

SPRING



It is spring in the garden at the David Parr House and the plants are unwrapping their blooms and scents in the lovely weather. They don't know that there are no visitors to see this rapture and I haven't told them. All the same, working in the garden is a more solitary and enclosed experience than usual. The surrounding streets, usually so busy, so full of builders, road menders and the sounds of traffic, are eerily quiet. Neither is there any noise or bustle from the car park on the other side of the high wall and this gives an added sense of seclusion. The trill and chirp of birds is usually overwhelmed by the sound of engines, the slam of car doors and the chirp of car keys. But now the silence intensifies the sounds within the garden: the scuffle of a blackbird, the passing hum of a bumble bee, the scrape of the trowel against a piece of grit.

As I weed and turn over the soil, a whirr of wings tells me that I am not so alone. Robin hops about nearby, tilting its head at me in that endearing way which seems so personal. Actually, I do understand that because the bird has eyes at the side of its head, this jaunty tilt is really to search the ground for goodies. Still, I can never resist the impression that Robin is cocking its head at me and saying 'Wotcher got?' And when it flies off and its liquid song spills out of the apple tree beyond, I stop to listen as if it is just for me.

The back garden at 186 is intended to reflect Elsie's love of bright colour and scented plants. There are tulips in every shade of red next to daffodils with their loud brassy trumpets. Yellow wallflowers release their velvety scent as I weed between them. In the centre of the garden the Crown Imperials rise majestically over the other plants, their bright orange heads effulgent in the sunshine. Unfortunately, they may look majestically effulgent n'all but they smell of old trainers, which is why they have been planted well away from the path. Blue is found in the dark blue uprights of grape hyacinths and the lighter blue cushions of forget-me-nots. The tubs by the back door, thanks to the mesh, have survived the squirrel aggro and there are daffodils in softer tones of cream and white and scented hyacinths in pastel shades.



Mind you, the squirrels are still getting away with it. The video camera shows a squirrel admiring a lovely frilly-petalled tulip and no, it is not choosing a bouquet for the lady wife as, after due epicurean consideration, it consumes the whole delicious bloom. Somewhere in a darkened room there ought to be a squirrel laid up with tummy ache. But I doubt it.

Being in the garden at Eastertide reminded me that David Parr and his granddaughter Elsie were both deeply devout. There is much evidence of this throughout the house, from David Parr's beautifully painted texts scrolling dramatically across the walls to more modest hints like the palm crosses that Elsie kept, one in the kitchen by the back door. As I looked about with this in mind, I began to see how many plants, even here in this small back garden, carry Christian symbolism linked to the Easter story.

A small carnation has opened, its petals edged in blood red. Its botanical name *Dianthus*

derives from Flower of God. It became associated with divine love and the blood of sacrifice and appears in paintings of Christ carrying the cross. In Northern European paintings, even weeds like the Plantain, rising out of its little saucer of leaves, can be seen in the dust at Christ's feet; a lowly plant, sometimes called 'Waybread' which grows by the path and the road of the pilgrim. In such pictures you may also see the Dandelion, of which there is no shortage in this garden. A rather jolly plant (if a bit too enthusiastic) and yet I recall that it is considered one of the 'bitter herbs' of the Passion, and indeed the shape of its leaves suggests the cruelty of a barbed spear.



The stately Iris is in bud by the path, its gorgeous complex purple flowers about to unfurl, but in paintings of the Virgin its sword-like leaves anticipate her anguish at the death of her son and she may hold Lily-of-the-Valley to symbolise His innocence. When at the age of 12, Elsie was sent to live here, she brought the sweet-scented Lily-of-the-Valley from her mother's garden in Parsonage Street to remind her of the home she'd had to leave behind. I let it come up where it will.

And then, as I'm putting my tools away in the shed, my eye is caught by the first butterfly of the season, poised on the handle of the old metal watering can under the scullery window. It is drying its wings perhaps, having emerged from its chrysalis into glory. It reminds me that Elsie had a favourite butterfly brooch on her coat and that the butterfly is the Christian symbol of the Resurrection and a symbol of new life the world over.

c. Elizabeth McKellar 41 Sturton Street Cambridge 12/4/20

