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CRIME BY BLOSSOMS

As I came away from the Royal Hospital Gardens at Chelsea, carrying the usual bunch of wicked catalogues of flowers and fruit and trees and seeds, I came to the conclusion that the English were after all the most remarkable people in the world and that the most fitting punishment for the professional nurserymen who are tormenting them this week at Chelsea would be that they should be condemned to grow nothing more rare or startling than field daisies for the rest of their lives. For the proceedings at Chelsea Flower Show are criminal, and the English are the most remarkable people in the world in that they suffer this crime, and suffer it jubilantly, not only once in a life-time, but every spring. They even pray to suffer it. Being English myself I pray and suffer gladly,

too. For crime by flowers is the only crime I know in which it is sweet to be the victim and in which one's suffering is heavenly.

I imagine there is nothing quite like the crime at Chelsea in the whole world, not even in Japan, while the Carnival of Flowers at Nice is, of course, something really wicked. The wickedness at Chelsea is quite different. It is angelic, the crime is exquisite, the criminals are darlings. And this year it seemed more lovely than ever. The delphiniums were larger and finer, their slender blue and lilac and purple steeples reaching far above the pointing parasols of those dim and dear old ladies who seem to emerge from their obscurity only once a year, for Chelsea. The fox-tail lilies, pink as delicate apple-blossom, grew even taller. Lupins, hydrangeas, peonies, tulips, poppies, stocks, sweet-peas, dahlias, they all seemed more wickedly vivid and gigantic than I ever remember. The lupin spikes seemed to have been dipped in wine of all colours from darkest Burgundy to champagne. The sweet-peas had the freshness and delicacy of early primroses, the carnations and roses went beyond me into an almost artificial perfection of colour and shape, and the auriculas, the little dusty recklessnesses of my grandmother's garden, had such passion and versatility that I hardly knew them. And as one walked round, the criminals, the stiff-collared, country-looking nurserymen, smiled benignly while masculine-looking ladies buttonholed them and bombarded them with the fiercest horticultural catechisms. "But is it hardy? I don't want it, my dear man, if it isn't hardy. My gardener says they're tender. Now, do you think they're tender? You are, I take it, the specialist in these things? Well, now, tell me now, what soil do they like? My gardener says they hate lime. Now, do you think they hate lime? And if I plant them now will they flower for Whitsun? You think it doubtful? Well, now, tell me now, I once had a Clematis Ville de Lyon, but it perished . . ."

This masculine lady is indeed one of the real criminals of Chelsea. She ranks with those other criminals, the bedding-out gardener and the hybridist. The first is thankfully less common than he was, but the hybridist increases like his crimes, the worst of which, this year, is his sport with the rhododendron. He has striven for years to produce in the rhododendron every colour from shell-pink to orange-scarlet, and this year he appears to have done it. The shriek of rhododendron hybrids along the main avenue is a shriek of pure agony.

Yet the hybridist has his virtues and rewards. We have to thank him for *Dianthus Winteri*, a new race of most delicate pinks in a great many colours, for the soft apricot and wine colours of *primula puleverlenta*, both of which were very striking this year. What he cannot touch with anything like his gaudy rhododendron success are the alpines—the little *primulus* and *potentillas*, the fairy *geraniums*, the blue-trumpeted midget *pentstemons*, and that little rose, *Rosa Rouletti*, which grows no higher than a baby's ankle. The alpines, to which both criminals and victims are devoting more and more time each year, are above and beyond him.

I don't suppose he can have much fun either with vegetables, of which there were two amazing exhibitions by the defendants Sutton and Fogwill, who had performed incredible wickedness with everything from tomatoes to celery. These gentlemen, together with the defendant Laxton of Bedford, ought to be condemned to growing nothing but common cabbages and sour blackberries for the rest of their lives. The defendant Laxton committed crime by strawberries. I stood watching them until I, too, nearly committed a crime for which the punishment might not have been so sweet.

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