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Jamie

A dozen men lounged around the super-elegant, super-modern apartment, all talking in high-pitched voices as loudly as they could. No one appeared to listen to anyone else, unless someone had a particularly scandalous or juicy item of gossip to relate about someone who was not present. Then the attention was general. Bernard Bradshaw-Boddington was having his usual Sunday night «at home».

Bernard was a retired elderly actor, retired not so much because of his elderliness, but because he never had been a very good actor, and it was years since he had had one of his small walk-on parts. However, he was wealthy, and he loved to entertain. He loved to surround himself with younger members of the stage and radio, of television and films. He loved to talk of first nights almost as far back as the dawn of the century when he had been brilliant, a time when few of his guests had been born, and which certainly none of them could remember. He entertained well and generously, and his chosen company was usually as elegant and as sophisticated as his apartment. He always knew the right people, and if one were ambitious, not too scrupulous, and even less particular as to the means by which one achieves ambition, Bernard could always perform the introduction which would lead to the audition which often had its prologue in another room.

Lots of people visited Bernard, and his invitations were always at a premium. Lots of people were prepared to go to any lengths to achieve the introduction which would enable them to go to even further lengths to attain an unfulfilled objective. Tonight's gathering was particularly representative. Everyone was striving to be, and almost succeeding in being brilliant.

In the midst of the general clamour the doorbell rang. Someone opened the door and two more men arrived.

«My dear Richard, how nice!» said Bernard waving a fat many-ringed hand as the first of the new arrivals, a good-looking young man in his middle twenties entered the room. Then he saw the second man. «My God!» he shrilled in a startled falsetto. «Whatever have you got there? Is it a tramp?»

The first man, Richard Robinson-Rollings, was just as sartorially splendid as anyone else in the room, but his companion was not. A little younger than Richard, but taller, and amazingly broad in the chest and shoulders, he wore a blue roll-necked sweater and old brown corduroy trousers tucked into half-length sea boots. His face, handsome as a Viking's, was dark tanned beneath a wild mass of fair curly hair, bleached by sun and wind. His eyes were blue as the sea, which from his dress, one would judge to be his natural environment. He stood there with a friendly half-smile, not quite sure of himself, but not obviously ill at ease in surroundings that surely were unfamiliar.

«My dear», someone else squeaked. «Wherever did you find him? He's gorgeous.»

«His name is Jamie», Richard announced pompously. «I picked him

up in the docks yesterday. He's sweet, and he's all mine. You may only look at him. Not to touch.»

«The docks?» An incredulous voice came from somewhere. «But how far from your usual hunting ground, Richard! What's wrong with Waterloo Road these days?»

Bernard had risen. He greeted his unexpected guest with a languid hand and a vapid smile. «My dear, how nice of you to come!»

«It was verra nice of Richard to bring me,» Jamie answered in a slow Scottish drawl as he took the outstretched hand.

Bernard fell back in his chair; the smile disappeared as pain distorted his face. «Oh my dear, I'm sure you've broken a bone,» he wailed. «But how strong he is, my dears,» he informed his guests. «Like a bear, my dears, a bear. But no one has given him a drink. Attend to him someone. What do you drink, you brutal man? We have everything, but everything.» —

«I think I'd like a wee drop of beer, if it's nae trouble,» Jamie replied with a cheerful grin. «And I'm sorry I hurt your hand.»

«Beer!» Bernard was shocked. «We don't drink beer. No one drinks beer outside pot houses. We have vodka, slivovitz, pernod, champagne, everything but beer. No dear, you must have something else.»

«Then perhaps a wee drop of whisky, if ye'll be so kind.»

«Oh dear, I suppose we have whisky. Yes, we have whisky but you are difficult. Give him some whisky someone. Now I suppose you want to sit down. Is he clean, Richard?»

«Of course he's clean», Richard announced. Then smugly he added: «I washed him all over myself — twice. I'm sure he'd never been bathed by anyone else before. He laughed like a drain.»

