

## **“Tea with the Colonel”**

**By Derrick Yeomans**

The house came into view at the end of the drive, Victorian, eighteen sixty, he guessed, and large, needing many hands to run it. Perhaps the Colonel had his own private army. He parked the van halfway round the turning circle and clambered out. The bell clanged in the deeper reaches of the house. He waited then rang again. Suddenly, the door opened to the sound of timber dragging on a tiled floor.

“Colonel Johnson?”

“Who are you?”

“Harris, sir. Baiter Harris?”

There was no response.

“From the council?” he said. “Pest control?”

The Colonel looked confused for a moment, then blinked rapidly.

“Yes, yes, I’d forgotten. Come in, man. Come in. Getting a bit forgetful these days. I’ve got the kettle on. I expect you’d like a cup.”

The house was silent – with no sign of the private army. He led the way down a cold, gloomy hall, brightened only by a row of sepia photographs on the wall. One or two were of unsmiling women buttoned-up in Victorian dress but most of them were of the regiment, showing the Colonel progressing through various stages of his career. The women looked to be the more fearsome. Warm and well-lit, the kitchen was far more welcoming. An old-fashioned black-leaded grate took up most of one wall and he realised that when the Colonel said he had the kettle “on”, that was exactly what he meant. It was probably never off. Black with use, it steamed from a solid hotplate to the side of the hearth. The Colonel poked at the coals with the tip of an assegai that looked as if it might have been wrested from the hands of its original owner on some far-distant battlefield.

This was obviously where he spent most of his day. A sleeping tabby cat, looking almost as old as the Colonel, shared an armchair with a newspaper and a tobacco pouch. A small radio stood on the table but most of the space was taken up by an ancient, dark brown enamel teapot covered by, of all things, a knitted teacosy. He hadn’t seen one of those for years. Certainly Kath had never used one. At home it was tea bags in a mug. Here, the Colonel shovelled leaves from a caddy into the pot, carefully poured on the boiling water, replaced the lid, covered it with the cosy and ushered him into a chair. After what seemed like an age, he poured out two mugs of tea almost the same colour as the pot, added a dash of milk that made no difference whatsoever and pushed the sugar bowl towards him.

“Help yourself, Harris.”

“Thank you very much, sir. No sugar.”

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The Colonel drained his mug in one gulp and smacked his lips. “Another? Plenty more in the pot.”

He put his mug down and cleared his throat the best he could. “No, that’s fine, sir. Tends to catch on the way down.”

He couldn’t have said anything guaranteed to give more pleasure. The Colonel positively beamed at him. “That’s it. That’s it. My own blend, y’know. Always liked a good strong brew.”

“About the infestation, sir?”

Again there was that slight look of confusion before the Colonel shook his head.

“No idea what they are. Cleaning woman found them in the old attic bedroom.” He rubbed his knee and stretched his legs out to get the maximum benefit from the fire. “Don’t get up there much these days. Top of the back stairs, slightly east of north. You pop up and sort ‘em out, that’s a good chap.”

Carrying his case of potions and poisons, he climbed the stairs to the attic, humming a little tune. Probably a few cockroaches, he thought. He’d be clocking off early tonight. He could take Kath to the Cat and Fiddle. She’d like that. Still humming, he opened the bedroom door on the top landing, stepped forward and came face to face with a tiger.

The tune died on his lips. Perhaps he wouldn’t be getting home early tonight – if at all.

Reality and reason came flooding back. No sane man kept a tiger in the attic. Or anywhere else for that matter. He reached out and switched on the light.

Originally, the room was probably for the servants, and he had a mental picture, gleaned from all the repeats of *Upstairs Downstairs*, of housemaids waking up at five in the morning and rushing downstairs to clean the grate and put the kettle on before the rest of the household rose at a more civilised time. It was probably the same kettle. Now, the room was full of junk. The one-time ferocious predator lay sprawled across the bed; a discarded rug, it glared at him through ruthless glass eyes, its teeth bared in a silent snarl as it jealously guarded two lampshades and a battered suitcase. Books were stacked on top of an old gramophone; a scarred cricket bat stood propped against a steamer trunk, a tennis racquet minus its strings lay on top. On a rickety cane table stood a matching chine ewer and basin, probably last used by his imaginary Victorian housemaids. At a later date, attempts had been made to install some modern plumbing and post-war servants had the luxury of the washbasin in the corner. He was surrounded by everything except bugs. He stamped his foot.

