

Second Attempt – *Frank Collymore*

Mrs Rinfer gave the flowers in the blue bowl a final little pat and stepped back to survey the effect. There now, that was delightful!

Crossing the room she surveyed her reflection in the mirror, she turned sideways. Holding herself in like that she didn't look too plump; that is, not for a widow of forty-three. And *he* would soon be here. Twenty-four years ago! Why, it seemed only like yesterday. And then, with a sudden little pang of anxiety, she wondered, 'Will he have changed much?' Twenty-four years was a long time, after all. He'd been a rather good-looking young man. He would be nearly fifty now. She hoped he hadn't gone bald: that would be worse than if he'd put on too much weight.

Footsteps on the verandah made her swing around. It was, it was James.

'James!' She almost tripped on the rug in her anxiety to reach him, to make him feel he was welcome.

'How are you, Mu-Muriel?' He came forward shyly and grasped her outstretched hand.

She fussed about him delightedly. 'It's grand to see you again.'

He wasn't bald thank God.

He smiled. She'd always liked his smile. She offered him a cocktail and watched him as he took one from the tray and fumble for a sandwich.. How clumsy he is, she thought, the dear old thing.

'When did you arrive, Muriel?' He had got the sandwich at last.

'Last Friday.'

'And how long are you here for, Muriel?'

Really! How could she answer him when everything depended on him?

She looked pensively at the mixture in her glass. 'I don't know. You see, Jack left me none too well off, and I'm rather thinking of going to live with Nita ... that's my sister-in-law. But I just had to come back to Barbados if only for a few weeks before settling down. It's not much fun living in Trinidad nowadays.'

She gave a little sign then smiled at him and raised her glass:

'Good luck!'

'Good luck!'

After his third cocktail he admired the flowers. 'Gardening's my hobby, you know,' he said shyly.

'Really?'

'Yes.'

He could see her now, slim and graceful, a little flushed as she clasped a profusion of white coralita to her bosom. He'd known her only a short while and he'd liked her, but it wasn't until that afternoon as she stood there clasping the wayward strands of coralita to her that he was overwhelmed by love for her.

She was thinking, as they both toyed with their glasses, dear James, what would it have been like had she married him instead? At least he would have been more

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considerate than Jack. Jack, loud-voiced, brutal in his lack of sensibility. And his women...his awful women....

‘And you never married, James?’

‘Me?’ He uttered a short nervous laugh. ‘No, my dear. Marriage isn’t for everyone.’

‘Rubbish.’

‘Not for me at any rate.’

Through the thick lenses the eyes looked larger and sadder than ever.

‘You’ll think me an awful simpleton, Muriel; but there’s been nothing, absolutely nothing.’

‘But why ... why?’

He looked away. She could feel that the eyes were brimming with tears. Oh, she felt mean, mean. And at the same time profoundly touched.

She leaned over and placed a hand on his arm.

‘I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to be inquisitive. Forgive me?’

He was about to pat the hand reassuringly, but the cocktail glass was in the way. He made a muffled noise of acknowledgement.

She mustn’t let him think *she* had escaped.

‘My married life wasn’t exactly a success, you know.’

He turned quickly and she was startled and thrilled at the solicitude of his regard.

‘My dear ... I mean ... I’m sorry. I I was never quite sure.’

‘Ah well, we won’t discuss it.’

They helped themselves to the cocktails. Silence had fallen upon them. He sipped his slowly, meditatively. He had loved her so. God, how he had loved her! He remembered that night. The last night he had seen her. How he had staked everything on it! What a ghastly failure it had been! That night when overcoming his cursed shyness he had ... He shuddered at the memory of it.

He looked at his watch. ‘I think’

‘James dear, will you answer me one question?’

‘Certainly ... if I can.’

‘I was wondering ... I’ve often wondered ... why did you never come back after that night?’

He was silent. She too had remembered that awful night. He didn’t answer.

‘Won’t you tell me? Was it anything I did or said?’

‘You! Of course not! The fault was mine. I have never forgiven myself. For I insulted you. I ...I outraged your...your essential innocence.’ He hung his head. She felt that the time had come to speak to him sharply.

‘Now, James, we’ve got to get this thing straight. Would you mind if we ran through the events of that night?’

He made no response.

‘Very well. I will. Stop me if I go wrong. You took me to the movies. It was Valentino in *The Four Horsemen*. Afterwards you suggested taking me for a drive. You drove me out to that quaint little old church by the sea....’

‘St Basil.’

‘St Basil. And we parked there for a while. You were particularly silent that night. Silent and ill at ease. Then suddenly you...you drove home again. And then you drove off without as much as a goodnight to me. Do you realise this is the first time I’ve seen you since?’

So she was going to compel him to say what he’d done? Very well he would.

‘You know Muriel, I was very inexperienced. You see, I...I respected womanhood. All womanhood. I... I worshipped you. Will you believe me when I tell you I’d sooner have cut off my right hand than to have done what I did?’

Her eyes were wide open with amazement. Whatever did the man mean?

‘That night I’d decided I must tell you how much I loved you. I had it all planned out. I thought I’d ask you at some suitable moment to look up at the stars; then I thought I’d ... I’d hold your hand and say: “They’re beautiful, but not as beautiful as you” ... or something like that. So I did as I’d intended. And you looked up at the stars. And then... and then something went wrong inside me. I couldn’t say anything. I ... I just wanted to hold your beautiful body close to me. I threw my arms around you ...’

It had all come back to her ‘Don’t ... don’t say any more. I remember.’

But he couldn’t stop now. He must make his confession. ‘You broke away from me with a cry of disgust. I shall never forget that cry. It has haunted me. The cry of outraged virtue...’ He closed his eyes. He could see her still, shrinking back from him, her eyes filled with unspeakable loathing.

He was afraid to look at her now after all these years.

But she said nothing and he turned to her. She was sobbing.

‘Muriel, Muriel, can you forgive me?’

She looked up at him, And then he realised she wasn’t sobbing. She was shaking.....shaking with suppressed laughter!

He couldn’t believe his eyes.

‘What are you laughing at?’

He was hurt, bitterly, bitterly hurt.

‘James, James, you poor darling...So that’s what it was...that’s what it was....if only I’d known! But, you see, it was onlyonly....’

The sight of the wounded expression of the sad grey eyes sobered her partially.

‘...only a boil!’

‘A boil?’

‘Yes. You see, I had a large boil and it was so painful ...right on my, under my arm, and when you threw your arms round me ... my outraged virtue ... oh, oh, oh!’ She was off again.

He rose to his feet.

‘I must be going.’

‘No. No. Don’t go.’ She looked up at him. ‘Don’t you see ... the irony of it, James? You and your dear old-fashioned notions of love, and me with my sense of maiden

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delicacy not wanting to let you know that your goddess suffered from anything so vulgar as a boil?’

A boil! The utter mockery of those wasted years, he thought!

He turned and walked slowly through the door.

Her heart was numb. She would laugh and laugh when he was safe out of hearing. She threw herself on the divan. She had plotted and planned to get him for herself since Jack died. Even when Jack was alive. Suddenly she realised it all. She loved him. Had always loved him. And...and....

Like a mad woman she rushed at the verandah. He was still there.

He turned to her and said

‘Look up at the stars, darling.’

‘You ...you don’t have to tell me they’re not half so beautiful as I am... now’

‘No, perhaps not. But there’s one thing I want to ask you.’

‘Yes... yes... ?’

‘You haven’t got any boils now...anywhere, have you, sweet?’