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Percival Strand – Going Places

Percival Strand lived with his family in what he had always thought of as their home. It was nothing like the homes of ordinary people, because Percival and his brothers and sisters were not actually people. They were just like their name suggested – strands, very thin, stringy fibres that were all packed together side by side in a plant that was really a tall cane something like bamboo. There were other plants the same as the one the Strands lived in, lots of them growing in a big clump at the edge of a forest; but Percival and his family didn't know this because they never got to see beyond the outside skin of their plant. Packed tightly inside their cane, the brothers and sisters just assumed this was what life was about, and there was nothing else. Percival, however, was sure there was more than simply being a strand stuck in a plant. "I can't believe this is all there is," he was often heard to say. "One day I'm going to leave here and explore the world outside."

Each time he said this, the others laughed. "How does he reckon he's going to do that?" Bitty asked her brother Filbert. "Maybe he thinks he can shine himself to the outside." This was a reference to Percival's colour which was very different to the rest. Instead of being simply a dull green, he was a bright yellow strand that seemed to glow.

They were always making fun of him about this; also that he believed he was destined to go places; but Percival didn't care; and when they pushed him for an answer about how he intended to leave, he would just say: "I am certain something will turn up." As time passed and nothing came along to change the boring existence of the Strand family, Percival was starting to think it never would. Then one day it really and truly did.

Occasionally the plant would move, particularly when a strong wind was blowing; but soon enough everything got back to normal. Not this time, though. The movement wasn't smooth and swaying either: what the Strands were feeling was jerky and jarring. The cause was a group of men, actually human people, who were hacking at the bottom of the canes with sharp chopping knives. "This is a good find," one of the men said. "We'll get some strong ropes out of these canes."

And the chopping went on, eventually reaching Percival's plant which a man cut off at the base. All the Strands felt it because the knife had cut through their ankles. In moments they were no longer standing upright, but were laying sideways as the men carried them to a cart into which the cut canes were tossed. Then came a bouncing as the cart was hauled away along a bumpy track. What was going on? "Is this what you meant by 'going places'?" asked Bitty in a trembling voice.

"I suppose," replied Percival. "Exciting, isn't it? Aren't you glad we're going there together?"

"Not really," groaned Filbert. "I wish you'd kept your 'going places' to yourself."

They certainly were going somewhere they had never been before, except none of them knew where that was likely to be. After a while, the carts pulled up alongside a large building. Men took bundles of canes inside and lay them on a flat bench. What happened next was the worst experience the Strands had ever had in their lifetime as two men began beating the canes

with hammers, splitting them open to reveal the fibres inside the outer skin. "Told you," said a man's voice. "Stronger and thicker than any we've found before. Once they're spliced we can start making the ropes; and I'll bet we'll get top prices for them."

Percival and the other Strands had no idea what the men were saying because they didn't understand human speak. They could only worry about what would happen to them; all except Percival: "This is probably the way of great adventures," he assured them. "Not knowing what to expect is the exciting part." No-one was prepared to agree with him, but there was nothing they could do to change his mind; so they just waited in silence.

Once the canes had been battered, someone came along and took bunches of the fibres from the inside of the broken canes to a different part of what was actually a kind-of factory. Here began a process that the Strands found very uncomfortable. They were stretched out, then twisted really tightly, and it didn't stop until the twisters were satisfied. "That should do for this lot," said one of them. "You can take them to the rope-maker." If the stretching and twisting hadn't been bad enough, the splicing stage was worse. Here, the Strands were joined up with a different family of fibres which were, in turn, joined to another bunch, and so on. Finally, one of the humans said: "That's long enough. Do another like this and we can make the rope."

Not that the Strands knew what a rope was, even if they could have understood the words the humans were saying; but they were soon to find out. The long, twisted thing that they had become a part of was laid beside another one pretty much the same; then the two were turned over and over as they were twisted together to make a long rope. This new rope was then formed into a coil and placed on the floor in a corner. When nothing else seemed to happen, Filbert said: "That was fun, I don't think. Do you reckon it's over now? I hope so."

"There has to be more to come," mused Percival. "There must be something other than being twisted into this long thing. What's it for, I wonder? Perhaps our becoming a coilly something is the first step to going places."

