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Summer Show

Julian Symons

‘What do you think of that little lot?’ From under the bar counter Joe Grayson drew out six shiny broad beans, green and plump, well over a foot long. ‘Too late for entry in the show, but I reckon they’d have taken first prize.’

The little group of farmers round the counter considered the beans solemnly. Francis Quarles looked at the poster behind Grayson’s head, which told him that the Mannington Flower and Produce Summer Show was to be held on the following day, with sideshows, stalls. Punch and Judy, fortune-teller, bowling for a pig, and prizes for local fruit, flowers and vegetables.

The men round the counter agreed that the beans looked good. Joe Grayson split one to reveal eight perfectly shaped beans, green and delicate, an equal distance apart in their soft furry beds.

‘If they’d all have been like that you’d a won it,’ said one

of the farmers. ‘What do you say, Mr Ashley?’

A cadaverous, pale, dark-featured man with deep-set eyes, who had been sitting on a bench at the other end of the room, came up to the counter.

Quarles’s host, a painter named John Tarn, whispered, ‘Here’s the expert.’

‘Shouldn’t look at these by rights, since I’m judging,’ Ashley said. ‘But as you’re not entering them, there’s no harm in it.’ He looked at the open bean, and nodded. Then most delicately, merely using his fingertips, he felt the others. Three he put aside with no comment, but at the fourth he said: ‘Soft in the middle.’

He split the bean. It looked identical with the others, but inside there were only five beans instead of eight. ‘No good,’ Ashley said.

‘You’re a wonder, Mr Ashley,’ said one of the farmers. ‘Have a drink.’

‘Tell me what that means,’ Quarles said to Tarn. ‘I’m baffled.’

‘They judge beans and peas like this. You make an entry of six bean or pea pods, and they should contain exactly the same number of beans or peas in them. Of course, there are other factors too – tenderness, ripeness, and so on – but the number is important. The judge opens just one pod and he tries to find a faulty one, as Ashley did just then.

‘They do say Ashley’s infallible, best judge in this part of the country. Queer chap, spent most of his life travelling round the world. Done all sorts of jobs by his own account, from selling vacuum cleaners and building bridges

to working in a circus. Then settled down in England, made money as a nurseryman, and retired.'

A big red-faced man pushed open the pub door. 'Evening all,' he said. 'Pint of ale, please, landlord. Looks like a fine day for the show tomorrow.'

There was a chorus of 'Evening, Mr Wayne'. Ashley did not join in it. He thumped his glass of beer on the table still half-full, and walked out of the pub. There was an awkward silence for a moment, then everybody went on talking.

When they were on their way home, Tarn enlightened him as to the reason for Ashley's rudeness. 'A bad business. Ashley's daughter, his only child, was more or less engaged to Wayne's son, and he threw her over. Treated her very badly. She took an overdose of sleeping tablets and died. Wayne's son's married and was farming out in Kenya but Ashley and his wife have never forgiven Wayne – he was against the marriage, thought the two weren't suited. The Ashleys are fanatical about it. They've both got religion late in life, belong to some obscure sect, and they regard Wayne more or less as anti-Christ. There was trouble between them yesterday, when Ashley was helping to put up the tents. Wayne's dressing up as the fortune-teller, and there was a scene because he thought he'd been put rather out of the way. Bad to have that kind of thing in a village.'

The sun was shining when Tarn and Quarles entered the large meadow where the show was being held, half an hour before it was due to open. Colonel Comstock, who had organised it all, greeted Tarn with a worried smile. 'Ashley hasn't turned up yet to judge the beans and peas. Rang up and said he'd been unavoidably delayed. Ah, here he is now. That's good.'

Ashley, grim and hollow-eyed, accompanied by a grey-haired woman, was ushered by Colonel Comstock to the door of a large tent. The two of them went in while Comstock stayed at the entrance talking to Quarles and Tarn. 'This your first experience of a country show, Mr Quarles?' Quarles said it was, 'Lucky to get a fine day for it. Hope Ashley's not going to be long, all the judging should have been done this morning.'

