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It Happened in Durban . . .

I had been out to dinner and was walking back to my hotel rather late one night. I stopped to buy a paper, the Sunday paper already on sale at 2 a. m., and the thought came to me to have a coffee somewhere. I asked the little Indian paper-boy if there was a cafe open, and he told me of one, open all night, not far off.

Just as I was about to set off in the direction indicated, a voice at my elbow said: «Excuse me, but I shouldn't go there if I were you». I turned and saw a young man, about my height, decently dressed. «It's a bit tough,» he went on, «and it isn't safe at this time. There's another one which is okay, a bit further on, in West Street — over there!» He pointed. I thanked him, and then he told me he had just missed his last 'bus, had been on night shift, and now would have to wait till the first workman's train at four-thirty. As he had nothing to do, he offered to show me the way.

Well, it was natural to invite him to have a coffee with me — I was alone, had only been 3 days in Durban, and would be glad of his company . . . besides, he looked a decent enough kid, clean and well dressed, though the little moustache — (I am allergic to moustaches) — put me off slightly. —

So he walked me to this Cafe, almost deserted, but glaring with fluorescent light. There was a juke box, too. It looked respectable, harmless. We sat at a table and I ordered and we talked.

Soon he began to tell me about himself, how he had been through the University, got a degree in science, couldn't get a well-paid job, so had taken up work on the railways; that he earned good money, working overtime.

He told me about his father, a well-known artist, who had cut him off, didn't want to know anything about him. And of his mother who was so beautiful and who had died when he was eight.

He told me that he would never marry; that he was terribly lonely; that he needed a friend, older than himself; that he was very affectionate and that once he gave his friendship it was for life.

And he told me about the flat in the suburbs he had rented, furnished. Such a bargain, only 20 dollars a month. It was really a flat for two, with two bedrooms, a sitting room with a grand piano, a radiogram. Yes, he loved music and loved to play the piano; Tschaikovsky was his favourite composer. He had wonderful records, too. He told me many things, and he showed me his big hands and the callouses on the palms, caused by his work on the railways. He made me feel how hard and rough they were, and so our hands touched. For a second he pressed my fingers. Was he, perhaps? I wondered.

He gave me his telephone number, asked me to ring him, to come up and see his flat. And now, he must wait around till it was time to catch the early train to the suburb where he lived.

His name was Charles.

Charles! And he wasn't bad looking; he had that matt-brown skin I

have always loved. He was well-built, too, strong. His jacket was expensive Harris tweed, his shirt white and spotless. Anyway, I'd risk it.

So I asked him if he'd care to walk me back to my hotel, to which he agreed. Perhaps he would come up for a while and rest? (My hotel is ultra-respectable, and perhaps it was unwise, but his diffidence in accepting the invitation re-assured me).

Anyway, up he came, and I found a bottle of brandy, and we drank and smoked. Charles sitting on the edge of my bed, looking like a good, rather shy, little boy. And I teased him about his moustache, and together we shaved it off with my electric shaver. «I promise you», he told me, «as long as I live, I'll never grow one again».

Without the moustache, he reminded me of a profile on a Greek coin: the curly, sensual mouth, the short nose, the long dark lashes . . . After all, the boy was beautiful.

He asked me for a cigarette, and taking two from the packet, put both in his mouth and lit them before giving me one,

«Is there anything else you want», I asked, lightly sarcastic.

«No, nothing», he replied, «thank you, except . . . «and he lowered his voice almost to a whisper, « . . . a kiss, perhaps?»

In a moment we were in each others arms, and that soft, beautiful, curly mouth was mine — all mine.

And soon it was late, and he had to go, and after all he had better have a room in town. My hotel? Too risky. We both agreed on that. He would be back tomorrow morning. But in the meantime he had no money — could I lend him 2 dollars till Monday? He knew where he could get a bed — not easy at that hour — for that price. And it was rather cold, could he borrow my overcoat, bring it back in the morning? Perhaps I didn't believe him? Well then, he would leave his worker's card. There it was, on the dressing-table; without that card he wouldn't be able to work on Monday. Wasn't that security enough?