«I know.» Bernard sounded a little petulant. «But those trousers, and my chairs! Perhaps you'd better sit on this dark one. I wonder if I should put something on it.»

«I know I'm nae dressed for calling,» Jamie apologised, «but I don't think I'll leave any marks.» He sat down and took a strong smelling pipe from a pocket.

«Oh please,» begged Bernard. «Not that! Do smoke a cigarette.»

He presented a carved box of black-papered, silk-tipped cigarettes. Jamie took one, looked at it dubiously, smelled it, and put it back.

«I think I'd rather have my pipe,» was all he said, stuffing it full of tobacco.

«But how completely uninhibited!» said a tall pale young man who had not taken his eyes off Jamie since he had come in. «Richard, you must tell us all about him, but everything.»

«Oh, he's a sailor and he comes from the Western Hebrides. He's a Stornowegian. I met him in a pub. I had no watch and I asked him the time.»

«How naive can you be? You haven't had yet another watch stolen, have you, Richard?» someone asked, not without a touch of malice.

Richard ignored the interruption. «He was just leaving, as he'd run out of money. I bought him some beer and invited him back to the flat. He came running.»

«Ye were verra kind,» Jamie confirmed, puffing vast clouds of smoke in the air to Bernard's dismay. Bernard had obtained an ivory fan and was using it vigorously.

«He's so primitive,» Richard continued as though Jamie were not there. «He's what the Victorians would call a «real child of nature», but of course, full of Freudian complexes, just as the Victorians were.»

«What's that ye say?» Jamie broke in. He smiled. «I wouldna know what those things were.»

«I know exactly what you mean, Richard», said the tall pale young man whose name was Arthur. «I've been in the Western Isles myself, and on some of them you find nothing but men and sheep, but nothing. And they *are* Freudian, they really *are*, and they don't know it, so it's all part of their charm. And they're so without guilt complexes at the same time. Why do I never meet someone like this in London?»

«My dear Arthur,» Bernard broke in. «You don't find Hebrideans in the cheaper Turkish baths. How could you expect to? You'll have to change your beat.»

«He won't admit his homosexuality,» Richard continued. «He says he does things to oblige. I will admit he obliges very well.»

«That isn't quite the truth,» Jamie said slowly. «I do things because I like them. Lads or lassies, it doesna matter, if I like them.»

«You see,» Richard argued. «That's where his simplicity covers his Freudianism. He does not know what he is. He's ambidextrous. I'm positive he'd be far happier if he'd make up his mind one way or the other and be like the rest of us.»

«But I'm not unhappy,» Jamie insisted, «and if I were like the rest of ye here, I'd be making up my mind one way only, and not the other. After all, Richard boy, when ye're hungry for food it doesna matter what ye put in your stomach, so long as it satisfies your hunger. And when ye're lonely, and ye've got strong inside urges, it doesna matter which way ye satisfy those urges. At least that's the way we think about it on ships, and we don't worry about those complexes ye spoke about. I don't think a man needs complexes to keep him happy.»

«There, Richard!» Bernard was almost ecstatic. «You've found yourself a real philosopher and I'm sure he'll be much better for you than that psychiatrist you're always rushing off to, but I shudder to think how much it might cost you. How much have you paid him for your weekend's entertainment?»

Jamie looked somewhat puzzled as he poured out a third whisky. «I don't understand,» he said. «He hasna paid me anything. I wouldna want to accept any money from any man, for that would make me a prostitute I'm thinking, and I wouldna like to be that. Richard was verra kind to me and I enjoyed his hospitality. What more could I want?»

«Well, that's something», Arthur volunteered, addressing Richard. «You've satisfied his urges, and he admits he's not fussy how he satisfies them, and it's not costing you a penny.»