They came scurrying from under the bed. Twenty five altogether. He counted again to make sure. Twenty five. And not cockroaches. They were reddish-brown in colour, and bigger. Much, much bigger. They rattled round to face him, in line, twenty five abreast.

So! You want a fight, do you?

A man who had just faced a tiger was not going to be scared by a few beetles, however large. He stepped gingerly around them and distributed piles of pellets in a distinctive pattern.

“Your last meal. Have a good night, fellas.” He patted the tiger’s head as he passed. “You, too, Tigger.”

The following day, fortified by more tea and a stale digestive biscuit the Colonel found in the pantry, he climbed up to the attic with a dustpan and brush. In the daylight, the tiger seemed to have lost its snarl and regarded him with benign tranquillity as a moth flew out of its ear and landed on the bedpost. The bait had gone. They’d taken all of it. But there were no bodies. Pushing back his baseball cap and scratching his balding head, he checked his disposition plan. There was nothing for it but to stamp his foot and once again the charged out from under the bed and clacked back into line, each one very much alive.

He stepped smartly backwards but, as if partnering him in some crazy Square Dance, from the end of the line, one of them moved forwards, as big and ugly as a toad. For the first time in his life, he felt threatened by one of his potential victims. Several weapons were available but the cricket bat was nearest. He grabbed it by the handle, lunged forward and banged it down where the beetle should have been. It had side-stepped his swipe by dancing on its legs to the accompaniment of its clacking carapace, but the attempt on the life of one of their number awoke the others to the danger they faced from this large, boot-clad exterminator.

He was clever. He needed watching.

He took one step forward and stamped his foot again but, instead of scurrying away in panic, two of them moved steadily towards him, waving their antennae. They stopped when they reached the toe of his boot. While he was staring at them, mesmerised, one clambered on top of the other, clamped its legs around his shin, and squeezed. The bat was still his only weapon. He banged away but only succeeded in hitting his knee. In a last attempt to do his job, he dragged the rug off the bed and threw it down, covering and crushing all twenty five of them. The tiger glared at him, justifiably angered by this improper and undignified use of its person. To his horror it lifted its shoulders. To his greater horror, he realised it was the beetles doing the lifting. Out they charged from under the moth-eaten corpse and headed back for cover under the bed. The Colonel shouted up from the bottom of the stairs.

“Everything under control, m’boy?”

“OK, Colonel. Just a matter of time.”

“I’ve got the kettle on.”

Oh Christ, not again.

“Lovely.”

Seated at the kitchen table, the Colonel poured out a brew that dripped from the spout like black treacle and was almost the same colour and consistency. He looked so pleased with himself it seemed a pity to upset him, but he thought he had better tell him the bad news.

“I think we’ve a problem upstairs, sir. It’s the bait. They’ve taken it all right. Trouble is, they’ve come back for more.”

Using his teaspoon, the Colonel tapped a tattoo on the table top.

“Not taking it, eh? Just like the North Africa campaign. Before El Alamein y’know. Some idiots suggested we send for Lawrence of Arabia. I told ‘em. Lawrence! No. Not Lawrence. They’ll never accept him as bait.” Once again, the blank look appeared on his face. “Slice of cake, Harris?”

Before he had a chance to reply, the Colonel disappeared into the pantry, allowing him just enough time to tip most of his tea into a potted plant, before he returned with two plates of fruit cake.

“Only shop cake, I’m afraid. Rations aren’t up to much these days. Not since the Memsahib caught the boat to Blighty. Still, can’t face the enemy on an empty stomach. What we need is a new battle plan. And what you need” he said, looking at the empty mug, “is some more tea.”

