

Note on a New Plant, *Serendipitus universalis*

"If you call the animal you are seeking by name, you will never find it." Told by a member of the Bativa people of Central Africa to George B. Schaller. (*The Year of the Gorilla*. The University of Chicago Press, 1964. Page 51.)

I don't know how I came to overlook this plant for so long. You will, I'm sure, have had the experience of finding, after many wasted hours, the solution to a problem and of then thinking: Why ever didn't I think of that before? Well, it was a bit like that with *Serendipitus universalis*: the existence of this plant is so patently obvious now that I could kick myself. Consider the two species of poroporo, *Solanum aviculare* and *S. lacinatum*. Perfectly distinct aren't they? How then could we ever have thought that there was only one poroporo in the country? There they were staring us in the face and we didn't see "them", only "it". Do you see what I'm getting at?

Of course I have all sorts of excuses for not realising before now that *Serendipitus universalis* existed. (Let's do without the long words: from now on, for short, I'll just call the plant *S. un.*). Futhermore, even if *S. un.* didn't exist—and I'm convinced that it does—I now realise it would have been absolutely necessary to invent it. To take an example from the animal kingdom: If Dog didn't exist it would surely have been necessary to create him, even if in so doing we made him back to front. Without Dog man would be lost—straying without a leash. So, without the light of *S. un.* the botanist is like a bee without a flower; he cannot see where to go.

I was going to tell you about my excuses but I got led away. When you have seen what sort of plant *S. un.* is, what sort of places it lives in, and what sort of life it leads, I'm sure you'll forgive me for not discovering it before. For that matter, why didn't you discover it? What are *your* excuses?

S. un. is a plant

So ephemeral as to be uncollectable,
So ethereal as to be incognisable,
So incognito as to be unrecognisable—
Papyraceous, papillionaceous, invisible.

S. un. lives in places

So precipitous as to be unassailable,
So preposterous as to be inadmissible,
So paradisaical as to be unimaginable—
Paradoxical, diabolical, improbable.

S. un. leads a life

That's efflorescent, special and incomparable,
Yet self-effacing, local and undemonstrable,
Quite mixed-up, chimerical and undecipherable,
Precocious, mono-di-polyoecious, impossible.

By this time I hope your curiosity as to the precise nature of *S. un.* will have risen to a high pitch. You may even be looking for a formal Latin description. But *S. un.* is no ordinary plant and cannot be bagged and tagged, picked and pickled, pressed and pigeon-holed, dried and described, dug up and laid down, cut down and sawn up. You cannot approach *S. un.* directly. Its name must not on any account be mentioned, not even in a whisper or by sign language; above all you must never actually look for it. (The analogy with the sun is obvious here: anyone who looks directly at the sun will certainly *not* see it). Any sort of pretense, such as feigning that one is looking for some other plant while all the time casting an eye out for *S. un.*, is quite fatal. One must have an absolutely clear mind, free of all images of what it might look like or where it might occur. Only then, and then only if you are very, very lucky, will *S. un.* shine and light your imagination.

To find *S. un.* one must use *indirect* methods; *direct* methods are poison. As an anecdote I'll give you the following antidote. (There are many others but most of them are trade secrets). Always remember that antidotes must be administered at the very first sign of poisoning, otherwise *S. un.* will have sunk below the horizon before you have even raised your eyes.

I was taking a friend to see a plant—I'll call it Cop—that grew at a certain place, and on the way we stopped at what looked like an interesting patch of bush, where I thought the plant might also grow, thus saving us a longer journey. (Let me tell you right away, with hindsight, that *S. un.*, all unknown to us, *was* hiding there). With clear minds we set out to look for, not *S. un.*, which of course was *not* in our minds thanks to the antidote, but Cop. We never did find Cop, even though we scrutinised every likely bush and turned out nearly all its closest relatives. Then, as you know, we saw *S. un.*, just a glimpse mind you, but enough to be quite sure of its identity. Only the other day I had another glimpse, in a different place of course, under almost identical circumstances. (And our 1975 president, I might add, recently had a similar experience!).

I can still hear you saying: But what does it look like? Is it tall—up in the trees? Or is it small—down on your knees? What does it smell like? Is it a ponga? What colour is it? Is it ever green? How does it behave? Does it *divaricate*, or merely *prevaricate*? Is it annual, or is it ennial? For the answers I'm afraid you must go to THE FLORA; that's what it's for. Sink your way down through the hierarchy and there you'll find *S. un.*, right at the bottom.

Kingdom	APLANTAE
Division	ELUSIPHYTA
Class	HAPPIGOPOSIDA
Subclass	OCTOBOTYLEDONES
Order	ACCIDENTALES
Suborder	TRIPRINCINEAE
Family	EPHEMERACEAE
Subfamily	SERIO-COMICOIDEAE
Tribe	HORACEWALPOLEAE
Subtribe	SPINOFFINAE
Genus	SERENDIPITUS
Species	<i>Serendipitus universalis</i>

Postscript

A. P. DRUCE

"Don't never forget": Seek and ye shall *not* find.



Earth star (*Geastrum triplex*)