

## **The Butcher Who Wanted To Garden (Joint third, Henshaw Press, December 2014)**

Everyone in the town of Eglington said Richard Makepeace was an excellent butcher. They all bought their Sunday joints from him: topside, leg of lamb, shoulder of pork, chicken or duck; all sourced locally, killed humanely, butchered with skill and bought fresh on Friday or Saturday. Monday was always a quiet day, as the townsfolk were eating cold meat with their potatoes and greens; but from Tuesday onwards, there was a constant stream of customers through his door: mince for cottage pie or spaghetti bolognese, chops, belly for casseroles. Yes, everyone in Eglington loved their butcher's shop. People came from the surrounding villages as well. Richard Makepeace should have been a really happy man—he was certainly a well-off man—but he wasn't content. For Richard Makepeace didn't really want to be a butcher. He wanted to be a gardener.

The Makepeace family had been market gardeners for three generations. His great grandfather bought a smallholding back in the nineteenth century and for more than a hundred years they grew potatoes, cabbages, beans and peas that were the talk of the county. They took most of their produce to the weekly market in the centre of town, but they would always sell you a bag of potatoes or a couple of leeks from the back door of their cottage. And if they knew a family was hard up, or someone was ill and unable to work, a basket of vegetables often appeared on the doorstep overnight.

Richard's father used to take him with him when he went out to weed the rows of carrots or pick the beans; but the green fingers, hallmark of previous generations, totally passed Richard by. He was too heavy-handed to pull up weeds without yanking out the tender feather-leaved carrots as well. He wasn't light enough on his feet to move among the rows of potatoes without treading on the plants—and on the one occasion his father left him to tend the tomatoes while his parents went to visit a sick relative, he over-watered them so the leaves turned yellow and half the plants rotted away.

“It's no good, son,” his father said to him when it was time for him to leave school, “if we leave the market garden to you, it'll be gone within a couple of years. Your brothers can look after the family business; I think we need to find you a different trade.” And that was when they saw the notice in the local newspaper for an apprentice butcher. Richard took the job, flourished and became the best butcher in the county.

But he never forgot he should have been a gardener not a butcher. His brothers were doing really well; the red and orange striped vans were a common sight around town, and many of the people who ate Richard's meat, would accompany it was Makepeace vegetables.

The brothers all get on well, and there was a fair bit of cross-marketing done between the two businesses. Richard knew he would never be a market gardener, but he would have loved to serve up a plate of food one day that was all his: meat from the shop and vegetables from his garden.

Not that he actually had a garden. Living in the flat over the shop, all he had was a sunny patch of concrete that he filled with pots of forgiving geraniums every spring. Then, one day he got a call from the Town Clerk, telling him there was an allotment available. He'd been on the waiting list so long, he'd forgotten all about it. Rushing over to the Town Hall at the end of that day, he signed the paper, paid his first year's rent and suddenly, he was a gardener—well, in name anyway.

From that day onwards, Richard spent all his spare time on the allotment. He hurried over on summer evenings, when the long days gave him time to work; and every Sunday he spent a few happy hours digging and planting. And finally he managed to grow a couple of broad bean plants, keeping them alive long enough for the pods to mature and produce something worth cooking.

For the first few months, Richard was happy. Then he started looking at the other allotments around him. As the season progressed, their output increased far more than his. In particular, he noticed the one next to his was superb. Everything was neat and tidy; there were more varieties than on any of the other allotments; and the vegetables were bigger and shinier than everyone's—especially Richard's.

"I'd love to know his secret," Richard moaned to the Town Clerk when she came over for her meat order one day and asked him how he was getting on. "I never see him working on the plot, so I guess he's retired and does everything during the day."

Annie Harford had been Town Clerk in Eglington for a couple of years, and Richard liked the look of her from the start, but was too shy to talk to her before. Now they had a topic of conversation. Annie took to popping in several times a week and they would discuss what he was planting, how he was treating the plants and what he needed to do next. Richard began to obsess about 'the plot next door' and the joy of gardening started dim ever so slightly.

"I think it's because I've only got a few hours free to do things," he said to Annie one day when the shop was quiet and he'd made them both a cup of tea.

"I could give you a hand if you like," she said. He looked at her in surprise.

"I didn't know you were into gardening," he replied. She told him all about the love of the soil her father had instilled in her when she was growing up.

“I’ve never forgotten the tips he gave me,” she said, “and it would be great to be able to pass them on to someone—to share them with another gardener.” Although Richard knew she was just being nice, he was thrilled to be described as a gardener.

