

The illustration is a vibrant, hand-drawn scene. A large, gnarled tree trunk curves from the bottom right towards the center. A young boy with blonde hair, wearing a brown jacket and blue pants, sits on a thick branch. He is looking down at a small, dark, monkey-like creature perched on the branch next to him. The tree is covered in green leaves. Numerous birds are depicted in flight throughout the scene: a large red and blue bird with a long tail is on the left; a green parrot with a red head is at the top left; a small red hot air balloon floats in the upper left sky; and various other birds, including a blue bird and a brown bird, are scattered across the sky and near the ground. In the background, a winding path leads to a complex of buildings with domes and arches, resembling a temple or a village. The sky is a mix of light blue and yellow, suggesting a bright, sunny day. The overall style is that of a children's book illustration, with bold lines and a rich color palette.

# THE TEMPLES OF MALPLAQUET

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# The Temples of Malplaquet





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*The Temples of Malplaquet* takes much of its initial inspiration  
(and the quotation on page 178) from *Mistress Masham's Repose*,  
one of the less known works of the great English writer, T.H. White

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**To Christopher, Matthew and Lawrence**



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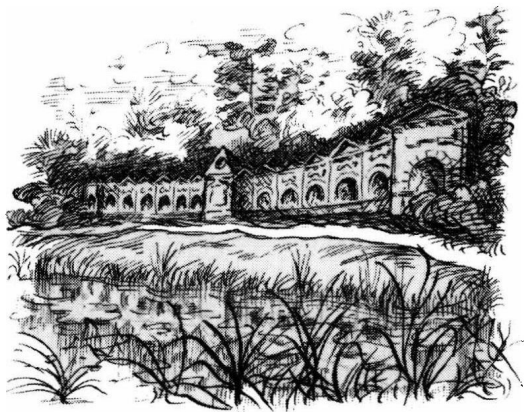
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# MALPLAQUE

## a guide to the Temples





## The Way In

Hidden away deep in the English countryside is a huge garden that is full of lakes, bridges, cascades, walks and woods. It also has a most enormous mansion, which is twice as long as Buckingham Palace and three times as attractive. And dotted throughout this garden are dozens of strange buildings.

Very strange buildings.

There's a Gothic Temple, which has *three* sides instead of four, and battlements and a look-out tower like a castle, but huge pointed windows as if it wanted to be a church. Elsewhere, on a small stone pyramid, sits a carved monkey looking into a mirror. There's a bridge with a roof. Statues of Saxon gods and goddesses. Ships' prows sticking out of a tall stone column. A cave of volcanic rock.

They also have the oddest names, such as the Imperial Water-Closet, the Fane of Pastoral Poetry, the Temple of British Worthies, and the Pebble Alcove.

Malplaquet, as perhaps you are already beginning to realise, is not just another old country house and grounds. It's unusual – and special. But what's special is not just what you can see.

It's what you can *feel*.

There's an atmosphere in the gardens. Visitors have always noticed it, but they've never been able to say exactly what it is, or where it comes from.

Until now.



One of them sneezed



## 1: Across the Water

*Malplaquet; an epic garden, created as a type of paradise, one of the great wonders of the eighteenth Century. Containing all manner of buildings by famous architects, its sheer scale must make it Britain's largest work of art. The main mansion is now occupied by Malplaquet School.*

County Guide Book

On a warm summer's evening in late July, Mr. Thompson drove the family car through Malplaquet's imposing pair of wrought iron gates, with his wife beside him and their two boys in the back. He slowed down to cast his eyes around the splendid landscape, with its low stretch of water, an old hump-backed bridge, and the road heading up between an avenue of mature trees. Then he uttered the familiar words.

'It's just like another world,' he exclaimed, with deep appreciation, 'or have I said that before?'

'Only every time we come here,' said Charlie, the younger boy, squashed amongst a small mountain of picnic equipment.

'Hurry up, Dad, or we'll miss the fireworks,' urged his brother Jamie, as the car looped gently over the small bridge. Although feeling slightly queasy from too much birthday cake (he was thirteen today), he knew his Dad was right. It was like another

world, it really was. The gardens were brilliant; weird buildings and statues hidden amongst trees, secret dens in bushes, and streams, lakes and waterfalls round every corner. It was always fun coming here – and definitely would be this evening.

Mainly because they were going to meet up with Granny – or to be more accurate, the old lady they called ‘Granny.’ Life was always far more interesting when she was around.