And another kiss, and just one more kiss. «And now, I am going to bed», said Charles, «And I am going to dream of you a little . . .» And then the last firm kiss.

Now, in bed alone, I thought of Charles, my Charles, and I longed for him, and I was convinced I'd never see him again, or, of course, the 2 dollars, or the overcoat. At least, I tried to convince myself, so I shouldn't be horribly disappointed next day when he didn't turn up.

Directly I woke up I knew there was something different about the day ahead . . . Ah, yes, Charles. Or had I dreamed it? No, there was the Worker's Card, still on the dressing-table. Charles was coming this morning — or, perhaps, not coming?

I ordered breakfast and ate it, without appetite; then I went back to bed once more, and was dozing off when suddenly there was a rap at the door and — there was Charles. He looked gay, cheerful, clean and refreshed. «Come on now, get dressed!» he cried, «We're going out — its a lovely day». «I want to have a bath first,» I told him, after we had kissed. «All right,» he replied, «Come on then, I'll run the bath for you». When the water was running he returned and started to pull off my pyjamas, then he picked me up and carried me in his strong arms to

the bathroom. When he had gone, now, I thought, is his chance to steal my watch, wallet, or anything. I thought this, but felt a little ashamed of myself. After all, he *had* come back! Perhaps he really does care for me? I shouted to him to come, and soap my back, which he did, and then proceeded to give me some massage. When I got back in the room I found him gazing out of the window. Together we stood, looking out over the palm trees and the milky blue water of the harbour; and we talked of the ships lying at anchor, and where we would like to go.

Then we ordered drinks, as it was by now after 10 o'clock. «Opening hours» in Durban. Over double gin-and-limes we discussed the future. «It'll be wonderful to find you there when I come home in the evenings», he told me. He drew a picture of our life together. He would be playing the piano, there would be a soft light, I would relax in an easy chair. Tschaikovsky — or perhaps Debussy. Or we would lie together and listen to the radiogram. And later he would cook me a delicious supper — oh, yes, he could cook, too! And then . . . well he had already telephoned the landlady to put sheets on the other bed — «Not that we shall need two beds», he explained, «but just so's the neighbours won't talk.»

It all sounded idyllic, and I found myself wondering if, after all, I mightn't get a job in Durban — settle down here — with my Charles. And we would spend wonderful holidays together in Europe . . . Was *this* the love I had been looking for? Could fate be so kind to me?

We joked and played the fool and made love and ordered more drinks — and we never went out after all. And then he had to go the station and sign a paper or something. He would take my pen — could he? And he would be right back. We would go together to his flat and then lie on the beach in the afternoon, and I would stop the night, and next day would move in. Oh, but there was no booze in the house — at least only half a bottle of brandy. He knew where he could get a bottle, even on Sunday. Could he have just fifteen shillings? I gave it to him, and we kissed, and he left . . . and I have never seen him since.

This happened two weeks ago, but last week I got talking to a journalist in the Mayfair Bar. I told him a little of what had happened between Charles and me, mentioning no names. «Was his name Charles he asked, «and did he say he was the son of a famous artist?» I nodded. «How did you guess?»

«Well, he's tried that on before», was the reply, «One of these days he'll go too far, and his name will be splashed across the front page of the «Daily News». Now, he's only a beginner, a petty blackmailer given the chance. But you wait . . . » «He could have taken my watch», I expostulated, «Money, my camera . . . except for the coat and my pen and the fews pounds he ,borrowed', he never touched a thing.»

«Well,» said my friend, «If he does come back, he'll come back for more».

But to date Charles has not come back. Durban is not a large city, yet I have never seen him since.

I can forget the petty theft, but the affection, the tenderness, the kisses . . . No, that I cannot forget. Charles! M. M. W.