

War Games

Clive F Sorrell

It was Tuesday afternoon and the last Lady of Shallot had been deadheaded and inspected for greenfly. Colonel Arnold Blotson, retired, was now ready for the four judges of the Best Garden of Tickles Green. According to the programme pinned to the village-hall notice board the judges would visit Alamein Cottage on the following morning at ten thirty. The old warrior completed his inspection of every plant in his half-acre garden and, with every flower squared away and at its blooming best, the colonel was confident that his parade would be a triumph.

It had taken him eleven months to prepare his strategy for winning the trophy for the fifth time running. If his battalion of blooms won the day he would be entitled to retain the solid silver claret jug in perpetuity.

The sun was still hot and high when he dropped into the deckchair on the lawn to enjoy the refreshing pot of tea that the memsahib had put on the small table. It had been an arranged marriage and being younger and without children she couldn't understand her husband's passion for pottering about in the garden rather than in the bedroom. Leaving the house for her Tuesday whist drive at the vicarage was a subtle ploy for getting to know the unattached and rather handsome vicar more intimately.

The colonel was left to review the result of a year spent up to his neck in muck and begonias. He made sure to log every Latin name in his brain in order to belittle the judges whose horticultural knowledge he knew was limited.

The hands of his watch moved to 4.12 and after sipping from his second cup of Earl Grey he bit into the moist, fruit-speckled Garibaldi. Suddenly his parade-ground voice burst forth with a string of unmentionable expletives, accompanied by a cloud

of crumbs for he was witnessing a loamy eruption of dark brown in the centre of the lawn that had taken him so long to perfect.

His loud roar of anger was practically unintelligible but it seriously offended his neighbour, Mrs Trump, who was very protective when it came to her two Dandy Dinmonts. Completely enraged, and ignoring the angry yapping of his neighbor and her dogs filtering through the high hedge, the colonel leapt to his feet. He snatched a fork from the bed of nasturtiums and, careful not to dig his heels into the spirit-levelled lawn, went to the scene of destruction. He plunged the tines deep into the hillock and feeling nothing he thrust the fork repeatedly until he was out of breath and was forced to stop.

The colonel withdrew his weapon and checked the tines but detecting no signs of blood he went to fetch a bucket and trowel to begin repairing the damage. On his return from the garden shed he gasped at the sight of two new earthworks that had brazenly arisen on either side of his deckchair. It would appear that a subterranean attack force was systematically sabotaging his hard work and he ran to the fork and began attacking another ugly blemish developing close to the terracotta edging tiles.

Whilst spearing this latest mound a movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention and once more he froze for in the far corner of the lawn tiny fragments of soil were slowly rising above the manicured height of the red fescue grass. Colonel Blotson waited a few more seconds until more grains stirred and then leapt across the lawn to ram the fork deep into the greensward until the tines were completely buried. He leant over the handle anticipating vibrating death throes coming up the elm wood shaft to his hands but he felt nothing. He gave a sigh, satisfied that he had overwhelmed the enemy and spent the remainder of the afternoon trying to patch up the imperfections.

The first time a supermarket trolley had scratched the door of his new car he had been depressed for a full month. No matter how hard he polished the small mark it was still there every time he went for a drive. In his mind he was never able to recover the pristine state that proudly said 'new' and now he was experiencing the same bitter taste when he looked at the lightly scarred lawn.

It was late twilight and a patrolling barn owl swooped over the garden when the colonel finished removing every speck of superfluous soil and tweaking the tufts

to disguise the holes he had plugged with potting compost. He dropped into the deckchair with a sigh and a large measure of whisky.

The judges would be the same as last year and he knew Miss Gleeson, a spinster who lived next to the church, would prove to be the toughest for she was a stickler when it came to the tiniest details. Last year she had disqualified old Sam when a single Grizzled Skipper caterpillar was spotted under a *cirsium rivulare* leaf.

The butternut squash-shaped woman with a penchant for Harris tweed suits was the sole reason the colonel returned to the lawn at midnight carrying a powerful torch and one of Mrs Blotson's meat skewers.

The colonel teased away at single blades of grass until he was sure the enemy's vandalism couldn't be detected and with knees cracking he struggled to his feet. A window was flung open and Mrs Blotson instructed him to come to bed. Her shouts reached the ears of Doris Cardew, the licensee of the King's Head, as she ejected the last drinkers and locked up for the night. The upstairs window closed with a firm thump and once more peace returned to the colonel's parade ground.

As soon as the sun had risen above the copse of straight-backed black bamboo at the bottom of his garden the colonel was up and heading for the back door to make his final inspection. Mrs Blotson had taken the car and left earlier than her husband thought necessary. She had promised to help the vicar with the preparation of his spicy sausage in the food tent which had been erected between the Wheel of Fortune and Splat the Rat.

Straightening his tie and slicking his moustache with the edge of one hand he left the house by the kitchen door and rounded the recently clipped calycanthus. With one foot raised to step onto the lawn he beheld a sight that froze him to the spot and he was unable to move any further . . .

It was two hours later that the judges, led by the clipboard and poised Biro of Miss Gleeson, finished the front garden with much nodding and grunts of approval and marched round the house. They passed through the subtly fragrant arbour, admiring the spectacular swathes of purple wisteria that hung in disciplined ranks. As they approached the boxwood hedge they 'ummed' and 'ahhed' with doodling pens until they reached the point where they could look over the top.

To a man, and one large lady, they all fell silent: the large area of garden that had once been a lawn now appeared to be an assault course for the Royal Marines. It was covered in mounds of fine, well-mulched soil that stood up to two feet high. Deep trenches criss-crossed the grass that had once been the subject of the colonel's proud boasts during his frequent forays to the King's Head.

Colonel Blotson was wandering aimlessly in the centre of this no-man's land with a spade in one hand and a fork in the other. His jacket and his mouth hung open and blood-shot eyes were glazed with shock. Guerilla warfare had apparently been waged throughout the night. The worm population of the lawn had been decimated as had any chance of retaining the silver trophy.

... Seeing the result of the enemy's mining activity the colonel had been immobilized with shock. The old soldier then recovered and sprung into action to create a number of battlefronts. Raiding the garden shed and wielding every cutting and stabbing weapon he could find he hunted the enemy, transforming the whole garden into a war zone.

Despite advancing on a number of broad fronts colonel Blotson was unable to pin the enemy down and now, in the middle of his post-apocalyptic scene, he sat, defeated and totally depressed, with his head in his hands. The enemy, it would seem, had lost the battle yesterday but had returned to stealthily destroy the colonel's spirit and win the war.

The judges left just as stealthily.

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