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From My Garden

by H. E. Bates

Of Loves Rejected

Gardening is a great leveller. One day you are cock-a-hoop because you have that exquisite thing *Achillea Millefolium* in bloom, with its many black, yellow and red Chinese lanterns all glowingly alight, the next you flop hopelessly with, let's say, pink Nerines, which you recently saw growing in a cottage garden with all the vigour and freedom of a row of common marigolds. There are, in fact, plants which love you; and alas!—plants which don't.

Since I have quite a host of plants I have wooed and failed to seduce into any affection for me over many years, I was recently much comforted to come across the following passage in *Aristocrats of the Garden*, by that great plant collector E. H. Wilson: 'The Madonna Lily is the glory and pride of many a cottage garden in the south of England yet often on the "squire's estate" near by neither skill nor care can induce it to happily make itself at home.'

As the Madonna is one of the loves who have been not only constantly 'uncertain, coy and hard to please', but have time and time again jilted me flat, I was still further comforted by a visit to the garden of a very aristocratic lady who, though succeeding with a positive forest of the glorious new hybrid lilies from Oregon, had suffered from the same dismal failure with the Madonna. Bulbs from Holland, bulbs from England, bulbs

from cottage gardens, bulbs from gardens where the lily flourished like horseradish: over the years all have failed me and now, at last, and alas, my courtship with this most seductive of beauties is over.

It is also over with the Belladonna lily, though here the story is slightly different. With this lovely pink treasure, an unseen hand works against me. Silently and mysteriously it plucks the bulbs and steals away, leaving not even a leaf to appear. The same hand filches from me that crocus-like beauty, *Sternbergia lutea*, and that other dwarf charmer, *Erythronium dens-canis*, the dog's-tooth violet. It roams, too, among all gentians, bearing them all away, from *venus* to *sino-ornata*, as it were, in the night.

For many years it played the same low trick with *Cyclamen Neapolitanum*, whom I rated among the more desirable of my floral girl-friends. Summer after summer I would be offered fragrant posies of her by children on the roadsides of mountain valleys in France, Italy and Switzerland. Summer after summer I peered for a single flower on my own plants, only to find a barren graveyard.

But at last the unseen hand relented. A friend conferred on me, as a birthday present, half a dozen positively enormous bulbs and this time I took no chances. Into the dark shade of a gigantic *Clematis montana*, slightly on a slope, went the bulbs:

if this wasn't the perfect place, I told myself, I would never find one. It was. The winter rosettes of marbled leaves, with their accompaniment of curious corkscrew stalks of seed, are today almost as great a joy as the leafless autumn masses of soft pink flowers, which bloom by the hundred for several weeks.

The same mean hand haunted a friend and his *Iris Stylosa*. In despair he decided the lady was for burning. I arrived just in time to save her, taking away three-quarters of a 20ft row for myself and begging my friend to try again. A quarter of a century later he is still trying to induce a handful of blossoms from his plants while I, richly blessed for once, gather nearly a thousand blooms every winter. He, however, is compensated by camellias which grow like gooseberry bushes, a pleasure I am denied.

There are other plants with which I am not even on speaking terms. For I insist that some should be talked to, if necessary with great severity. Like children and women, they are actuated by jealousy, as I once discovered when, after growing begonias for years with considerable success, I decided to mix them with gloxinias. The gloxinias flaunted themselves with proud velvet splendour. The begonias at once fell out with me and ever since our relationship has grown painfully distant.

There are also plants I intensely dislike, often for no logical reason. I greatly dislike the odour and sight of the common

sunflower; and I recoil coldly from *Hypericum calycinum*, guilty of false pretences, I feel, in its other name of *Rose of Sharon*.

Going back for a moment to the loves I love but cannot coax into ardent health, I must now confess to an increasing sadness about a family to which belong some of the most beautiful of all climbers, namely clematis. Over the past ten years I have planted some 20 of them; less than half have survived. The rest have succumbed to the dreaded clematis wilt, for which there is no known cure. Like a black palsy it strikes at plants apparently in the prime of their vigour, so that they wither before the morning sun. Formerly it was maintained that the wilt was caused by the grafting of hybrids on wild stock, but now all clematis are propagated from cuttings and still, sadly, wilt persists. Hurry, you horticultural witch doctors, before we clematis lovers have to say yet another melancholy farewell to yet another beauty.

Finally, I know full well that someone will write to me and explain with solemn logic that the reason I cannot grow camellias, gentians and certain lilies is not because an evil hand roams and filches across my plot of earth, but simply because I have too much lime in my soil. Exactly: I am aware of that; but I remain unconvinced and unconverted. Gardening, like love, is a funny thing; and doesn't always yield to analysis.

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