

Only a Humble Gardener; *Or, Compost is a Man's Best Friend*

by Joy Hinckley

The setting: The house of Lady Sprout and her daughter Orchid.

Time: 1920s or whenever you can round up the costumes for.

Dramatis Personae

Lady Sprout, a widow

Orchid Sprout, her daughter

Derek Dibblestick, their gardener

Mr Syde, a nasty villain

Herbert (Herbie) Syde, his son

Casting notes: Cast with whoever's available. Quirky casting only makes it funnier.

A royalty fee of \$15 per performance is payable for performances for a paying audience.

All requests to perform this play are to be addressed to hinckley_joy@hotmail.com

Enter Orchid and Lady Sprout, carrying a basket of cut flowers.

Lady S *(calling back over her shoulder to off stage)*

And don't tie the sweetpeas up too tightly Dibblestick, there's too much at stake.

(to Orchid) Ah, Orchid my dear, the garden is in the bloom of perfection, just like you my sweet. Your poor dear Papa would be proud of us. We will make a fine effort at the Garden Show, just as he always did. Who knows, perhaps like him we may come home with the Grand Trophy.

Orch We mustn't forget though, Mummy, we couldn't have done it without - Derek.

Lady S Yes, young Dibblestick has done us proud. Since we hired him as gardener the plants have been coming up in spades.

Lady S *sings (tune: My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean)*

He's only a poor common gardener

Not even partic'larly smart

But he's got a way with petunias

Orch *Breaking in to finish the verse*

And he's got a very good heart.

(speaks) Mummy?

Lady S Yes dear?

Orch About Derek...

Lady S Yes

Orch Well –

Lady S Spit it out, child, all this waiting is wilting my wisteria.

Orch I know Derek is just a common gardener, but he is also fine and upstanding as his delphiniums, sweet and tender as his snowpeas, firm and straight as his... zucchini –

Lady S You're not suggesting –?

Orch Yes! Derek Dibblestick and I are in love, Mummy. We want your blessing for us to be wed.

Lady S A gardener! What would your poor dear Papa have said?

Orch Mummy, you know Papa was the most democratic of men. Why, he even befriended that strangely disturbing Mr Syde who still keeps hanging around.

Lady S 'Twas their common interest in gardening that brought them together.

Orch And what about that weedy twit of a son of his.

Lady S Hush! Here they come now. Be nice to them for your poor dear Papa's sake.

Syde Knock knock!

Lady S Ah, Mr Syde, enter, do.

Syde *(doffs hat)* Lady Sprout, Miss Sprout.

Lady S Good day to you, Mr Syde, Herbert.

Herb Hello your ladyship, Miss Sprout.

Orch Please, do call me Orchid.

Herb Gosh, thank you. Please call me Herbie.

Syde Just popping in to see if you are planning on entering the garden show this year.

Lady S Oh yes. We must do it for poor Lord Sprout's sake. And with the help of our new gardener *(to Orchid)* about whom we'll speak later, *(to Syde)* we should make a very creditable showing.

Syde Splendid, splendid. Well, please let me know if I can be of any help. Even if we are rivals – I hope we can be friendly rivals, ha ha.

Lady S Thank you, Mr Syde, you are too kind.

Syde Any special plants you're planning to show?

Lady S Oh yes, we have some superbly formed flawless Honeydew melons for the vine fruits and vegetables section, and I'm entering poor dear Lord Sprout's finest creation in the floral section, a rose of a new breed he named "the Ruby Rose of Ranjipur". A fanciful name, I'm sure, I was rather hoping he would name it after me, "the Lady Sprout". But a jolly romantic name I suppose.

Syde Indeed, indeed, most mysteriously fanciful of him. Well, Herb, we must keep moving. Au revoir, your ladyship.

Lady S Good day, Mr Syde.

Exit Syde and Herbie

Lady S Now, back to your startling and entirely unexpected revelation. Come to the drawing room, and tell me what it is all about while I arrange these blooms.

Exit Lady S and Orch.

Enter DS Syde and Herbie

Syde So. They are planning to enter the garden show, eh? And with a rose called "The Ruby Rose of Ranjipur". We have no time to waste!

Herb Yes, home for some fertilising and stuff. Don't mind a spot of gardening actually.

Syde No you fool. It is time to put my great plan into action.

Herb What great plan, Father?

Syde The plan that started one fateful night after an unfortunate card game with the late Lord Sprout.

Herb Unfortunate for who?

Syde For me...and Lord Sprout. You see, that night I lost the last game having gambled something precious I've been trying to get back ever since. Not long after that, I managed to get Lord Sprout drunk in another late night session, and he told me a secret – a secret he had told no-one else.

Herb A secret?

Syde Yes. And not long after confiding this secret to me, poor Lord Sprout was killed in a nasty hunting accident. (*evil snigger*)

Herb Gosh.