Following a period of having more coils of whatever they were dumped on top of them, the Strands were on the move. Being no longer inside their cane they could see the outside world. It appeared to be quite a wonderful place; at least Percival thought so. "Now we really are going places," he said, bubbling with excitement. "I have a feeling it will be somewhere special, and we have been made into this coilly thing to do a really important job." And this was soon to happen; although not even Percival could have imagined what that job might be.

The Strands, of course, had been made into a rope; and along with other ropes they were taken to a sailing ship tied up to a jetty. Sailor men on board busied themselves fixing the ropes to masts and spars, replacing those ropes that had become old and weak over time. Just as Percival's rope was about to be attached, the Captain of the ship came over. "That one looks different. It seems to have a gold thread running through it, and it's my guess it will be stronger than the others. We'll use it for the anchor."

This was to be the job of the Strands who had been spliced to the other fibres that made up their particular rope; and, as Percival had guessed, it would be very important to the safety of the ship. For some time to come, whenever the ship needed to stay in one spot, the Captain would order the anchor to be lowered. Into the sea it went trailing the rope, and down and down went the Strands. The first time this happened, Filbert complained: "I don't like it in the water. It's cold and salty." Then, when the anchor reached the seabed and eventually dug into the sandy bottom, the rope went tight as it strained to hold the ship on the surface.

"We're being stretched again," moaned Bitty, and the others agreed. "I just hope we're not down here too long."

On this occasion, the Strands' underwater soaking was to last only a short while. The Captain had ordered the ship anchored in the bay of an island so that his men could row ashore to collect fresh water and fruit. Once this was done, the Strands felt an even greater strain as the anchor was pulled free from the sandy bottom and hauled up to the ship. Back on board, Percival declared: "That wasn't too bad, was it? If this is all we'll have to do, I won't mind at all."

And think of where we could be travelling to on this thing. That really will be going places." Calling it a 'thing' might have sounded strange; but, of course, the Strands weren't human people and didn't know they were on a ship; so they just thought of it as a thing.

The voyage was quite a long one, and the more times the anchor was dropped, the more the Strands got used to the salt-water drenching and the stretching until they had to agree with Percival that it wasn't really all that bad. Then one day the ship was caught in a furious storm which tossed and rocked it. Although the Strands remained coiled up on deck and not actually in the water, they were still drenched by the waves crashing over the bow. They were glad, at least, that they were just lying there and not being stretched which was a good thing; but the situation was about to change. "The storm's driving us towards land," declared the Captain. "Drop the anchor quickly before we crash onto the rocks!"

Hurriedly, the sailors lowered the anchor over the side and let it fall to the seabed. To start with it just dragged along through the sand until it found a clump of rock and hooked on tightly. With the storm on the surface driving the ship, the strain on the anchor rope was far greater than at any time before. Filbert and Bitty were moaning, certain that they would be pulled apart. "No we won't," Percival told them. "We're much too strong for that. Whatever it is that we're tied to will hold and we'll be the ones who save everyone on the thing from drowning." Unfortunately, although the Strand part of the rope was really strong, the other fibres that made up the rest of it were far weaker. They strained and stretched to the point where they could stay together no longer, eventually pulling apart and breaking. "Ah," said Percival, "But at least we didn't break."

"No," Bitty had to remind him, "But we didn't save the thing, and we are still tied to the whatever it is that's stuck fast. I just knew going places would get us into trouble. Now we're doomed to spend the rest of our lives covered in salty water."

It certainly seemed that way. Percival, however, was determined to find a way out of their problem. "Listen," he said to his brothers and sisters, "We are all separate strands and it's only because the humans twisted us together that we're part of this long windy thing; but if we work hard we can untwist ourselves where we are tied. Then we'll be free."

It was exactly as Percival said and soon enough their rope was no longer attached to the anchor caught on the rock. The original thought had been that once they were free of the weight they would float up to the surface, but they had been underwater too long. Their rope was absolutely soaked and simply stayed down below. They were moving, though, carried by the tide and the rough seas, pausing occasionally when they became caught in seaweed; then they were on the move once the strong current tore the weed from where it was growing. Percival was again talking about going places: "I wonder where we'll end up this time," he said.