Ashley was not long. After a few minutes his head poked out from inside the tent flap. On tables inside the tent the entries of broad beans, peas and other vegetables were arranged on plates. One pod had been opened from each entry in the broad bean and pea section which Ashley was judging, and he curtly indicated entries to which he had given prizes.

Outside the tent there was a shout, and agitated voices. A young man wearing a steward's badge ran in.

'Is there a doctor here? It's the fortune-teller, Mr Wayne.'

'What's the matter with him? Taken ill?' asked Colonel Comstock.

The young man gulped. 'No, Colonel. There's a knife – through his neck.'

The small fortune-teller's tent was next to the big marquee where Ashley had been judging. Wayne lay sprawled face forward across his table, his crystal ball just in front of him. His tall hat had fallen on the ground by his side. A thin shaft of sunlight through a gap near the top of the tent shone on the knife embedded deep in his neck. Quarles put a hand on the body. It was warm.

‘Queer sort of knife,’ said Colonel Comstock. ‘Never seen one with a handle that looked as light as that. And the blade doesn’t even look sharp.’

Quarles touched the edge of the blade. ‘It’s completely blunt. Does that mean anything to you?’

‘Only that tremendous strength must have been needed to drive it deep into his neck like that. How long has he been dead?’

‘Not more than five minutes.’

‘Then that lets Ashley out,’ the Colonel said. ‘He’s the obvious suspect, but he was in the marquee judging. There’s no other way out of it except the entrance where we were standing.’

Quarles’s face was grim as they returned to the marquee. He looked hard at the Ashleys. Mrs Ashley, wild-eyed as her husband, returned his stare. Quarles thoughtfully examined the open bean and pea pods and then walked round the inside of the marquee.

When he had reached a point opposite the fortune-teller’s tent he got onto a chair and pushed at the apparently unbroken canvas. Suddenly a gap appeared where the guy ropes had not been firmly tightened. This gap was just opposite the larger gap in the fortune-teller’s tent. Through it one could see the sprawled body of Wayne.

‘You helped to fix these tents, Mr Ashley,’ Quarles said. ‘You fixed them conveniently for murder.’

‘I don’t know what you mean. You saw me arrive here. Since then I’ve been in this tent. You can all testify that I’ve had no time to do anything but judging – and also that I didn’t leave the tent.’

‘That’s right,’ said Colonel Comstock.

‘Your wife could have opened these beans and peas and put the prize notices on them,’ Quarles said. ‘Because you’re regarded as infallible your decisions wouldn’t be questioned. You’d better open all those pods.’

‘Oh, I say now, I don’t think we could do that.’ The Colonel’s sense of propriety was outraged. ‘Ashley wouldn’t make a mistake.’

‘But his wife might.’ In a tense silence Quarles broke open the pods of the beans given first prize. Two of the six were much inferior to the one on show.

Colonel Comstock’s lips were tightly pursed. He broke open the beans awarded second prize himself and found a pod containing beans large and hard, well past their prime. In one of the pea pods awarded a prize there were discoloured, brownish peas.

‘You never judged these, Ashley,’ Colonel Comstock said harshly.

‘You can think what you like.’ Ashley’s voice was violent. ‘I did what I had to do.’

‘The Lord destroyeth evildoers,’ his wife said suddenly. ‘We are the servants of the Lord.’

‘What was your job in that circus, Ashley?’ Quarles asked.

‘I heard a voice that said, “Kill”,’ Ashley answered his wife.

Tarn was looking puzzled. ‘Whether Ashley judged the entries or not I don’t see how he could have killed Wayne. He never left the tent.’

‘He didn’t need to leave the tent. Yesterday he helped to

fix this marquee and the fortune-teller's tent. You remember Wayne was annoyed about the placing of it. He arranged things so that there was a gap in each tent to the point where Wayne was sitting. Then he threw a knife through the gaps into Wayne's neck. The two of them planned it together. I don't know whether any jury will consider them sane.'

'But to throw a knife in that way would require extraordinary skill.'

'It was a special kind of knife,' Quarles said. 'With a sharp point, a blunt blade, and a specially light handle to ensure balance in the middle. I recognised it as soon as I saw it, and I knew how the murder had been done. It's the kind of knife that's only used in a circus by a professional knife-thrower.'