

Showtime

'Can I get you two gents another pint?' asked Pauline leaning over the table while she added some empties to her collection of clinking glasses.

'I am alright, Pauline, must be off soon, lots to do.' said Bert.

'I reckon there's a conspiracy afoot and I can guess what it is all about - you old rascals.' she said with a chuckle.

'Conspiracy? Just sharing a few reminiscences, that's all.' said Bert picking up his tweed coat that he had draped over the back of a greasy looking chair.

'Who are you kidding Bert? You and Jerry have been the fiercest of rivals at the show for donkey's years. Why so chummy all of a sudden?'

'My lips are sealed. Just count the rosettes tomorrow, that's all I'm saying.' said Bert pushing back his chair which then squealed across the wooden floor. 'Goodnight, all.' He turned and noted that they were the only ones remaining in the snug. After he had left Pauline sat and sidled up to Jerry.

'Busy night?' he asked.

'Nah. Quiet as the graveyard. Always the same the night before the show. Everybody's busy at home polishing their tomatoes.' cackled Pauline.

'More fool them. I need a jar or two just to settle the butterflies.'

'You, nervous? After all these years, how long is it, must be thirty?'

'And the rest.' said Jerry looking wistfully at his glass and drank the last inch in one long, slow gulp.

'Come I'll get you another - but only if you tell me what it is all about.'

'Nothing to tell.' said Jerry but he got up and followed her to the bar.

'You must think I'm a fool. It's Jasmine Frodsham, that's what it is all about.' said Pauline, pulling him a pint.

'Maybe, or maybe not.' said Jerry rather despondently.

'Come on, you and Bert have reigned supreme at the show, and then last year along comes Jasmine and trounces you both.'

'A fluke!'

'Most golds and overall champion I seem to remember.'

'Those leeks came straight from Waitrose.'

'That's not fair, I've seen her garden.'

‘That’s Jasmine for you, Lady Bountiful opening her garden for ‘charity’; just bragging - that’s what it is. There’s more to showing than having a rich husband. She doesn’t have the pedigree, experience or knowledge, the young upstart. Showing is a family tradition; my granddad passed on his secrets to my dad and him to me. She’ll get her comeuppance tomorrow - you’ll see.’ Jerry paused to drink his beer.

‘She gave a most interesting talk to the WI.’

‘Yes, Freda told me all about that. Her ladyship showing off again. All that internet stuff - it’s not right.’

‘Seems sensible to me, getting advice from all over.’

‘Phrasebook, Grinder and Wickedpedia, I ask you.’

‘Something like that.’ said Pauline smiling at the old curmudgeon.

At five o’clock with the faint light of dawn just breaking, Jerry was getting ready. Carrots needed ever so gentle scrubbing, faded petals needed detaching with tweezers and potatoes needed matching for weight and shape. A well-worn checklist ensured each entry met the exacting rules of the schedule.

When Jerry and Freda arrived at the main marquee just minutes after it had opened Bert was already staging. When he saw them, he just winked. It was only when everything was carefully placed on gleaming white plates and trays that Jerry began to relax and started to look around at the other entries, he spoke to Bert in a low voice.

‘No sign of her yet. Perhaps she isn’t coming?’

‘Nah, she’ll be here, anyway that’s what she told my Freda on Thursday.’ said Jerry.

‘And our plan is going to work?’

‘Undoubtedly, we’ve got the best chances of winning by competing against her and not each other. We only needed to know which twelve classes she is entering.’

‘Well, Jasmine was perfectly open about it all to my Freda. I’m looking forward to seeing the look on her face when she sees what she is up against.’ ‘And the herb class, that’s our trump card.’

Jerry and Bert both smiled as they looked at the cluster of entries on a trestle table set apart from the others. Stan, the chief judge and organizer insisted on introducing something new each year. ‘To keep everyone on their toes’ is how he explained it. Sometimes the class had been rather odd, for example one year it had been the most yellow flower. The new class often proved crucial for the championship cup as points counted double. Last year Jasmine had clinched it with ‘the most blooms on an orchid’. After grumblings about the origin of her winning plant, Stan had decided on something a little less controversial; so, he had gone for ‘The best culinary herb growing in a pot’. Bert carefully placed his fine specimen of curly ‘Now, Freda did tell Jasmine about the little

change to the schedule, hasn't she?' asked Bert. leaved parsley in a pristine terracotta pot. Jerry then produced his entry with a flourish - a lush and perfect thyme plant.

'Yes, she swallowed it all - hook, line and sinker. She'll get her surprise when her herb entry is rejected.' replied Jerry with a smirk.

'A bit underhand I suppose, but desperate times call for desperate measures.'

Suddenly Jasmine dashed into the tent, followed by her two boys carrying her entries in a variety of buckets and boxes. Bert monitored Jasmine from the corner of his eye and sidled up to Jerry muttering:

'She's not entering any of the classes she told Freda.'

'That's not fair - lying like that. I calls it cheating.' said Fred as he saw Jasmine place her entry for the 'two aubergines' class alongside only two other entries.

When Stan rang the bell for two minutes remaining all the exhibitors busied themselves, removing stray specks of soil, aligning carrots and rotating turnips. It was time for all the exhibitors to leave but as Jerry stood up from tending his superb thyme plant, he managed to knock it, and it fell to the floor, leaves and blossoms crushed. There was no time to do anything but put it back on the table and hope it might spring back into some sort of shape on its own. The two veterans spent the two anxious hours of judging looking half-heartedly at the other stands and side shows.

Soon enough Bert and Jerry re-entered the tent with hearts pounding, Bert quickly surveyed the tables and counted up the gold rosettes. It was neck and neck, between Jerry, Jasmine and himself. He double checked and it was eight for him, seven for Jerry but eight for Jasmine. The cup would go to the winner of the culinary herb class; he dared not look.

Jerry pressed forward and after uttering a great sigh said.

'I don't believe it.'

For there, resting against Jasmine's herbal entry, was a gold rosette. Her thyme plant towered over the other entries with its fine, healthy leaves and a covering of perfect little pink flowers.

'She's won! How the devil does she do it?' said Jerry staring open-mouthed at the majestic, winning plant.

'Well Jerry, I am loathe to say it', said Bert, 'but I think we both have to admit, hers was the best of thymes, yours was the worst of thymes.'