Syde Well, aren't you going to ask me?

Herb Ask you what?

Syde What's the secret.

Herb Oh, I'm sure I don't know, nobody tells me anything.

Syde I will tell you, you fool!

Herb Oh, righto. So what IS the secret?

Syde Well may you ask, my boy. Long ago, in the mysterious east, a giant rose coloured ruby was plucked from the turban of the Royal Raj of Ranjipur as he dozed in his den.

Herb Who was the plucker what plucked it, Father?

Syde That plucker was none other than I.

Herb Wasn't that a tad dishonest?

Syde (*aside*) Oh, where did I go wrong with the boy? (*to Herb*) Of course it was dishonest. Unfortunately it was this very same Royal Ruby of Ranjipur that I lost in that card game. So there we were in Sprout's study a week or so later, with me topping up his cognac whenever his attention was distracted. I mentioned the ruby and its worth, and suggested that for safety he should secrete it somewhere very safe. The poor fool, thinking me as honest as he, told me it was somewhere no-one would ever think to look. He had hidden it, he told me, in the pot of one of the roses he was breeding. Aha – I had my answer. I decided that nothing would stop me from pluckily plucking my ruby again. Soon after that, Lord Sprout had his accident. Under the pretence of helping poor Lady Sprout with the watering, I was able to enter his rose breeding conservatory. There I discovered Lord Sprout's death had been a little premature. I needed more information! He had hundreds of roses, curse him. Which one held my treasure?

Herb Which one?

Syde Exactly. I had no idea – till now.

Herb I've still got no idea.

Syde Ohhh. Don't you see lad? I lose the Rose Ruby of Ranjipur and Lord Sprout breeds a new rose called the Ruby Rose of Ranjipur.

Herb Ye-es...

Syde Oh never mind. Just listen carefully (*to audience*) and you lot too – this is an evil plan of sublime complexity and evilness, with multiple payoffs for me.

Herb And me Father?

Syde Aah. Of course, son. Firstly, we find a way to steal back the Rose Ruby of Ranjipur. Secondly, if the theft is found out, we frame some innocent sap to take the blame. Thirdly, we sabotage Lady Sprout's perfectly rounded melons – the judges are bound to be captivated by those and they're in the same category as my continental cucumber. Fourthly, we lay the blame for the sabotage on some poor sap, preferably the same poor sap as the first one.

Herb Why the same one?

Syde Just for fun. Fifthly – pay attention, this is where you come in – you must convince Orchid to marry you so that we can get our hands on the rest of their not inconsiderable fortune.

Herb I say, that's a tall order for a short chap.

Syde Silence! You will do as I say. Now come, we have devious dastardliness to devise.

Exit Syde and Herb

Enter Lady S and Derek

Lady S So, Dibblestick, you, a common gardener, wish to marry my daughter.

Derek Oh, Lady Sprout, I do love her so. I know I am but an 'umble 'orticulturist, but my 'eart is 'olesome.

Lady S You have thrust me upon the horns of a dilemma. Most awkward (*pronounced like 'Orchid'*).

Orchid pops her head in

Orch Yes Mummy?

Lady S Yes what?

Orch You called.

Lady S Did I? Oh. I don't recall. Huh. You must excuse me, I think I need to sit down with a little shot of...tea. It's all been a bit much lately.

Orch Shall I come?

Lady S No, no.

Exit Lady S

Orch What was all that about?

Derek No idea. Oh, Orchid, I fear Lady Sprout will never give her consent to our marriage. It is pruned ere it has had time to blossom!

Orch No! fear not, Derek, it will blossom into a glorious...uh...blossom.

Unseen by the lovers, Syde's head peers in.

Derek Blossom! For now, dearest, all I can do to win her approval is help her to win at the garden show. I shall go now to polish her Ladyship's ripened melons and pop some compost on his Lordship's new rose. What a glorious ruby colour the rose is! Like the roses in the cheeks of my beloved. Farewell.

Orch Farewell my love.

They make kissy gestures as Derek exits. Orch wanders to side of stage looking pensive.

Enter Syde on opposite side to Orchid.

Syde *(aside)* Oho! So there's love afoot, eh? I'd already decided to nobble the gardener as the hapless innocent sap to take the blame. Seems I chose well. I'll kill two birds with one stone – we can't have him in the way of my Herbert's winsome wooing.

(offstage, whispers) Psst...Herbert. You're on.

Herb peers in, is shoved towards Orch by Syde. Syde watches scene from behind a large pot plant.

Herb Aah...hello, Orchid.

Orch Oh! You startled me!

Herb Sorry.

Orch Herbie. What are you doing here?

Herb looks very uncomfortable. Keeps glancing towards Syde.

Herb I thought you might like to take a stroll around the garden. It's a *spiffing* day outside.