Ignoring his protests, the Colonel refilled the mug with more of the sticky black liquid, now stewed to perfection.

“Drink up, Harris. Thirsty work – forming a strategy.”

To the Colonel’s delight, he helped himself to three heaped spoonfuls of sugar and stirred briskly before the spoon had a chance to dissolve. It still seemed to strip the lining from his throat but he blamed the choking fit on a few cake crumbs going down the wrong way.

“What we really need,” he said when he could speak again, “is a flame-thrower.”

The Colonel regarded him steadily for a moment, then tapped the side of his nose knowingly.

“It just so happens – But mums the word. No names, no pack drill, eh, lad.”

The cellar was damp with a strong musty smell of drains.

“Will it work, Colonel?”

“Should do, Harris. Old Foggarty used it in the garden. Cleared the woods in no time. Runs on petrol.”

“Is that so, sir?” He whistled through his teeth. “Whatever happened to Old Foggarty? Haven’t seen him for ages.”

“He retired last year.” The Colonel said, and there was a slight pause. “Bonfire night. He said the equipment was faulty but I told him it was all right in the war.” He looked quite dejected for a moment but soon brightened. “I’ve got a twelve-bore too. Is that any good?”

“Er – I’ve never fired one, sir.”

“No? Oh well. I suppose it might be considered surplus to requirement. After all, they’re only insects. Can’t you just bash them over the head with a piece of wood or something?”

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“I’ve tried that. They’re pretty nippy, sir. By the time I’ve knocked out one, the others’ll be back under the floorboards. They’re big enough to attack a human,” he said, rubbing his sore shin. “Especially if they gang up.”

The Colonel was looking at the flame-thrower again with a glint in his eye.

“Perhaps – if we’re careful - ”

Baiter shook his head.

“No, I’m afraid there’s only one thing for it. I’m calling in an expert.”

At noon the following day, the air was full of sunshine and insects of the airborne persuasion, sending the Professor, dressed for the occasion in bee-keeper’s hat and veil, scampering about the Colonel’s garden with delight.

“Lovely day for the Lepidoptera,” he said, “But that’s not why I’m here, is it?”

He took Baiter’s hand and pumped it up and down with great enthusiasm.

“Battye. From the Insectarium,” he added. “Big, you say, Mr Harris?”

His hand was in danger of becoming detached. The Professor might look like a rare specimen of stick-insect but he had a grip that could match the beetles’.

“Huge.” He said. “And getting bigger by the day. Nasty, too. I’ve not seen the like of these before.”

“Ah! There are still some mysteries left in the world, Mr Harris, and it looks like you’ve discovered one of them. We could call it Baitium Insectia – or the Baiter Beetle, perhaps, in honour of your good self.”

“You’d better see ‘em first.”

Inside, after a pre-battle cup of tea which wiped the smile from the Professor’s face, the Colonel took command.

“Me first, I think. Then you, Harris. Anything I leave you can stamp on with those boots of yours.”

Baiter nodded. “They’re not called Beetle Crushers for nothing, sir.”

An apologetic cough sounded from under the Professor’s veil.

“I don’t want to put a damper on things but is there any chance we could save a few? Alive, I mean. I’m afraid I’m more of a collector than an exterminator and these sound like endangered species.”

Like a gladiator in the Coliseum, he held up a large net. Only, instead of the traditional trident, he carried a fishing rod.

The Colonel was in his element now, barking out orders.

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“No shirkers here, Battye. You bring up the rear. And if there do happen to be any survivors, they’re all yours.”

He led the way up the stairs, confidently enough, but arrived outside the bedroom door, obviously out of breath.

“Slight change of plan,” he said between gasps. “Never move in to attack off balance. You’re the expert, Battye. In you go. Do a recky, man! I’ll bring up the rear with the heavy artillery. You go too, Harris. Watch his back.”

It was all he could do not to snap to attention and salute the old boy.

“Very good, sir!”

Before the Professor had time to object, he pushed open the door and thrust him inside, stomping in after him in his beetle-crushers. The Professor, not being an expert gladiator, tripped over his fishing rod and stumbled to his knees with a thud that brought the beetles marching out to investigate. It also alerted the Colonel.

