opopanax or roses. Asphalt or turf. Pose or repose.

If you want anything badly enough it will come, only you must want it with the whole heart. That is wonderfully, graciously true of life. I suppose why we get what we want in the end, is that if we want badly enough we never lose a single opportunity of pressing towards the dearly-desired goal. There came a magic day when the Master rented three acres of shaggy ground in Surrey and I entered into paradise.

A modern slate-tiled cottage, papered inside with the usual deadly patterns and colours at 7d. a piece, was set near a pine wood with
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a field below, very much off the high road. So we took the wood and field into the grounds and set to work with distemper and paint to make a cool restful home. I notice people always try to make a country cottage “cool” and the pied-à-terre in town “cosy”; dirt being cosy, and cleanliness cool. The most strenuous labour of the most heaven-sent housewife ever born will not save one in London from the infiltration of an ineffable misty grey—an all-pervading indescribable yellow-grey film, which signs and seals the London homes, so that there are chosen there, wisely and well, the darker warmer colours which betray the fog fingers less readily than others; and in the country, with a glorious reaction, cream distemper, muslin and chintz.

The Master is not sensitive to a hideous wallpaper, and I am. I need only be left long enough in company with one to become a sordid squalid mass of unresisting misery. He said the papers were clean and therefore all right. I said they were ugly and therefore all wrong. It ended in my undertaking to paint and distemper the place throughout myself. It sounds much nobler than it
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really was, since the village carpenter lent scaffolding and steps, and showed me how to mix the distemper, which laid well over the clean new paper; it took three coats to each room to obliterate the staring patterns, and a sailor-man friend came and helped with the giddiest parts of landings and stairs. It took a fair quantity of distemper to turn all those ugly walls into a warm deep cream; the wood-work we painted walnut brown. When arm and shoulder muscles became accustomed to the monotonous rhythmic exercise, the adventure became wholly joyous. I liked the quaint disinfectant smell of the distemper; it was fresh and wholesome. I grew fond of the magic brush that turned aggressive designs into a peaceful monotone. I loved the clatter of pail and brush in the empty echoing rooms; and all the time I was working I was dimly conscious of the garden outside. With the splash of the brush went a ceaseless accompaniment of sound like waves breaking on a pebbly beach. It was the sound of wind in the pines. I knew nothing at all of gardening; never did anyone know less. I thought it meant weeding and backache. One
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day I saw a man’s face through the window; he had with him a rhododendron in a pot, heavily set with bud. He offered it to me for four shillings. I offered to make it five shillings if he would show me how to plant it, which he very kindly did. I may say that I have been a cherished client of his ever since, only on less hysterical terms. He brings me sloes in season, and baskets of kingcups from the marshes near Frensham, and bluebells from the wood which the White Lady haunts o’ nights, and “masheroons” after heavy autumnal rains.

Having no garden tools he scrubbed a hole in the light sandy soil with his fingers and we planted the rhododendron in the wood, where I trod on it in the dark two days later and slaughtered it. As I had not begun to take gardening at all seriously, the loss of the handsome plant disturbed me less than the waste of money. What I might, had I been more keen, have interpreted as an unlucky omen for the garden, was therefore only an unfortunate incident.

One drifts unconsciously into the passions of life. I did not know as I worked happily
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with pail and brush that that delicious under-current of sound, like a breaking sea, was to weave itself into the tissue of my days and become so much part of life that there should be an active agony for me ever more in missing it—that it should tint the fabric of the years with its own peculiar colour. The sound of the wind in pine trees has a sombre radiance, penetrating, mournful, joyous, and any reader who has suffered that sound to impinge on his emotional life will know what I mean when I say this. It is nonsense to everyone else. As I listened and worked, unconscious of the fetter being forged, I went wishing (in that incompetent irritable way ignorance has of wishing) that the ugly messy garden would spread away into spaces of green turf, into arches and glades and brave spots of colour. But I never imagined making those things for myself . . . till a guest said one day at the gate, looking back on the untidy litter, “What a paradise this will be after you’ve worked in it two or three years.” The idea that a garden was a canvas on which to paint a picture in flowers and trees and winding paths never occurred to me till that moment;
and from that moment it has never left me. A landscape gardener was created with a sentence.

I took the hand of my wishes and led them through the overgrown wood; over harsh hillocks of grass and gorse in the field below where a neighbouring peasant’s lean pony grazed; and round the sandy waste in front of the cottage where lone cabbages reared unsightly stalks—a very abomination of desolation—redeemed by clumps of trees, good big hedges and the acre or so of pine wood adjoining. I led those whimpering young unformed wishes round on many and many a morn and eve till they grew sturdy tiresome companions, until they clamoured for space and light, for roses, for fruit trees, for lawns, for masses and avenues of colour; I lived with them till they peopled the place; and the garden as it was ceased to exist. It became an imagined paradise complete, mapped out, planned, and ever-improving in my heart. What joy the dream-garden gave! Long winter evenings were spent with Mr. Cook’s delightfully illustrated book “Gardens of England” on my knee, the book which
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made me long for a dovecote and a daffodil walk; long hours, immeasurably happy, went to the study of catalogues. My presents became the scandal of the family; asked what I wanted for Christmas I said half a dozen loads of manure, for Easter as many of loam, for my birthday eight tons of “pitching” stones to pave the terrace—and so on till my “mania” showed such fair results that it was toned down to a “hobby” and enthusiasm was justified of her child.

Gardening speedily became a series of illuminating flashes; it was strange to have to readjust the mental attitude with every added fact, it seemed something like a very very shortsighted creature wearing constantly stronger and better glasses, so that the eye looked daily farther and farther into the wonderful world; daily widening the horizon, daily dispersing the film of ignorance, and seeing daily more clearly through the powerful lens of knowledge opportunities in the garden for beauties of form, colour, line and happiness. So ignorant I was! I remember the day I went dreaming down a lane and stopped to lean on a low stone wall because