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Troopship Diverted

by «Chick» Weston

The «Cape Times» of the previous day lay scattered on the floor but the front page headlines stood out sharply . . . «SUEZ POSITION WORSENS . . . TROOPSHIP DIVERTED.»

Dawn had just broken and already there was much activity in and around the neat Cape Dutch style farmhouse. In the main bedroom Errol Mason stretched himself lazily, looked at his watch, grunted, and threw back the bed clothes. The nip in the air brought goosepimples to his flesh, and he rubbed his hands vigorously over his body and through his close blonde hair. He examined himself in the full length mirror of the old fashioned wardrobe. «Hm», he thought to himself, «I'm still in good trim», surveying his broad shoulders, strong chest and flat stomach . . . a good body above legs that one would expect from a seasoned rugger player. He stroked his chin and suddenly realized that he would have to shave and bathe quickly, as there was much work to be done if he was to take off the day to go into town on Friday. He glanced down at the «Cape Times», took in the headlines again as he walked into the bathroom, and let the water run into the bath.

At 27 he led a very quiet and secluded life, absorbed in running the wine farm left to him by his father a few years ago. He never gave any serious thought to marriage and, when questioned by some of his friends, replied that there was plenty of time. In his own heart, however, he knew that he would never marry. At the university he had mixed with all the students but he had never formed even a temporary attachment with any of the girls, preferring the company of the few lads with whom on free weekends he would go camping and climbing. He had played rugby enthusiastically for some years and still played tennis and swam regularly. His best friend had recently left for the copper mines of Northern Rhodesia, and he felt deeply the end of their «private agreement» and the companionship which they had enjoyed . . . hence the impulse to go into Capetown to meet the troopship and invite some of the visiting troops for a day to the farm.

Two days later, as he drove into Capetown, and particularly as he neared the dock area, he had misgivings . . . surely the troops would prefer to go sightseeing and visiting bars or shows . . . what would he do with them when he had shown them the farm?

There were already a large number of cars at the docks for the Capetonians were keen to open their homes and their hearts to their unexpected visitors, so he drove slowly around, and finally parked some distance away. Instead of walking towards the ship, he wandered townwards and stopped near the statue of Van Riebeek at the foot of Adderley Street to watch those troops who were just starting to head for the city itself. They were in small groups, all chatting merrily and none so much as gave him a glance. Four of them came towards him and one of them stopped to look at the statue. The others paused for a moment and one called out . . . «Come on, Robbie, you're wasting good drinking time.» «No», answered the one addressed as Robbie, «I'm not starting to drink at this time of the morning . . . you fellows go along and I'll meet you somewhere later, perhaps.» The others strode off without a further word, except for a brief «Suit yourself».

Errol mowed towards the soldier who was still reading the inscription on the monument, and who looked up as he approached.

«Excuse me but I overheard that conversation, and . . . er . . . well . . . the fact is I came to offer some hospitality to you chaps, if I could and I thought perhaps . . . that is, I could show you around, but I must get back to my wine farm by lunchtime . . . it's only half an hour's drive away and I would bring you back this evening if you would care to spend the day with me».

Now Robbie's face could be described as a sculptor's inspiration that did not quite come off, for though his features were regular, his nose was a shade too sharp and his mouth when shut gave an impression of surliness. When he looked at Errol, however, he smiled, and any sculptor's defects were forgiven by the row of even white teeth and a mischievous light in his eyes as he said, «Gee, thanks, that would be grand . . . I would far prefer a day in the country to sightseeing and drinking. It is very nice of you to ask me . . . by the way, my name is Robbie Dexter».

Errol introduced himself and then they strode back to his car. He was thrilled that Robbie showed such delight at spending a day at the farm instead of passing his time ashore going from bar to bar and generally painting the town red. He drove around for an hour, pointing out many places of interest and then headed for home through Constantia Nek. It was in the beauty of the Cape Countryside that Robbie showed the keenest interest and waxed enthusiastic about the scenery . . . he seemed to know a great deal about botany for he referred to many of the trees and flowers by their correct names, sometimes even using their Latin titles.

Finally, they turned off the main road and, passing through the tall stone pillars of the gate leading to the farm, drove up the driveway, fringed with ancient oaktrees, to the house. Tea was served in Errol's little study by an old Cape Malay girl, who was told to prepare lunch for two.

«Tell me», asked Errol, «your knowledge of botany has me guessing as to your «Civvie Street» occupation . . . do you live in the country?»

«In a way, yes. My parents were divorced when I was small. I was brought up by my mother on her parents' farm in the Lake District but, when mother remarried, we went to live in a holiday resort in the south of England where my stepfather — my dad died ten years ago — owns and runs a large hotel. I still long to live in the country but until I was called up for my National Service, I was under age and worked for my stepfather, keeping the books and running the wine-cellars. Oh Brother, I wish someone would tell the old devil that Queen Victoria is dead . . . he is so old-fashioned he makes my life a misery, not that he means badly, but he just cannot realise we live in the middle of the twentieth century.»

«Run the wine-cellars!! Then you will be interested in seeing the farm, the presses, etc.» said Errol enthusiastically.

«Of course».

«Come on then, Robbie, let's go. By the way, it will be wet and rather muddy outside after last night's heavy rain so we had better change into some old clothes. You are about my size and I'll find you some things to wear.»

Errol changed into a leather jerkin and blue jeans, and handed Robbie a polo-necked jersey and a pair of worn corduroys.

