

She turned to savour the applause of her audience—and met the glacial eye of the headmaster.

We are not to know what followed. It has somehow slipped Aunt Daisy's memory. What she does recall is Mr Dempsey's own idea of a joke. The Central School was built on a large recreation area known as Poverty Flat. Once a year, Wirth's Circus also used the ground and the children were allowed to help the workmen erect the big top. When this was nearly up, all hands straining on the ropes, Mr Dempsey would appear and blow his whistle. Ever obedient, the youngsters dropped everything and ran to school. The billowing tent descended like a deflated balloon on the cursing circus-hands. Only the headmaster ever really understood the unique comedy of this event.

From Poverty Flat, Daisy moved with a scholarship to New Plymouth High School, then a mixed institution with another Irishman, Mr Pridham, as headmaster, and Miss Montgomery as headmistress. Sometimes she walked to school of a morning with one Harold White, better known nowadays as H. Temple White, conductor and musician. Even then, she recalls, he was cultivating—on his mother's orders—the beginnings of the distinguished beard he now wears. He suffered with stoic indifference the taunts of his schoolmates.

Whatever the children did, Aunt Daisy remembers, the teachers remained in masterful control. "Miss Montgomery was very prim and very strict. My mother approved of her; she was quite our kind of person. And I remember one day a girl stuck a pin in another girl and she let out a little scream. Ohhh! Miss Montgomery simply looked up from her book and said quietly,



DAISY (left) and her sister Katie as members of the choir of St. Mary's, New Plymouth.

"There is a girl in pain, I fear."

Mr Pridham used similar tact with the queue of hot and nervous girls who lined up against the wall each week, their hands sticking to the varnish, to

be heard in recitation. Shapeless Nelly Kelly, from Lepperton Junction, was struck speechless with self-consciousness. When asked, "Well, now, Nelly Kelly, what have you to say?" she writhed in silence for a minute and finally burst out with, "God Knows, Mr Pridham!" And the headmaster quietly observed, "I've no doubt He does."

For the chubby, ex-troverted little Daisy, recitation held no such terrors. She had performed from infancy before auditors at least as critical as Mr Pridham. Unlike her friend Grace Fookes, whose tastes ran to poems like "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp," she would usually choose something amusing or slightly daring, on the lines of "The Editor's Story," or "You Are Old, Father William." Or, when forced into seriousness, it might be Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon" or Longfellow's long "Evangeline."

AT home, at play, at school, but most of all in the choir of St Mary's Church, Daisy sang. "I really had a voice," she says. "I could sing high, low, or any way at all. It was not till after-

wards when I had lessons that they made me a contralto. And in those days everybody sang. The congregation did not sit and listen to the choir. Nor was there so much unaccompanied singing, which is dreadful!"

The accompaniment, however, came at a price. "In those days the old St Mary's organ was wearing out," Aunt Daisy recalls, "and the organist, Ezra Brooke, had to be quite an acrobat as well as an organist. He would play a psalm and then swoop behind the organ to slap a piece of brown paper on a pipe or something. Then he'd slide back into his seat and we'd sing 'Amen.'"

The choristers also performed in the Sunday School hall at the periodical concerts. Daisy sang favourites like "The Old Folks at Home" and "Love's Old Sweet Song," and, following Amy Sherwin's success in Australia with "Coon" songs, she carolled "Ma Curly-Headed Babby" ("Honey, you play in your own backyard; don't mind what them white chiles do.") She learned then, in the hardest way of all, how to please an audience.

She pleased herself, too. Speaking of their most ambitious production of those days, *Trial by Jury*, she becomes, even now, almost incoherent with pleasure. "I was the plaintiff—and there's the judge on the bench—he was Jack Ryan—and he had a beautiful voice—and I was, I suppose, about sixteen—and, of course, every young girl has a pash on somebody older—and I remember I was so terribly excited because I had to go up and put my arms round him—and then later he came down and he said, 'I will marry her myself.' Ohhh! It was a moment, you know!"

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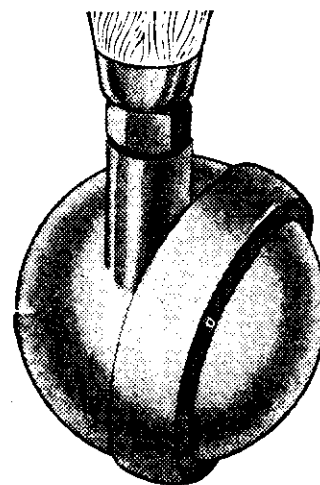
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