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A BED FOR THE NIGHT

by «Stornoway»

Fog hung over London like a gray blanket as Val Garnett groped his way along the almost deserted street looking for the 'Queen's Horses', his local pub. It was difficult to see the low object over which he stumbled, barking his shins in the process. The object was a long, sleek, pale blue Aston-Martin car. Val swore out loud when he recognised it, and he kicked one of the tyres, but very gently, because it was a beautiful thing and he did not want to damage it. It was only a token kick, for he knew the owner, and if it had been Dooley O'Dillon himself, the well-known theatre critic, alone on the street instead of his car, Val would have kicked Dooley instead, and much harder, in his fattest and softest part.

Val had just had his first play produced in a West End theatre, and it had not been a success. Val had a regular very ordinary job on a newspaper, and he had counted on the play's success to get him away from the monotonous routine of his office job. Dooley was critic for the paper that employed Val, and his review had been particularly scathing. The play had come off after only four nights. True, other critics had not thought very much of the play either, but somehow Val had counted on Dooley for a little support. He should have known better.

Once upon a time Dooley had been very friendly towards Val. That was shortly after Val had started work on the paper. There had been a brief encounter in the wash room of the newspaper office, and Dooley had invited him to lunch. Other invitations had followed, to dinners, to parties, and Dooley had given him tickets for first-nights, all with one object in view. Val had met a lot of people and had had an enormous amount of fun. The trouble had been that Val was not prepared to give anything in return, or at least, not what Dooley wanted. It was not that Val put his own moral standard on a very high plane. His standard was just about at the same low level as Dooley's. However, Val was revolted by the thought of intimacies with fat old men, even if the fat old man in question lived in a luxury apartment and was an influential figure in the world to which Val aspired to belong. There had been heavy drama one night when Val had flounced out of the apartment leaving Dooley in tears, but all that had been a long time ago. They had met on numerous occasions since on reasonably cordial terms, and Val had hoped that the episode was forgotten. Val was on the right side of thirty, and Dooley was on the wrong side of fifty. Val had only the money he earned from his job, and Dooley was rolling in the stuff. Val had a one-roomed flat in Pimlico and Dooley had a town apartment in a luxury flat, as well as a cottage in Kent. Val did not even own a bicycle, while Dooley got a new Aston-Martin, or something similar, every year.

Through the fog Val could see the outline of the pub, a few yards down from where the Aston-Martin was parked. The presence of the car could only mean that Dooley was inside the pub. Val swore again, and was in two minds about going in. When he thought about it, he decided that it did not really matter. The play had flopped and he could afford to be rude to Dooley if the opportunity arose. Val had the idea that Dooley still hoped to bring him to a horizontal level. He had another play in mind and the matter of levelling might eventually come to pass. However, it could wait.

The bar was surprisingly full for a night when the weather was really on the nose. Dooley was indeed there, with a little group of sycophants, mostly small-part actors, all very young and very pretty, prepared to be nice to Dooley if it meant getting them their big chance. To these people, an invitation to one of Dooley's parties would be more highly valued than an invitation to Buckingham Palace, though it was extremely unlikely that any of them would ever be invited to the Palace. There were various other groups also in the bar. Val knew a few of the people personally, and a lot more of them by sight. As well, there was a light sprinkling of servicemen, mostly soldiers, and a few sailors as well.

As a gay rendezvous, the 'Queen's Horses' had only recently become popular. Val had patronised it for a long time, because he lived in the area. He was not very pleased at having it turned into a hunting ground. Pubs were like that. For years, a pub would carry on its own quiet trade, and suddenly, for no real reason, someone would *discover* it, and it would become fashionable to screaming point. It would stay like that for a few weeks, and then the crowd would get bored and move to somewhere else. For Val, that time could not come quickly enough. Val could always find a gay bar for himself if he wanted one. Being in Chelsea, this little place had always been interesting; now it was threatening to become sordid as well.

Val decided not to join any of the people he knew, so he took up a place as far as possible away from where Dooley was holding court. If Dooley saw him come in, and Dooley's bright little eyes seldom missed an entrance, he gave no sign. Val nodded to one or two acquaintances and called for a pint of bitter. He was determined that tonight he was not going to get involved; he was just going to have two pints of beer and then go home and start his new play.