The rest of the morning was spent in inspecting the plant and equipment; after lunch they went to see the vineyards and, with so many interests in

common found the time just flew by. Conversation flowed freely and they found a real bond of friendship growing between them.

After tea Errol showed Robbie some of the historical records of the farm which had been bought by his maternal great-grandfather, an immigrant from the Rhine Valley of Germany, and which had been added to by each succeeding generation. Then they decided to get changed and Errol suggested that a hot bath would be welcome, to which Robbie readily agreed for after the hot sea-water baths of the troopship, it would be nice to relax in a hot fresh water bath again.

They stripped and Errol noticed that Robbie's body was far more muscular than he had expected. «Weight-lifting? Gymnastics?» he asked. «No, wrestling» grinned Robbie, «Care to take me on?» «Sure, cocky!», saying which Errol grabbed at Robbie's waist, only to find a powerful pair of arms round his shoulders, a twist and he was on his knees firmly held in a half-nelson. He knew a little about wrestling, and managed to slipe loose, applying a body-scissors under which Robbie squirmed, but his experience got him out of trouble and so for about ten minutes they tussled, neither really getting the upper hand, Robbie's extra experience countering Errol's weight advantage. Then they suddenly found themselves in something of a knot and, glancing at each other, burst out laughing and relaxed. Robbie lay back and closed his eyes, with Errol's head resting on his heaving chest. Errol moved his face, looked up and his eyes met Robbie's. No word was spoken but Errol slowly moved forward and his lips brushed Robbie's. In a sudden moment they drew closer and so, in the fast fading twilight, they found contentment, and the answer to a question that neither had dared to ask.

Later, having bathed and changed, they sat in the study on a carpet in front of the fire, for rain was falling and it was wet outside. With the barriers down they spoke of themselves freely and Errol wanted to know what Robbie planned to do now that his National Service was nearly over.

«Well, I am over 21 now, so I can please myself. I want to get away from the hotel trade — everlastingly bowing and scraping before snooty guests who consider themselves gods and goddesses. I should like to live in the country, but I am not really trained for anything».

«Good!» said Errol, «That settles it!»

«What settles what? What are you driving at?»

«Why, my worthy Robbie, can you not guess? This farm is too much work for one person. I need an assistant — eventually a partner. I am an obstinate person and so my assistant will have to be able to stand up to me . . . er, my ribs still ache; I need someone who loves the country and won't want to go running into town every five minutes. I will run the farm and you will run the office, helping me and learning the outside work at the same time. In brief, will you come and join me? I think we have in one day discovered that we have much to offer each other.»

Robbie's only reply was a swift embrace of acceptance, and a smile that spoke of deep inner happiness. They fell to discussing plans, and after supper Robbie wrote a long airmail letter to his mother explaining his future plans, knowing that the letter would reach England long before the troopship.

It was late before they left the farm and Errol drove swiftly into town as all troops had to be on board a minute before midnight. This time he drove right to the foot of the gangway, then jumping out — their real farewells had already

been said before they reached town — Robbie sprang to attention, saluted, and said with a cheeky grin: «Thank you for a most memorable and instructive day, Mr. Mason» and vanished up the gangway into the bowels of the great liner.

As Errol slowly drove away, his heart at once gloriously happy and sad, he started reckoning how many weeks would elapse before he would again be speeding to the docks; this time to meet and not to part with his newly found happiness.

As he drove through town his eye noticed a «Cape Times» placard which read «ANOTHER TROOPSHIP DIVERTED». He smiled as he drove off into the night . . . maybe this next ship would bring someone else the same sort of unexpected happiness.

Something About Sailors

There is a popular belief among shoresiders that all sailors, sexually, are «fair game». Why — I do not know, and I am a sailor. Certainly, when we go into a bar in uniform, there is a much greater interest shown in us, by both men and women, than when we wear ordinary civilian dress. If in civilian dress, once our occupation becomes known, the atmosphere immediately becomes much more friendly, much more intimate. When I was a soldier, I was less aware of public interest in people in public places, and when I was a civilian, no one ever offered me a bed for the night without preliminaries nearly so many times as they do when I wear my sailor's rig.

Is it the uniform that does it? Lots of people see glamour in a uniform, and collect uniformed personnel as others collect postage stamps. It is not, I think, entirely the uniform, because as I have already said, invitations are freely forthcoming, once people know that a man is a sailor.

Is there a general idea that all sailors are homosexual, or potentially so? Is there a general belief that once they get on the high seas with no women within reach, all sorts of orgies go on, and the homosexual leads a free and completely uninhibited life? No, if such ideas exist, they have no real foundation.

I will admit that a large number of purely homosexual people take up the sea as a career, particularly in the merchant service. It is also true that a great number of seafarers are bisexual. According to Kinsey about 40% of American males are not averse to bisexual practices, and this I think applies also in Great Britain, at sea as well as on shore. The figure at sea may even be a little in excess of this, but I think, not very much. Certainly at sea, there is a much greater tolerance towards homosexuality than there is on land, and when a purely heterosexual sailor knows that someone else is as queer as a coot, he might kid the other along a bit, but in my experience, never maliciously. For example, I have seen a big burly fireman approach a steward, throw his arms around him, and say, in reference to a passing bell boy — «Listen Duchess, next voyage you and me are going to get married, and we'll have the little princess as our daughter». But it did not mean a thing, and it goes on all the time.

Regrettably, the only time when unpleasantness occurs, is when two homosexuals fall out with each other, which they do frequently. If a heterosexual or a bisexual forms an association with a homosexual at sea, it may be purely