“Well, if you’ve got time, it would be wonderful,” he said. “Maybe you would like to join me on Sunday morning.”

And so the pattern was established. Richard collected Annie from her cottage just outside town and they drove to the allotments together. They worked side by side for several hours; she would suggest ways of planting, methods of pest control, the best arrangement of rows to catch the sun. One day, Richard suggested they go to the local pub for lunch afterwards and that became a regular pattern too.

Over the rest of the summer, Richard’s gardening skills developed a treat. He learned not to be afraid of the plants. He was able to distinguish between a weed and a seedling; he learned how to prune raspberries so they would fruit heavily the following season. His potatoes started to flourish; his beans grew tall and twined beautifully around the wigwams of canes; his pea plants were sturdy.

Occasionally, on a Wednesday afternoon, Annie and Richard would visit stately homes and other properties in the county with gardens open to the public. They took ideas from what they saw and tried to incorporate them into Richard’s allotment.

“Why don’t you try putting a few flowers in,” Annie suggested one day. “All the best kitchen gardens have a row of sweet peas or chrysanthms growing in them; flowers for the big house, usually.”

So, Richard added a few flowers that season and was delighted to see them growing well, flourishing in fact. He became almost more interested in flowers than in vegetables—and Annie’s suggestions spurred him on to better and more colourful things.

But if he was completely honest, the allotment next door still looked better kept and more productive than his. The beans had more flowers and therefore more runners; the potatoes stood even taller than his, and probably yielded more tubers; and as for the marrows, they were huge. He’d never seen such specimens.

“It’s really intriguing; how does he manage to get everything so big?” he said to Annie over a pint and lunch one Sunday.

“Why don’t you ask him,” said Annie in what Richard thought was a rather frosty voice.

“Because I never see him! Every time I go up there, I can see signs that he’s been around: a row of beetroots weeded; wigwams erected; compost bin topped up or turned; but he’s never there.”

“And what about the other allotment owners? What do they say?”

“Well, they just tell me it’s an old family; been around for a long time—a bit like the Makepeace family, someone said—but no-one can tell me anything about the current owner. But one day, I’ll find out,” he said. “I’ve got a day off next weekend, what with the Bank Holiday, so I’m going to spend every minute of daylight up there. He’ll have to show his face sometime.”

But the owner of the neighbouring allotment didn’t appear once throughout the long weekend. Richard was so frustrated. He had to know the secret of his neighbour’s success.

Then one day he saw the poster for the Garden and Produce Show. It was being held in the Town Hall the following weekend—and there were classes for all sorts of vegetables. Including marrows!

“Got him!” Richard said as soon as Annie walked into the shop that day. She’d taken to bringing her packed lunch in and eating it in the back room with him when the shop was empty.

On the morning of the show, Richard was delighted to see a massive marrow taking pride of place on the display table. He could hardly wait for the afternoon to see who the grower was. He was sure there wouldn’t be anything to compete with it, and he was right. When he walked back into the hall after lunch — a nice steak pie in the pub with Annie — his eyes were immediately drawn to the red certificate with ‘First Prize’ on it, which was propped up against the marrow. He dashed across to look closely, but was disappointed to see the exhibitor’s name was missing. He’d have to wait for the prize-giving ceremony.

Just then, one of the judges strolled past and clapped Richard on the back. “Well done, old boy. I see the green fingers have finally appeared,” he said, pointing to a table at the other end of the room. Richard walked over to look and stopped in amazement. The flower table was a riot of colour—and there in the middle, with the red winner’s certificate next to it, was a vase of his copper chrysanthus.

“I told you they were good,” said a quiet voice in his ear. Annie was standing next to him with a huge smile on her face. “You were so concerned about those blessed vegetables next door; you ignored what was obvious to me. You have a talent for flowers. So I entered yours—and you won.”

When the Chairman of the Society called everyone to order for the prize-giving, Richard took his cup and cheque to great applause, then watched in amazement as Annie went up to receive the prize for the best marrow and several other classes of vegetable as well.

“You were so convinced it was a man who owned that plot; I didn’t want to disabuse you. And it was the only way I could think of to get your attention,” she said, taking his hand. You’re a hard man to get to know, Richard Makepeace.

Now, every Sunday, Richard and Annie Makepeace eat lunch in their little cottage on the edge of town. He supplies the meat and she supplies the vegetables. And on the table will always be a huge vase of flowers.

But Richard secretly still hankers after growing a bigger marrow than his wife’s.