«You mustn't be naughty, Arthur», Bernard said reprovingly. «There comes a time when you have to pay for everything, but everything, and you will too if you ever have any money. But of course you, Arthur, will

never have any money and you're getting on, and as you haven't had a part for months even on T.V., it won't be long before you too will be one of those horrible things Jamie said he didn't want to be, though a lot of us wouldn't be surprised if you weren't one already if one can believe only a quarter of what one hears.»

Arthur looked annoyed but said nothing, and Bernard turned to Jamie.

«Let's stop talking about complexes,» he said. «Jamie doesn't understand them anyhow. Now tell me, dear, you must have fabulous times in foreign ports. What do you do?»

«Oh, I like to see the towns, and we go to the bars, and I like to go to the opera, and on Sundays to the kirk.»

«Opera! The kirk! My God!» someone ejaculated from the background.

«Yes. When I have any money I like to go to the opera. I've been to lots of foreign operas, including the Chinese opera in Hong Kong, but that wasna like our opera a bit. And on the Sabbath I like to find a kirk with a good choir because I'm verra fond of music.»

«Oh yes, we're all fond of music,» someone else announced impatiently, «but what do you do for sex?»

«Sex? It's there, everywhere, if ye have the money to pay for it. But I don't care for prostitution. It lacks sincerity, prostitution.»

«Take note of that, Arthur», said Bernard. «Prostitution lacks sincerity. How delicious!»

Arthur's face flushed. «I'm sure I don't know what you mean.»

Bernard ignored him and turned back to Jamie. «But at sea, my dear, you must have some thrilling times. What do you do there, for love, and romance?»

«Romance?» Jamie looked puzzled. «I don't know romance. I have my friend at sea, but it's nae romantic. It just satisfies.»

«Personally I think I'll join the merchant navy tomorrow,» said a dark youth who had been drinking steadily but saying little. «I'll join a squalid old tramp steamer and bring a little romance into the sailors' dreary lives.»

«You wouldna like life on a tramp steamer, laddy,» Jamie informed him seriously. «It's no a place for a fairy-boy. It's a verra rough life.»

«A fairy-boy!» cried the youth with shrill indignation. «Did you hear what he called me?»

«Aye. That's what we call boys like you, or Richard, or Arthur,» Jamie answered quite innocently. «Oh, I don't want to hurt your feelings, man. I like to be with you, but you wouldna like life on a tramp with us.»

«Give me strength!» the dark youth demanded of no one in particular.

«Aye, ye'd need strength, for it's a hard life at sea. It's a life only for men.»

«Richard, did you bring this creature here to insult us?» Arthur demanded.

«I don't mean to insult ye.» Jamie was very contrite, and his embarrassment was clear in his simple honest face. «I'm only telling

ye what is the truth. Ye must not be afraid of the truth. If ye're one thing, then you are that, and not something else. Ye may be strong, or ye may be weak, one or the other. Ye're either a man, or not a man. Ye can't pretend to be something that ye're not. Ye've got to accept being what ye are.»

«He's so right,» said Bernard piously. «Now take me. I've never pretended to be something I'm not. I've never been afraid of the truth.»

«Yes, but ye're an old man,» Jamie informed him. «When ye get old ye learn wisdom.»

Bernard's mouth fell open. He choked and almost lost his dentures. He looked horrified. «An old man, me?» he shrieked.

«Why yes,» said Jamie, quite without guile. «Ye must be nearly as old as my grandfather.»

«Old as his grandfather!» Bernard was now almost hysterical. — «Richard, how *dare* you bring people here to insult me. How *dare* you pick up people in the docks and bring them to my house? How *can* you know these people who drink my whisky and smoke their filthy pipes in my drawing room, all the time being so *rude* to my *invited* guests. Take him away, or give him some money and send him away. Somebody bring me my smelling salts.»

«Old as his grandfather, Bernard,» said Arthur smugly. «You do seem to be just a teeny bit afraid of the truth, dear.»