As yet Jamie hadn’t been able to work out why.

The Thompsons’ car dragged up the long slope and disappeared over the brow of the hill towards the open-air concert and picnic (his parents’ idea of a birthday treat). Back down on the bridge, two of the carved stone faces on the decorative urns moved slightly. One on the left, with wild eyes, puffed-out cheeks, and a full beard, gave a wink. Another on the right, normally scowling, gave a huge smile back.

They knew the long sleep was over.

It was the beginning, as described in the ancient Writings.

The Man had arrived.

‘Why do we need all this stuff?’ groaned Jamie, struggling with his load. ‘And where’s Base Camp?’

‘Very funny,’ said Dad, marching on ahead. ‘Let’s find Granny – it won’t be easy in this crowd. My word – that’s *really* impressive. Look at that.’

He had rounded the final corner and come to a sudden halt. Jamie caught up, and accidentally let slip a chair, two coats, a rug, a large thermos flask, a torch, and a whistle (useful for emergencies such as floods, avalanches, and blizzards). Then he stared. It *was* extraordinary.

The light of the July evening was slowly fading, but on the gently sloping banks of a grassy valley, lined by trees and bushes, were hundreds of pin-pricks of light, as if all the stars above had floated down to earth and were hovering around in this vast hollow. These flickering candles were wedged into bottles, or fixed inside small metal lanterns hanging from poles. Groups of picnickers were sat around, chatting and laughing quietly, enjoying their food and each other’s company.

Dominating one end of the valley was the pale-cream mass of a huge Greek temple, like the Acropolis above Athens, columns on all sides, with stone figures crowning the high points of the roof. In its front portico sat a small chamber orchestra, the men in dinner jackets, and the ladies in dark dresses, gently playing some Music for a Summer's Evening. Coloured spotlights of blue and green were skimming around, catching the branches of nearby cedar trees that were silhouetted against the oranges and pinks of the sunset.

Even as the Thompson family watched, quite spellbound, the whole galaxy of lights began to sharpen and to twinkle more strongly. There was an air of quiet mystery, of suspense. It almost looked 'Magical,' said Mr. Thompson, 'absolutely *magical*. And . . . yes . . . I do believe that could well be her. . . .'

He was squinting towards the temple. Just below it, in prime position, lay a picnic rug that was barricaded by large bags, an electric buggy and a folding chair. Standing in the centre was an old lady, waving a rolled-up umbrella in time to the music, but now and again pointing it threateningly towards any intruders.

'Yep, 'fraid so, that's her,' replied Jamie cheerfully, feeling very proud. Granny spotted them, and conducted even more wildly with both arms. The Thompsons wandered over, and Jamie received a big hug. People nearby were relieved that some guests had turned up to protect them.

'Well, how is the birthday boy?' she said enthusiastically, handing over a large card in a bright red envelope. 'Feeling any older? Do you know, some people think boys come of age at thirteen – so perhaps I should call you a birthday *man*.'

Granny lived down by the Octagon Lake in a small cottage. Rather wonderfully, it was built onto the back of a classical temple by the Bell Gate entrance to the gardens. For years, whenever the Thompsons had walked down that path, she'd always been there, leaning over the fence, and keen to chat. Before long, she was their own particular granny; the two boys had no grandparents of their own, she herself had no living relatives, and so it had suited both sides to adopt each other. She quickly became a very convenient and interesting baby-sitter; she had an

inexhaustible supply of fascinating stories about Malplaquet when it was a country-house, played a mean game of cards, and could even score well on Jamie's favourite computer game of 'Myths and Legends.'

'I haven't got your present here, I'm afraid,' she apologised. '*Much* too big to carry. You'll have to come for it tomorrow morning.'

Sounds promising, thought Jamie. 'What time?'

'As soon as you want, my dear. I'm always up with the birds.' Fitting a small jacket, no longer than three inches, onto a doll, she placed it in her sewing-bag. She spent hours and hours making such tiny clothes, often selling her exquisite handiwork on the WI stall at the local market. Her skills with a needle and thread were legendary.

Inexplicable things shouldn't happen when you're merely playing 'Hide and Seek' with a whinging brother.

'It's not fair, you hiding first,' protested Charlie, 'you've been here loads more times than me. You know all the best places.'

'I won't go far, honest, and I'll come out in five minutes if you can't find me,' said Jamie, desperate to get going. 'Shut your eyes and start counting.' He darted off.

