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TOBAGO

by

Orlando Gibbons

When the evening settled over New York, it did not kill the heat. All day long, the sun had beaten down on the desert of stone that is New York, had settled in the thick hide of the skyscrapers, in the pavement, in every nook and hole. Now that the sun had vanished in a red explosion, the skyscrapers gave back the heat radiating it into the streets.

Jimmy had just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang. As he lifted it, he had an uneasy feeling—Les, Fred and a student from the West were supposed to meet him at 'Toni's' for a long, leisurely dinner, just the right thing after an exasperating day with his music pupils.

'It's me, Jimmy, Les. It's happened again. Marian blew a fuse. Don't be mad but I can't make it and Fred is simply dead. He has to get up at six to tramp to New Jersey to look over some stupid factory . . .'

'Oh, never mind . . .' Lonely dinner in the kitchen . . . left overs from yesterday, a little music, a drink all by himself . . .

'What did Marian do?'

'The usual. She insisted that Elmena Keller, you know in the T.V. version of 'Sahara', wear some phony stuff left over from 'Arabian Nights.' Really none of my business, I only look after the men. No cracks, please. Well, it didn't fit, the Keller girl cried, Marian shouted and I was called in. I'll spend a nice evening sweating over costumes.'

'What happened to Mr. X., the fellow who was supposed to tag along?'

'Tough luck, Jim. I told him all about you, your music, your piano, the concert James Shelton is going to give next month. But he wouldn't meet you without us.'

'I don't blame him. Don't worry. Call me when the Marian tempest has blown over. I'm tired. It's just as well.'

It wasn't just as well, and Jimmy knew it. When he had finished his meal, the apartment seemed so still it made him nervous. From somewhere a feeling of being deserted crept over him, a drive to go out, to lose himself in a crowd, to see people, to talk to them, to be swallowed by the immense, surging, searching multitudes. He knew this urge to adventure and disaster which visited him often now that he had broken with Henry who had gone for good, leaving behind a few books, a few records and a memory that already glossed over all the bad things . . . Henry never wrote from Virginia where Mother and money smothered him, but that was all to the better. They wouldn't make him give up the bottle, Jim thought, mechanically opening the closet to look at his suits; they would make it worse, these poor, stupid, rich killers who didn't know that Henry hated everyone at home . . . No, he must stop. Now there was no doubt any longer, there was only the question which pair of pants, what shirt he would wear . . . Because Jim Shelton, age 29, slim, small, gifted and driven by powers he didn't understand, had decided to go out . . . By now, he even had an idea whereto—none of

the old places with their tired, malicious people who were bored by their own malice. No, the address Henry had given him with a few earthy words of encouragement: the new place in Harlem, a Negro pianist who spoke French, and a lot of educated Negro college boys, and they are so much more honest and there is not that competitiveness—Henry had used the word—that competitiveness which makes the other places so unbearable . . .

In the last moment, Jimmy took the light sportscoat because he found he couldn't put the wallet into his pants, they had holes in the pockets. And it looked so much better, the English linen jacket Henry had given him last year, it went well with his brown hair.

The busride to Harlem took much longer than he thought. But then, up in the vastness of Harlem, he couldn't find the place. No wonder, he discovered, Henry had given him a wrong address. He sauntered along the dirty brownstone houses where large Negro families sat, talking softly, the big, bosomy mothers shrieking once in a while to the kids who played hide-and-seek among the garbage pails. 125th Street, Harlem's main artery, was loud, neonlit, steamy, its stores locked by heavy iron grilles that looked like the jaws of a shark.

THE BROWN BOMBER, the lights twitched, BAR. MUSIC. The Red turned a poisonous Green, the Green turned a wounding Red . . . No, it hadn't been 'The Brown Bomber' that time . . .

Jimmy remembered that somewhere here, years ago, he and Henry had strolled into a dim, small café owned by a man called Nimble who weighed 300 pounds, strikingly resembled an Orang Utan and owned half of Harlem. Nimble had stood the boys two drinks and told Jimmy that he liked white boys who had 'a mind of their own'. But what was the name of that place? As Jim wiped the sweat from his forehead, wishing he had left his jacket at home, he tried to remember. — After the neon glare of 125th., the narrow alley appeared murky and menacing. Jim began to walk faster. The people here seemed to throw suspicious glances at him. He became self-conscious—the only white person walking through the street reserved for the black people. A neon sign, half out of order, blinked . . . MBEZI Bar.

Jimmy almost stumbled in. It was not only cool, it was pleasantly icy. The lights had been turned so dim, Jimmy hardly recognized the bartender behind the enormous bar. The man didn't move a muscle.