Bernard looked as though he did not know whether to faint or blow up in the air. Jamie looked confused, knowing he had said the wrong thing but not knowing how to put it right. The others, particularly Arthur, were enjoying the drama immensely. It would be something to talk about in the bars and clubs next day.

«I'm sure I'm very sorry I spoke,» Jamie apologised. «I've enjoyed being entertained by you, Bernard, and I did not want to hurt your feelings. I spoke only what I believed to be the truth and you can't deny the truth, even when ye are an old man pretending to be young.»

«Go away. Go away all of you or I shall go mad. Richard, take this horrible savage away and never speak to me again. Never again. You've betrayed me.» Bernard picked up a vase and threw it at Jamie's head, but his aim was bad and it hit the dark youth who had wanted to be a sailor. The youth screamed, lost his balance, and fell on top of the cocktail cabinet which crashed on the floor, and the floor and the tinkling of broken glass was mixed with the hysterical screaming of Bernard and the dark youth.

Suddenly Jamie found himself outside with Richard and Arthur. It was pleasant and cool in the clear night air away from the crowded smoke-filled room. Jamie breathed deeply and filled his lungs with air.

«I did not mean to upset your friends and break up the party,» he apologised, and his words were sincere. «I'm very very sorry, Richard.»

«You're an animal,» said Richard indignantly. «I'm sorry I ever met you. You're just a common lout and Bernard will never forgive me. I'm not going to drive you back to the docks. Here's two shillings. You can take a bus.»

«I don't want your money, Richard boy,» Jamie informed him. «I'll

walk back to the docks. I told ye I was sorry and I meant it.»

«You're an ignorant monster, and I never want to see you again.» Richard turned round and flounced back into the house, leaving Jamie alone with Arthur. Jamie turned as though to follow Richard, but thought better of it and walked slowly down the drive. Arthur followed him.

«But Jamie, you were so right in what you said to Bernard. He really is a broken down old bag but won't admit it, and Richard uses him just for what he can get out of him. Of course, you were a teeny bit rude to me too, but I forgive you for that.» He linked his arm through Jamie's. «You can't walk back to the docks; it's all of ten miles. Why don't you come to my place and go back in the morning?»

Jamie disengaged his arm. «It's very kind of ye, and I don't want to be rude to anyone. But I'll not come back with ye. I can walk to the docks in less than three hours. I like to walk. Please forgive me for what I've done and ask Richard to forgive me too, for he's a nice lad in his own house and I could be verra fond of him.»

Arthur tried again. «It's so nice to meet a real man like you, Jamie, and so rare, with all these beastly queers and their silly parties and their nasty backbiting gossip. Why, I could tell you things about Richard and Bernard and all of them that you just would not believe. Please come back with me.»

Arthur turned on what he believed to be his most winning smile.

But Jamie was already striding down the road.

Stornoway.

The Sandpit

My work took me, in the summer of 1926, to a beautiful small city in Western New England. There I took a room at a small hotel, the owner, Jacob Lane, being an old friend of one of my friends and a prominent business man in the city. The hotel was managed by Paul Ray, a dark, curly-headed young man of quiet demeanor, distant manner, and large, but in outline babylike, figure. In three months of residence there, during which time my own friendly manner scarcely succeeded in establishing even acquaintance with Ray, I learned that he was supporting an invalid mother and a crippled sister, as well as himself, on a meagre salary for which he worked seven days a week and often twenty hours a day. Lane, who came to the place only to sleep, to collect his profits, and to play with his pet ferrets, was in manner always somewhat contemptuous of Ray and often cruelly impatient about Ray's work. He was about forty-eight years old, a hook-nosed man with calculating eyes and a trick of pulling his mouth sideways derisively when he talked or laughed. His speech was often vulgar and mean.

Yet he had a wry sense of humor and, accepting me because of our mutual friend, he often made himself very agreeable to me. Having no car at the time, I was glad to join him on Sunday trips or on jaunts to roadhouses at night. He was well-informed, he conversed well, and he