

# TAKING PERCY TO THE GARDENS

AT breakfast, Father announced the news. Percy would be spending two or three days in Wellington on his way through to the South Island.

Percy was my cousin, rather a nebulous one, for I had seen him only five or six times in my life—mainly when he was a nasty freckled-faced little boy who insisted on flicking my ankles with a switch as a sort of playful pastime. But Percy, we heard, had grown up into the masculine counterpart of a Blue Stocking. He had forsaken all his nasty ways, and developed into a studious, sober-minded young man.

He was to arrive on Monday, and I was instructed as a dutiful cousin, to go in and meet Percy, entertain him for the day, and bring him home for dinner.

## Bad Beginning

The day did not begin very well. I was twenty minutes late, for one thing. It was all the fault of the bus. I was just getting in, when I remembered I had no cigarettes (I felt quite sure Percy didn't smoke). I jumped out again and ran across to the corner shop to buy a packet. You would have thought the bus-driver would have used his head and realised I had run off to buy something. But no, when I came out again—it could not have been more than five minutes later—the bus had gone! Was I mad? I had to wait fifteen minutes for the next one.

Percy was waiting for me at the Railway Stop, and I could see by the look of his face he wasn't taking it too well—my being late, I mean. So the first thing I did was to apologise and explain the delay.

Percy's pale blue eyes, which hadn't altered much since he was a small boy, regarded me thoughtfully through his pince-nez.

When I finished explaining he said: "What a girl!"

Now, I think it was real nice of him to take it that way, don't you? To offer the other cheek, as it were, by paying me a compliment when I didn't really deserve it. It showed what a nice spirit he must have, though you would never suspect it to look at him.

"Now, what would you like to do, Percy? I thought it might be a good idea to take a run out to the Exhibition—the Roller Coaster is a real thrill—and as for Jack and Jill. . ."

Percy gave a nervous little cough.

"Well, I was rather counting on seeing the Gardens. I'm pretty keen on that sort of thing."

## "God's Children"

I struggled to keep the dismay out of my voice. The Gardens? But why the Gardens? The prospect looked as bleak as Percy's pince-nez, and I could see my day's pleasure receding with the Roller Coaster.

Still, I remembered my duty and managed to enliven a forced interest in my voice.

"But that would be lovely, Percy. I haven't been there for ages, and really, I'm very fond of flowers—they are such pretty little things."

"They are God's children," said Percy, piously.

That statement kept me busy all the way up to the Kelburn cable-tram. I had never thought of them that way before, and it just goes to show that a person can be a poet at heart, and but for a chance remark, you would never discover it.

I looked at Percy with a new respect.

It was Percy's first trip up in the cable car, and even this short trip made him quite car-sick. He hung on to my arm, as he said he had the most

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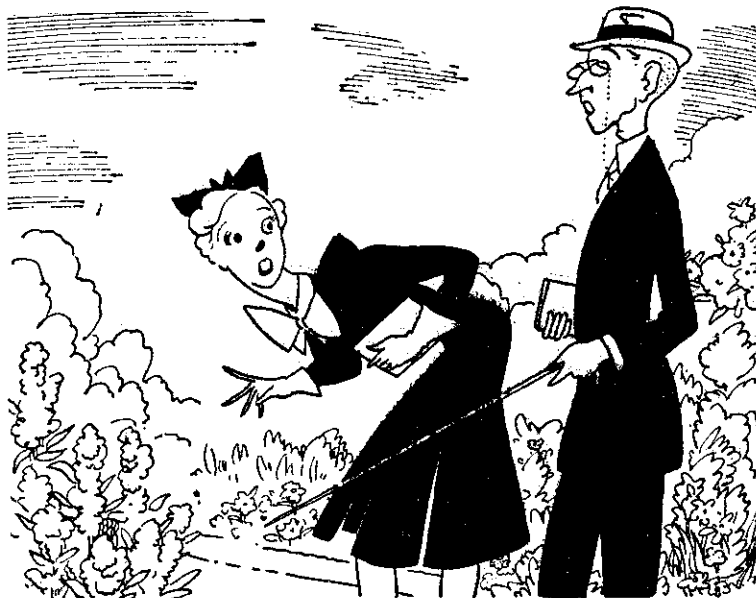
powerful desire to jump off into space. I was relieved when we reached the top.