'Nice'n cool here, son', he declared in the singsong tone of the South.' Take your time. It's fierce hot out there.'

Jimmy began to relax. The sweating stopped. His eyes recognized the photos of boxers, wrestlers, football players behind the bar. There were only three people, two elderly negroes and another, younger one at the far end his face in a magazine. The bartender, Jim decided, was friendly. Perhaps he could ask him for the 'Tobago'? But when he had received his Bourbon-and-Soda, he didn't dare ask. The bartender knew. He knew that Jimmy had blundered in, he was waiting for the question, the stuttering, the lowered voice, the false man-to-man tone. But Jim couldn't start. It had always been nerve-wrecking for him to

make the beginning, to utter inanities about the weather, even though a heatwave like this asked for inane conversation.

Jimmy turned. From the juke box came a Westindian song, jaunty, with rhythmical embellishments Jimmy liked. As he kept his eye on the huge machine, the boy, the magazine under his arm, straightened up and looked at Jimmy. A boxer, Jim thought, the nose even flatter than is usual for some colored types, the ears a bit damaged. But the eyes held an expression that didn't fit a boxer. They looked, intelligent and a little sad, out of an ugly, slightly scarred face. The boy—he was much shorter than Jim had expected—walked by and gave him a smile.

'You like this?' he asked.

'Very much. What is it?' Jimmy asked. By now he knew—it was from a Westindian Musical, 'Steel Band'.

'Steel Band'. A little shortened around the edges.' The boy lingered, then returned to the bar. All of a sudden, Jimmy's throat felt dry. His drink was nearly finished. The boy had turned his face so that the scar was on the other side. Now he whispered to the bartender. No, Jim couldn't ask for the 'Tobago', he just couldn't. As he paid, leaving a generous tip, the young boxer—Jimmy decided he must be a boxer—kept glancing at him.

Outside, the heat slapped his face with a vengeance, and when Jim found himself again on 125th Street, he saw the two blond men in tight white suits. They were glancing at a slip of paper, their hair shining very bright under the lantern. They turned left; Jim followed at a distance. They turned right into a dead-end street, and there it shouted, in unbroken letters: TOBAGO.

After the first drinks, Jimmy had all intentions of leaving soon. The bar was crowded, all shades of color, even two Javanese in exotic garments, the boys three deep at the bar, the pianist tinkling pleasantly and the cold air soothing his face. As worries and tensions slowly flowed out of Jimmy, he noticed faces he knew, faces he didn't want to talk to, and then he saw the boy on the stool, one removed from his, smiling, the white teeth like piano keys in the mahogany-brown face.

'Your first time, here, stranger?' the boy asked. The elderly, skinny man in between them got up, a bit outraged, and left. The boy moved one over.

'Yes', Jimmy answered. 'My first time. Seems nice.'

'My brother plays over there'. A smooth brown arm pointed toward the pianist. 'You like music? I wish I could play like this. But I only dance.'

Jim inquired about the dancing school. The boy—his name was Howard, he said—sat close to him now. One leg was right under Jimmy's and it seemed as though the leg expressed very simply that Howard found him interesting. Nothing was said—Howard didn't push, Jim didn't withdraw. As Jimmy bought Howard a drink, and Howard bought him one, the world appeared to be a friendlier place. Jim had decided to ignore the noise, the laughter, the others around him, when he saw opposite him the scarred face with the broad nose and the sad eyes. The

boxer must have followed him in here. In comparison to Howard, the boxer appeared really ebony. The boxer smiled at Jim but Howard kept asking questions and Jim forgot about the sad, ugly face on the other side. —

Howard's clothes, Jim noticed, were cleaner than his shoes, and once in a while he darted a glance around as though expecting someone. When Jim offered him a light, the brown fingers closed over his. They were thick and calloused — strange for someone as elegant as Howard. Howard explained to Jim his one ambition—to dance in a musical, on Broadway. It turned one o'clock and Jim began to feel a little unsure. Should he go home? He had a nice evening, he had met a nice fellow, he could try to see him again, and he hadn't thought of Henry too often. Or was he passing up a chance again?

'... at Aline Marshall's school,' Howard finished. 'That's where I had my first chance.'

'Aline Marchand', Jimmy said mechanically without realizing he had corrected Howard. Howard smiled and put his hand on Jim's knee.

'Two blocks', Howard whispered, 'I'm ashamed of the basement but it's my first apartment.' For a moment he turned around, his glance casually resting on a thick-set man who had smiled at Jim before and whom Jim had ignored, and then on the boxer. The boxer—this Jimmy caught just in time—glared back, Howard quickly averted his eyes and then, before really knowing, Jim was out in the street.

