

"Perfectly Delightful"
The Life and Gardens of Harvey Ladew

By Christopher Weeks

(Excerpt)

"I wish you wouldn't use my middle name, 'Smith', when you establish the foundation " Harvey Ladew wrote his attorney friend Nicholas Penniman, then roughing out plans for incorporating the Ladew Topiary Gardens. "It's such a boring, common name and I have no idea where it came from." That somewhat casual remark says much about Harvey Ladew. No one ever called him-or his relatives-"boring" or "common." In fact, he took distinct pleasure and pride in his *unboring* and *uncommon* family, relishing their adventures, marveling at their ready wit and imagination, admiring their independence and their blithe disregard for the opinions of others. While that might sound like a sort of willful eccentricity, it wasn't. It was simply that various generations of Ladews, Wallses, and Graces blissfully refused to be ruled by others.

In part, certainly, Harvey Ladew's restless independence came from his lively curiosity. As Billy Baldwin, his Baltimore-born, intimate friend of many decades, wrote, "Harvey loved everything you could imagine you might if you had all of his money. He had delicious food. He was wildly interested in the theater and music as well. He drew and painted extremely well and kept a wonderful diary that was never completed." No wonder Ladew refused to submit to the standards of others. No wonder he led his "perfectly delightful" life (to use one of his favorite phrases) solely according to his own, colorful lights. No wonder he designed and planted personality-radiating gardens that have intrigued the cognoscenti for three generations.

Harvey Smith Ladew II, "gardener, sporting art patron, and good companion" (as the *Tatler* dubbed him), was born into the fluid yet definitely upper strata of New York society at his parents' house, 3 East 67th Street, on April 6, 1887. He retained an interest in the City, its attractions, and its people the rest of his life: he treasured its opera and theater and maintained a series of much-visited *pieds-a-terre*. His last flat was at 155 East 49th Street, a chic address one block east of the Waldorf-Astoria. He asked his friend Billy Baldwin to decorate it. "He spared no expenses," Baldwin has written of that job. "The atmosphere and the things he had in it made you think that you were in a great London flat. It was an absolute knockout."

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