Orch *(Wiping eye)* Oh.

Herb Yes, I thought a chat might be nice. Before he died your poor dear father expressed a desire for us to get to know each other better.

Orch *(sighs)* In that case, of course. Come, we'll take a turn around the turnips.

Herb Perambulate the petunias?

Orch Circle the cabbages.

Herb Tiptoe through the tulips?

Orch Blunder through the beets. Come along then.

Herb By the way, my Father said to tell you he noticed that gardener of yours behaving suspiciously earlier.

Exit Orch & Herb, who is casting an unhappy look back towards Syde's hiding place.

Enter Lady S & Derek. Derek is carrying a large potted rose with red flowers. Lady S is carrying two round melons.

Lady S Put the rose down over there, Dibblestick. I say, it's a bit whiffy, isn't it?

Derek *(Putting rose on table)* Sorry your ladyship, I didn't realise you were going to bring it indoors before the garden show. I've only just covered it with my special organic composted fish guts. *(Sees pot plant Syde is hiding behind)* That pot plant *(Replace with name of plant if desired)*!

Lady S What about it?

Derek It – it jiggled.

Lady S Don't be absurd. And the word 'jiggled' is vulgar. I'm sure I don't know what Orchid sees in you. I'll put the melons here till I work out how best to display them. I want them to be very prominent. *(Puts melons on table)* Now fetch me my basket. I'll be in the garden. *(exits)*

Derek sighs and exits opp.

Syde Now is my chance! Ha ha! – the ruby will soon be mine – all mine!

Syde goes to table and tips out the rose plant from its pot. He rummages through the dirt and hold up the ruby.

Syde Here 'tis, my precious ruby.

Enter Derek with basket

Derek 'Oy! What are you doing there?

Syde hastily shoves the ruby into his pocket as Lady S enters

Lady S What's all the noise? Oh! Poor dear Sprout's precious rose!

Syde Luckily I was passing, your Ladyship. I spied this young ne'er do well in the very act of vandalising your blooms and rushed in to apprehend him.

Syde grabs Derek by the shirt.

Lady S *(to Derek)* Oh, you wretch! Just because I hesitated before sending off my dear Orchid to an unknown fate.

Derek No, Lady Sprout! It isn't true! It's a lie!

Enter Orchid

Orch I say, what's going on?

Lady S This spiteful young man has destroyed our rose because he can't get his hands on you and your money.

Orch Oh, Derek, how could you?

Derek Please listen to me! 'Twas he what did the evil deed. He took something from the bottom of the pot and put it in his pocket. Look, look at the dirt on his dirty devious hands!

Lady S He's right!

Orchid dives for Syde's pocket before he has a chance to stop her. She pulls out the ruby.

Orch Look, Mummy, an enormous ruby. And a ticket to “Saucy Girls on Parade”.

Lady S Call the constabulary!

Syde I’ll be off now (*goes to dash out*)

Derek picks up a melon and dongs Syde on the head with it, causing him to sit heavily in the chair. Syde lands face first into the compost, comes up and looks out, cross-eyed and wavering and making ‘cuckoo’ noises, before crashing back down into the dirt.

Orch (*Inspecting Syde*) He is non compost mentis.

Derek holds Syde by the coat in case he comes round. Enter Herbie

Herb Your Ladyship, Orchid, I must warn you about my Fathe – what’s this? So – he has already made his move and been foiled by your t’riffic gardener. Good. I’m sorry my warning comes too late to be of assistance, but I hope my heartfelt apology is not also too late. My Father forced me to be part of his evil plans. It was never my wish to be wicked.

Lady S I’m sure at heart you are not a bad lad. Once away from the influence of your devilish Dad, do you think you could reform?

Herb I believe I could! I will find honest employment and become a new man.

Lady S Well, as I can hardly have my son-in-law as my gardener, would you like the job?

Orch Mummy – does this mean that you accept Derek?

Lady S I have never been happier to have been proved wrong. You may wed with my blessing.

Orch and Derek embrace adorably.

Herb Lady Sprout, I would be thrilled to be your gardener. Thank you, thank you! You’ll soon see the results of having Herbie Syde at work in your garden. I can now look forward to a bright and glorious future.

All We can all look forward to a bright and glorious future.

Derek (*to audience*) And remember, compost is a boon to all (*Syde raises head and moans*) except the wicked!

All laugh. Then to front and sing (tune “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean”)

All except Syde So come let us strike happy poses
 For the villain is filled with remorse
 Now everything’s coming up roses
 And true love has triumphed of course.

True love, true love, true love has triumphed of course, of course
True love, true love, true love has triumphed of course!

THE END

(Optional exit: Syde darts out from their clutches and runs in a wavy path offstage, with the rest of them in hot pursuit, “Benny Hill” style)