A small breeze struggled through the murky lane. Over there, Jimmy recognized the blue light of the subway station. Now was the time to go home, get Howard's address, wait . . .

'Watch your steps', Howard whispered taking Jimmy's arm. Soon, Jim found himself in a dimly lit basement.

Howard didn't turn on the light. A timid bluish bulb shone over a gigantic bed, and a dresser. It was a narrow, ugly room. Howard seemed to listen. Now Jim heard it too, someone was approaching, a heavy tread, someone came closer, Howard's fist held him. The ugly man, whose face Howard had searched in the bar, stood there.

«Don't shout, white boy, or I'll knock your teeth in. My brother is under eighteen. You know what the cops would do to you? Come on, your money.' Hands went into his pockets, his wallet, another pair took his watch.

'Give him back the wallet,' the ugly man said. Jimmy only felt that this wasn't real, and that perhaps he wouldn't come out alive.

'You're lucky' Howard said in a hiss. 'You're lucky that we like you, see? If you weren't nice, my brother would knock you cold. Don't you know any better? You are old enough.'

'Shut up', said the other man and Howard returned the wallet. 'Take off that jacket,' the man said. 'You got little money there, boy, mustn't come up here with little money, makes people mad.' He slipped off the jacket so swiftly, Jimmy hardly felt it. 'I like that jacket,' the man declared without much emotion, 'and now beat it, quick. Don't you try to

look around, and don't you go back to the bar. You've had it. Now get going.'

The steps from the basement seemed black. Then he was in the street, the subway sign was still blinking its light-blue signal and he had no money and no watch and he was so disgusted with himself he could have cried. Enough of Henry's sleeping pills at home to kill two . . . He fingered in his pocket. He had been left exactly 25 Cents . . . The courtesy of gangsters . . . They were all gangsters, black and white and he could only blame himself, never again would he talk to . . .

Jim stopped at a corner. Here was 125th Street, loud and bright and he mustn't betray anything, just walk toward the subway and be happy that he was alive, that he hadn't been beaten like Stewart whom they had kept at the hospital for three months . . . To the left, a sign blinked TOBAGO. Damn Tobago, damn Harlem, damn everyone here, they were pushing the white people around now . . . He wiped his forehead, his neck, he was moist all over . . .

'Hello,' said a strange voice. 'What's the matter?'

Jimmy wheeled around. The young boxer with the sad, ugly face stood near by, staring at him. The boxer's glance held him. 'Did they take your jacket?'

Jim only nodded. 'I thought so,' the boxer said angrily. 'Those crooks. Come, you need a drink, a real one. Oh, come now,' he went on as Jimmy shook his head, 'I know they took your money. We've been watching them for days now . . . No, I'm no cop, don't worry, I just hate to see . . .'

He didn't finish the sentence. Jim had started walking with him. His head, all of a sudden, was over-clear, but his muscles seemed to give way, once in a while. 'My name is Tom,' the boy next to him said, steering him by the elbow toward a small place, 'Tom McGrath. Come in now and relax and don't worry.'

Jim glanced around. This was the place he'd been with Henry he remembered, and here, that enormous man, that must be Nimble . . .

As Nimble slowly approached, the boxer leaned closer. 'I'm on the level, really,' he said softly. 'What's your name?'

Jimmy told him quickly and then Nimble sat down with them, heaving his elephantine masses on a stool with surprising agility.

'They robbed Jimmy here,' Tom explained. 'They took his money, his watch and a linen jacket.'

'How did you know?' Jim asked watching Nimble's eyes narrowing.

'You mean Jack and Hines?' Nimble asked and as Tom nodded, he got up. 'You just stay here, boy, and don't you pay no mind to anyone. We'll get those bastards tonight. They ruin every decent person up here. Just sit tight. Tom McGrath, I hold you responsible for this boy here. An artist, right? You were up here at my place some two years ago, with your boy friend . . . »'

Jim nodded. That the big man remembered after all these months. 'But I have no . . .' Nimble just waved him aside and went out of the place.

A drink stood before Jimmy, a tall one. As he tasted it slowly, he recognized the double Scotch. The fog, the mist of despair seemed to lift . . . he was almost back in reality . . . My God, his concert. If they had beaten him up . . .

'I'll pay you back, Tom,' Jim declared with an effort. He fumbled with his wallet. 'Here, write it down, my name and address . . .'

Tom just stared at him. He had about the saddest eyes Jim had ever seen. And from his scarred, irregular face there came to Jim something almost intangible, something tender and honest. Why, this boy liked him, it was unbelievable.