On a previous visit Jamie had spotted a few badger sets bursting up under some bushes. The perfect spot, he realised; with the foliage and small mounds of earth to hide behind, Charlie would never find him. He ran over, dropped to his knees, and pushed aside a few branches. As he began to wriggle in, his face barely above the ground, he pressed his right hand on a scattering of fresh earth at the sloping entrance to a hole. He looked down and then didn't move his hand any further.

Next to it was a line of tiny prints. Shoeprints. Leading into the tunnel.

Jamie stared at them, stunned. He didn't know what to think.

'I can see your feet!' shouted a familiar voice from behind. 'Got you!'

Jamie groaned, squirmed back out on his elbows and stood up, brushing the dirt off his trousers. 'Okay . . . look, let's pack this in and do something else.'

'You *always* do that when it's my turn!'

‘Don’t be stupid, you know I don’t! Just grow up.’ Jamie (for once) wasn’t in a mood for an argument with his younger brother.

‘I’m telling. Just because it’s your birthday. . . .’ Charlie ran off to complain to their parents.

Jamie’s mind was buzzing about the footprints in the soil. There had to be an obvious explanation for them – like, for example, some kids playing with a toy figure. But right inside some bushes? He slowly sat down on the grassy slope opposite the temple to try to think about it.

The final streaks of the sunset were beginning to fade, the darkening hollow was peppered by flickering lights, and the musicians were playing something gentle and relaxing. Then he heard it.

Or rather, heard *them*.

Two voices, both very faint. Like picking up a distant channel on his radio.

Startled, Jamie glanced around. Nobody was near him, and yet he could definitely hear a conversation. He screwed up his eyes to concentrate.

There was the odd word or two – ‘crowds’ and ‘fireworks.’ Then a longer snatch of conversation.

‘. . . the new Assistant Guide.’

‘Nigriff will know.’

Then silence. What on earth was going on? Was he hearing things? And who was ‘Nigriff’? He listened again, but there was only classical music, easy and relaxed chatter, the chink of glasses and the distinctive sound of Charlie moaning.

In a slight daze, Jamie got to his feet and shuffled slowly back to his family.

Mr. Thompson spotted him first and noticed his look of deep thought – which struck his Father as unusual. ‘Hello, Jamie. Are you alright?’

‘I’m, er, fine,’ offered Jamie, not that confidently.

‘Isn’t it Charlie’s turn to hide?’ added his Mother. Charlie smugly folded his arms in satisfaction and stared at him.

Jamie shook his head. ‘It’s too dark for Hide and Seek. You can’t see properly.’



Granny nodded, her eyes fixed calmly and steadily on Jamie. He reckoned she knew something.

At that moment the musicians completed their performance, and a man in a crumpled cream suit walked over to the microphone at the top of the steps. He tapped it, making a loud clonking noise, and announced, in an embarrassed manner, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm afraid that the final movement of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony ended sooner than we had anticipated, so there will now be a short delay while the Pyrotechnic Ignition Operatives take up their positions.'

'Sounds like fireworks,' said Granny, 'time to light the blue touchpaper and retire. I'm off. Busy day tomorrow.'

She gathered up her bits and pieces, packing them into the luggage compartment on her electric buggy. Jamie called the vehicle her 'GT' – short for 'Golf Trolley.' Downhill with a following wind it could overtake most pedestrians.

She turned to Jamie. 'You *must* come and see me in the morning.'

He nodded – and immediately, much to his astonishment, heard a bell frantically being rung. Not a church bell, but something much smaller, like the one teachers ring in a playground. It was clear and ringing out across the gardens, but nobody seemed to be reacting at all. But he did spot that Granny was watching him.

She drew closer, and whispered in his ear. 'You can hear the bell, can't you? It's time you knew. Tomorrow. Don't tell anyone.' She smiled, revved the engine, scattered startled picnickers, and then ambled away at top speed, headlights lighting up the bushes on either side of the path.

The first fireworks exploded above the crowds in a blaze of coloured lights, stars bursting into huge parachutes and showers of sparkling rain. They were impressive, but far bigger fireworks were going off in Jamie's head.

Who had made those footprints? What *were* those voices he'd heard? Why was he the only one that heard the bell? What did she mean about it being time he knew? It wasn't just a present he wanted from Granny.

He wanted some answers.