“What’s happening in there, Harris?”

Taken y surprise by the Professor’s sudden disappearance from his view, he stepped smartly backwards, crushing the Colonel’s foot with his custom-made boots, probably making mincemeat of his toes. In what could only be described as a knee-jerk reaction, the Colonel’s finger tightened on the trigger. The resulting explosion brought down the bedroom ceiling, covering everything in plaster, grit and the black accumulated dust of the ages. They waited for it to settle. Eventually, the Colonel raised his head and spat out a piece of plaster.

“Did we get any, Harris?”

“I think you missed them, Colonel.” He said, counting twenty five pulsating plaster-covered mounds trailing back to the safety of the bed.

A thin peevish voice emanated from under the bee-keeper’s veil. “They’re grey. No use at all. I distinctly remember you saying they were a reddish-brown, Mr Harris.”

Some people were never satisfied.

“They’re brown all right, Prof. The Colonel’s dusted them with the ceiling.”

“It was dicky.” The Colonel muttered, surveying the devastation caused by the twelve-bore. “Must’ve been a dicky ceiling.” He brightened considerably. “Never mind, Harris. The other barrel’s still loaded. Let’s let ‘em have it. No guts, no glory, eh, m’boy.”

He felt the colour draining from his face as the Colonel raised the shotgun and made ready to fire again.

“No!”

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The Colonel gave him a stare that, a one time, probably had an entire regiment quaking in their boots. He wondered if they still shot people for mutiny these days and staged a dramatic fit of coughing.

“The thing is, sir, what with the dust and everything – What about a nice cup of tea, first?”

The Colonel clapped him on the shoulder.

“Good man. Excellent idea. Supplies for the troops. I’ll see what I can forage downstairs.”

The Professor waited until the Colonel’s footsteps could be heard in the hall before pushing back his veil. “Phew! We’ve got to stop him. Can’t you do something with that gun, Mr Harris?”

“I could shoot the Colonel.”

They moved outside to the dust-free air of the landing and were discussing other, less drastic ideas when the Colonel returned with a tray. It was weighted down with the enormous teapot, a jug of milk, mugs, spoons and a plate of fondant fancies. Clearly, he intended to make a party of the occasion.

“Here you are, men.” He said, pouring out three mugs of his special brew. “I’ve been having a think about these beetles and – Damn! Forgot the sugar!”

Before anyone could say anything, he was making his way down the stairs again. The Professor looked miserably at his mug of thick, dark brown, sludge.

“I don’t want to offend him, Mr Harris, but - ”

“Down the plughole?”

The Professor opened the bedroom door, took one look inside and closed it again quickly. “They’re everywhere! And – and they’ve brought reinforcements. There’s hundreds of the little – I can’t do it, Mr Harris!”

Baiter clapped him on the shoulder. “Courage man. In and out. Fast as we can. It’s either them or the Colonel’s tea. Ready?”

The Professor took a deep breath and swallowed hard. “I’m – I’m right behind you, Mr Harris. Right behind you.”

Guessing this meant he was meant to lead the way, Baiter stood up, flung back the bedroom door and headed straight for the washbasin, trying to ignore the movement at his feet. He was almost there when a shove in the small of his back told him that when the Professor said he was right behind him, he meant it. Later, over a large scotch in the Cat and Fiddle he was to tell Kath the tiger leapt up and bit him. The truth was, he caught his foot between the snarling jaws, stumbled forwards and

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spilt almost all of the contents of his mug on the floor. There was an ominous hissing sound. Beneath his feet, five of the beetles lay flat on their backs, their tiny legs pointing upwards, stiff and lifeless. Steam, and a pungent smell of burning beetle, rose up from the carpet.

“Still want ‘em alive, Prof?”

The endangered species was going to remain endangered. The Professor shouldered his fishing rod.

“To hell with that. Let’s get them, Mr Harris.”

He nodded, strode out on to the landing and called down to the hall below.

“Colonel! We’re going to need a bigger teapot!”