## Percy on Poppies

The Gardens looked lovely this day. Everything was so fresh and green and colourful. The flowers, as Percy said, were more than just pretty little things—they were God's own children. I was determined not to let Percy's superior horticultural lore keep me lagging too far behind.

I remembered hazily a bed of red poppies in the lower Gardens, and dragged Percy off in search of it. My guess was correct. There it was—glowing brilliant and dazzling in the sunlight.

I felt a shine of pride—as if I had grown them myself.



"... With his stick he pointed to a pretty little bed of wild pansies. 'Know them?'"

"Now, what do you think of those for poppies?"

"Ah—*Eschscholtzia*—one of the most interesting examples of seed distribution. . . The whole sub-kingdom of the spermatophytes or seed-bearing plants is divided into two classes—the *Gymnosperms* and the *Angiosperms*; the last being divided again into two other classes—the *Dicotyledons* and the *Mohocotyledons*."

That took the wind out of my sails a bit, but I was determined not to be outdone. The pretty heads of a bed of *Scabias* nodded to me. Here I was on familiar ground.

"What darling *scabias*—and how prolific!"

"*Scabiosa Caucasica*," corrected Percy austerely. "An effective colour scheme by the side of that *Mathiola*, don't you think?"

"That what?"

"*Mathiola*—of the 6th order—*Crucifera*. 28 Genera—common garden-name—Stock."

"Rather a mouthful," I giggled.

Percy looked at me reprovingly across his glasses. "We have the botanist *Linnaeus* to thank for simplifying the names of plants and flowers. Originally they were almost unpronounceable."

I swallowed my protest, humbly.

We had turned up a shady path, bordered on either side by dense foliage and spreading ferns.

I recognised the friendly face of a punga.

"Isn't it sweet," I exclaimed, "like a lovely, cool, shady umbrella."

Percy's cold eye swept the small fern-clad gorge. "Pteridophyta," he remarked briefly.

It sounded profane. I moved on hastily to avoid another blast.

Percy was close on my heels. In his cold way he appeared to be enjoying himself.

## Percy Recites Shakespeare

With his stick he pointed to a pretty little bed of wild pansies.

"Know them?"

It seemed too good to be true.

"Heartsease," I gabbled.

Percy did not appear to hear. His head was thrown back and his Adam's Apple moved up and down as he recited in a sepulchral tone:

"A little Western flower,

Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,  
And maidens call it love-in-idleness. . ."

I felt a rush of unwilling admiration.

"Oh, Percy, how clever you are! Did you really compose that all on your own?"

Percy's chill gaze seemed to pass over me and wither me.

"Shakespeare," he replied cuttingly.

I swallowed hard. But, on second consideration, I was glad it was Shakespeare. I might have known this cold fish could not compose anything so dainty. . .

We moved on. The sun was hot and my feet began to ache. There was a cool spot of shade beneath a big tree, and I suggested we sit down.

"Look!" said Percy, quickly. "There's a creeping Jenny."

"Where?" I cried excitedly. "I can't see her."

"She," said Percy scathingly, "happens to be a flower!"

I went hot with mortification. How was I to know? I'd never heard of the beastly thing. But I bit my lip, and kept silent.

## Milk and Water

Percy, with a magnanimous gesture, pointed to the water lilies.

"Water lilies?" I said—but without hope.

"Nymph-aeaceae," said Percy. "Quite an interesting history—they extract pure tannic acid from the flower. The Turks have a method of preparing a cooling drink from this type of lily. . ."

The word "drink" acted like a spell on me. Straightway my fainting soul thought of tea. I made the tentative suggestion to Percy.

He looked at me in pained surprise.

"Why, Dora, don't tell me you are a tea-drinker. You are imbibing the poison of tannic acid—might as well eat those lilies. . ."

"Coffee?" I pleaded.

"Oxalic acid—just as bad."

"Cocoa?" I croaked.

"Packed with oxalic," he pronounced, "might as well drink poison. What about a glass of milk?"

"Can't stand the beastly stuff!"

"Then what about a nice glass of cold water?"

"A bus!" I muttered hysterically.

"Never heard of it," said Percy.

"A bus!—Home—let's go home!"

With tottering steps and reeling senses, I made for the Exit. . .

That night, at home, I heard Percy tell Father that I was a nice child, really, but a bit backward!