The tide was taking them towards land, and after being tossed back and forth by the waves they found themselves lying higher up on a sandy beach still tangled up in seaweed. Here was where they stayed for what seemed ages. As it happened, some children were playing on the beach and one of them spotted something shiny amongst the weed. Pulling it clear, one of them said: "Hey, it's a long piece of rope. I bet Mum could sell it to the workhouse."

The boy was talking about his mother, Molly Thimble. She did have a job at the workhouse, separating the fibres of old ropes so that the strands could be made into new ropes; but she also worked for herself at home sewing dresses and clothes, mainly for fine ladies. When her children brought her the rope Molly was delighted by the look of it, especially the shining strand that was Percival. "This is far too good to be made into another rope," she declared. "I believe it's just what I need for Lady Elizabeth's sachet."

Now, a sachet was a small material bag or purse for holding small personal things, and it was tied around a lady's waist with a thin, woven cord, usually a fancy one. Molly set about preparing the threads she needed by unravelling the fibres of the rope. Once she had them all laid out on the table before her she knew this sachet and cord was going to be something quite special; and it was. Working for the rest of the day and through the night, Molly wove the Strands into a beautiful sachet, threading Percival into it to make a pattern of gold. She even

saved some of him to wind though the cord; and when it was done she had to admit it was probably the best thing she had ever made.

Lady Elizabeth certainly thought so when she came to collect it. "This sachet is much better than I imagined it could be," she said to Molly. "Thank you so much. I can see I will be envied by the other ladies at court."

The court Lady Elizabeth was talking about was actually the Royal Court where she was a lady-in-waiting to the Queen. As she walked through the Royal Palace, everyone who saw it admired the amazing, sparkling sachet, which made her so proud. Later, she received a summons to attend her Royal Majesty, and on entering her chamber, the Queen rose from her chair and walked around Lady Elizabeth gazing in wonder at the sachet and cord. "So, this is what everyone in court is talking about, and I can see why. It is magnificent and beautifully crafted. Who made this for you? I wish to have one just like it."

Lady Elizabeth had never expected this and felt awkward when she had to explain: "I don't think that will be possible, Your Majesty. Molly, the lady who sewed it, told me she had just enough special thread to make only the one." Seeing disappointment spreading over the Queen's face she added: "But, would you be offended if I gave mine to you?" Lady Elizabeth began to untie the cord around her waist. "I would be so proud to have worn something that my Queen now has."

Once she had removed the cord and sachet, she then tied it around the Queen's waist. Standing back, she inspected it to make sure it was on straight and said: "It looks far better on you, Your Majesty. In fact, it might have been made for a Queen."

There was no denying it. The Queen went to a mirror, smiled and nodded; then she took the sachet in her hands and stroked the material lovingly. "Very fine workmanship," she commented. "Does this Molly person make other things?"

"Actually, Your Majesty, she made the dress I am wearing."

The Queen frowned. "Why was I not told about this expert seamstress? Is she in court now? Send for her," ordered the Queen.

"Actually," said Lady Elizabeth, "Molly isn't a courtier. She's just an ordinary, simple woman who lives in the town with her three children."

"Oh, that won't do," stated the Queen firmly. "A woman with such talents is not ordinary and is clearly far from simple. Fetch her to me, Lady Elizabeth, and her children. And have a steward prepare a room for them, a big room finely furnished. From now on, they will stay here in the palace. I can't have my new seamstress living in town, oh no. It wouldn't be fitting."

As soon as Lady Elizabeth left, the Queen continued to look at herself in the mirror, and as she turned, Percival sparkled from the sachet and the cord. "I have no idea what all that was about," he said to his brothers and sisters, "But I have a strong feeling that we will be alright from now on. I truly believe we are at last in the place we were meant to be."

"And I reckon it's a lot to do with that human person who made us into what we are now," said Bitty. "She wasn't like the others who were very rough with us. This person was so gentle. I do hope she will be alright too."

"I'm sure she will be," said Percival, "One fine day in the future, maybe. Good things come to everyone in the end."