'You pay my drink next time we see each other?' And as Jim only nodded, suddenly overcome by a sort of shiver, Tom grasped his hand in his own enormous brown ones. From the touch, courage seemed to flow back into Jimmy.

Tom seemed to guess his thoughts. 'They've worked this act once too often now, Jack and that con man, Hines. Jack isn't under eighteen, by the way, he's just an ordinary hustler. But Nimble hates his guts, and we know where they operate. They are stupid amateurs, they don't even bother changing their operating field. Just wait, Jim, just wait a while. I know how you feel now. I followed you, to the 'Tobago'. Gee, I wish I had warned you but I was late.'

'I'll never forget it,' Jim answered. 'I'm a bit shaky now, but I'll make up for it somehow. You're the . . .'

The door flew open. A burly dark policeman followed Nimble who held a jacket over his arm, a big smile spread over his enormous features.

'Jim, this is Sergeant Atherton. We are mighty obliged to you.' The policeman nodded gravely. 'Is this your jacket and this your watch?'

'The watch has a J. C. inside the cover,' Jim said. 'Here . . .'

He opened it quickly.

Nimble and the sergeant peered in. 'What did I tell you?' Nimble shouted in triumph, 'we've got them. Now don't you worry, boy, you won't have to show up in Court, we got 'em this time.' Nimble hung the jacket over Jim's arm, giving him an hard squeeze. 'We found enough stuff in that little basement to send'em away for a long, long time. Only your money' . . . he shrugged his enormous shoulders. 'They hid it somewhere. How much was it?'

'Oh, fifteen Dollars or so,' Jimmy said and then he shook Sergeant Atherton's paw and before he knew it, he had his jacket on and Tom was walking him to a taxi stand. 'No subway for you tonight,' Tom declared, slipping five Dollars into Jim's pocket. 'I'll ride with you. I live downtown myself, in the village, Hudson Street.'

The taxi slowly veered through the deserted streets of Harlem. A slight caressing breeze had begun to stir. A touch of fall was in the air, a touch of cool, promising autumn.

'When will you come to dinner, Tom?' Jim asked, cautiously reaching for the warm, hard fingers next to him. The fingers answered back.

'Any time this week,' Tom said. 'I'm alone. My friend . . . well that's another story but he's gone home. He couldn't take this hard town.'

'Tomorrow then,' Jim declared as the trees of Central Park seemed to close over the taxi. It appeared as though Tom and he were the only people awake at this small hour of the morning. 'Tomorrow at seven, for dinner'

He felt happy and light and it had all gone too fast . . . It was good to have a jacket now that it had turned almost chilly.

'What is home, Tom?'

'You won't believe it, but I'm from Tobago, British West Indies, a little island north of Trinidad. I must show you the paintings I did of Tobago. I hope you'll like them.

'I'm sure I will,' Jim said. 'I like everything about Tobago.'

OUR VALUES

As far as *our values* are concerned, our sense of what the things of this life are really worth, I am sure that we overestimate masculine strength and beauty, and underestimate ourselves. In one sense our homosexual idealism is like that of a boy of ten, hero-worshipping the strength and beauty and glamor of a big boy in the upper forms. Which do you really believe in, the virtue of a handsome lad you may pick up, or the virtue of a Goethe, a Mozart, a Botticelli or Titian? It is not an either/or proposition. It is a question of where you rank these things in your scale of values. I think we overestimate fantastically the virtue of the husky, healthy, nonentities we fall for. Physically, they are the symbols of our ideal. Spiritually, inwardly, in their selves, they are more likely to be mental and moral sobs. And I am writing this from the midst of a nation which worships youth more extravagantly than it ever seems to have been worshipped before.

You and I are not kids any more. And yet, in our spirits we can certainly remain vigorous and young almost until we draw our dying breath. It is the physical sort of man who grows hopelessly old. He lives by and for his body, and his spirit is a shriveled, atrophied little thing. His whole self sickens as his body sickens. His entire being grows weak and flaccid as his body does. His body is damn near all he is. When that fails him he has nothing left.

The value of the handsome lad or young man to you and me is just this: he arouses and brings forth something from within ourselves. The beauty resides in us, rather than in him. He is valuable in that he brings out the creative vision from within ourselves. But do not make the mistake of believing that the handsome young man *is* our vision, that he embodies our dream and our ideal. He is the movie screen. We are the projector and the film.

So take these young fellows for what they are worth. Give them their fair deal, yes. Reciprocity is always in order. But do not give them credit for possessing the beauty, the meaning, which you yourself lend to them. And do not underestimate yourself, for what you see in them is really you, it is the product of the union of your own spirit and your own soul.

L. A., USA (from a letter).