

## The House Plants.

A year or so ago I was staying with a friend of mine in her small wooden bungalow by the sea. We had been friends for so many years that it was home from home to me. So close were we that I did not have to let her know beforehand, if, or when, I might be arriving at her house. She had no children to consider. She lived alone but for her cat, a pet rabbit, and one spoilt hen, Jemima. And her house plants!

She had about forty house plants of various kinds in the front porch-cum-greenhouse, some blooming, others just foliage, green and lush. They grew and flourished under her care - "having green fingers" is the name of the quality these people have, I believe. My friend, Sadie, had other plants on small tables and window sills. She called them "her children". The biggest and best, the pride and joy, was a plant that is sometimes known as a "lucky" plant and sometimes as a "money" plant. It stood on a low stool in the corner of the sitting room. It was about twenty inches high and eighteen inches round, with a stem an inch and a half thick, and fleshy oval leaves. My friend, Sadie, loved this plant. She talked to it, and she sang to it, albeit in a cracked voice. She tenderly sponged its leaves with room temperature water and a soft sponge. Indeed, all her plants looked so well and happy that one felt that they knew what a loving home they had there. They sprouted and branched in abundance, spreading their glossy green leaves in contentment. They almost smiled. I asked Sadie if she had ever had any luck from the "lucky" plant.

"Not exactly," she said, "but then nothing nasty has happened to me either." She thought for a moment then said, "Oh, yes! Someone gave me a carpet for my bedroom and a man building a house down the road gave me enough odds and ends of wood to carry me through the winter. Little things like this happen to me".

Being in need of some small gifts like this myself, I asked Sadie if she would give me some cuttings from the plant. This she did, and then explained to me how to look after them for the best results. I brought them home and carefully potted them in the best compost for the job and stood them in a sunny window in my sitting room. I sang to them, I talked to them, and lovingly washed their glossy green leaves in room temperature water. Each day, before I had my breakfast, I went into the room to wish them "good morning". I gave them the odd cup of tea left over from my little two-cup capacity tea-pot. I smiled ingratiatingly, and gently patted their little green heads. I introduced them to my friends hoping that the plants would think that they had the best minder ever. They flourished and branched. Their oval leaves glistened and shone. They stood as upright and as motionless as Grenadier Guards. As has happened to the Guards at times, one leaf fell over and off. Picking it up, I planted it at the base of the parent plant, where it survived, looking at me with gratitude in its little face. I waited patiently for something nice to happen. For someone to give me a carpet, or, at least, something out of the ordinary, perhaps an exciting letter to drop through my letter box, or something to fall off the back of a lorry into my lap. But, in the avenue where I live, not many lorries bearing gifts pass through.

I realised that I was half afraid of these magic pieces of greenery, half afraid of what might happen should I neglect them in any way. I was stricken with guilt if I had my morning cup of tea to shape me up for the day, before giving my plants their morning salutations. This would happen if I had overnight guests. My role as hostess overruled my role as a "precious plant" minder. I found the ridicule of my fellow men less easy to bear than the reproachful atmosphere in the corner of the bay window where the plants sat in state. Once, in one of his flying visits my son caught me doing my daily obeisance and burst into scornful laughter. He thought I was quite mad.

"Oh, Mum, do you think for one moment that the stupid plant will bring you a fortune? That green object? Oh, Mum!"

"No," I answered. "It is only a plant."

But, as soon as his back was turned, I resumed my hopeful vigil on letter box and lorry. I walked the streets with bent head and eyes peeled looking for dropped £1 notes. Then one day I found one! It was very dirty, having the footprint on it of a cleated, rubber sole of a shoe. Did I care about mud? Not !! Oh, joy! Deep joy! My little green friends!

After that I had several small strokes of luck. I won £30 in a newspaper competition. I won free seats to a theatre. I won a "guess the weight of the cake" at a church fete, and another time, dinner with my favourite T.V. star. I shall not tell you which one as that would spoil the memory for me. During the next week or two I began to backslide in my attention to the plants. I gave up singing to them, and gave up washing them, although I still spoke to them. Then came the day when I just poked my head around the door giving them a wave of my hand and a cool "good morning". I felt they did not approve of this, but the skies did not fall on my head, so I did not worry. I gave them water regularly, but not much of my company, until it was time to sit down in the evening to read a book or watch the television.

"They are only house plants," I persuaded myself. "Don't get worked up over house plants!"

Sometimes I spoke this aloud. I began to notice that things began to happen that made me think that these house plants were beginning to take over my life. I broke china, and the fence in the back garden fell over and split into fragments. The roof tiles loosened and came sliding down onto the pathway below once just missing my head. I began to feel jittery.

"Nerves," I thought.

But I started to talk to the plants again, and to sing to them in the morning. The tune was pretty but the words were uncomplimentary to house plants. This they did not seem to mind as they perked up and grew more leaves. One morning after a sleepless night, I went over to the plants and said to them in a firm voice,

"You'll have to go! You are making me nervous!"

I put my hand out to touch the leaves - the smooth, green leaves - and one of them caught my middle finger and made a half inch cut in it. It bled into the compost in the pot before I had time to take my hand away. I went into the kitchen to hold it under the tap for a moment, the water turning slightly red. I reached out to take the pot to the window for a closer look, but my hand shook so violently that I dropped the plant pot on to the floor and the one inch thick stem of the plant snapped in two with a crackling sound. Or was it a laugh? It tore my stockings as it went down and scratched my leg. I pulled myself together and muttered under my breath to it.

"You are only a house plant! Do you hear me? Only a house plant!"

I swept up the compost and re-potted it in the unbroken pot. Ten days passed quite quietly and all seemed well. The plant returned to its normal glossy, green colour. My finger healed.

Then one Sunday I was checking my football coupon and in my excitement I again knocked the plant to the floor. It almost cried! I gave a silent scream of joy and disbelief at the unreality of the situation! There they were! Eight little beautiful crosses! Eight beautiful draws! And a half million pounds! I stumbled to the phone to register my claim. I picked up a book with all the phone numbers in it that I needed and - there it was! Under the book! Unposted, a brown envelope addressed to Liverpool!

The plants still flourish. The leaves are sleek and glossy.

I know when I am beaten!