Two sailors, both Royal Navy, stood near him. One was red-haired, and once he caught Val's eye and held it, but only for a moment until Val turned away. The other had his back to Val. He looked ordinary enough, though Val could not see him very clearly. They seemed to be working something out between them, and Val did not take much notice of them. Val was on his second pint of beer when the sailor next to him moved away from the bar and went out, leaving the redhead alone. Once again he caught Val's eye and moved closer up to him, taking the space formerly occupied by his friend.

«Bit of a stinker out tonight,» he remarked.

Val agreed that it was.

«What you drinking?» the sailor asked, peering at Val's glass. «Bitter ain't it? Have one on me.»

«I'm not halfway through this one yet,» Val protested.

«Never mind. Finish it up and have another. My name's Fred, but everybody calls me Ginger. That's because I got red hair.»

«I can see that,» said Val.

«That's right,» said Ginger with a grin. «Obvious, ain't it?»

He was a pleasant looking lad in the early twenties, with the fresh pink complexion that goes with red hair. He was well built and on the small side. He had a lively alert face, with green eyes. Val had a thing about redheads; he also had a thing about sailors. While still resolved to go home early and do some work, he had been prepared, in his own time, to make a move towards getting acquainted. After all, if he had two beers, he might as well have three or four.

Ginger, having made the first advance, was not playing according to the rules. Sailors do not usually offer to buy beer for strangers; their pay does not per-

mit it. Usually they wait for someone to offer to buy them drinks, which they accept with alacrity. Val decided to play it wary.

«Come up from Portsmouth today, I did,» said Ginger. «Going back tomorrow. What's your name?»

«They call me Val.»

«Val, short for Valentine I suppose. That's a bit of a highbrow name ain't it? We got a Val on board, but we call him Valerie.»

«Oh, why?»

«Just for camp I guess. She's a cookess. You come here often Val?»

«Fairly often. I live near here.»

«That's handy, ain't it?»

«Very handy. Want another beer?»

«Thanks Val. I never refuse,» said Ginger.

Val decided that after this drink he would excuse himself. Ginger was an attractive looking lad and he used words that showed he knew the answers. He fitted his uniform as though he had been poured into it, and he was standing closer to Val than was strictly necessary, even though the bar was crowded. Val felt a bit uncomfortable. He knew he was being watched by others in the bar. Dooley had glanced his way and given him a nod, which Val affected not to see.

«I got a problem,» Ginger remarked, not looking the least bit as though he had anything on his mind.

«What is it?»

«Got to find somewhere to spend the night.»

«A hotel room?»

«Don't make me laugh,» said Ginger scornfully. «A sailor's pay don't run to hotel rooms.»

«Where do you usually stay in London?»

«Oh, round and about. I sleep almost anywhere that offers,» he said airily, looking straight at Val, his green eyes unblinking.

«Don't they have clubs and that sort of thing, for servicemen on leave?» Val asked.

«All over the place,» Ginger admitted. «I only go to them as a last resort. Besides, who'd want to sleep with a lot of sailors?»

«Who, indeed?» remarked Val, *sotto voce*.

«Well, would you?» Ginger demanded.

Val decided not to answer that one. Instead, he said: «Do you know London well, Ginger?»

«Fairly well,» Ginger admitted. «I'm from Birmingham though. Most times we drink around the Dilly. That's where my pal Tommy just went. He's fixed up for the night and he's gone off to meet his friend.»

«There's more life around Piccadilly,» Val said. «What brings you down to Chelsea tonight?»

«Oh, I'd heard about it. Had a bit of trouble last time I was in the Dilly. Guy took me home and came the rough stuff, he did. Had to deal with him. Thought if I went to the Dilly tonight I might meet him again, and I'm still mad with him.»

Val decided that it was time to leave. He put his empty tankard down on the table and slipped on his gloves.

«Not going?» said Ginger, with a trace of alarm in his voice, and putting a hand on Val's arm in order to stop him from getting away. «No, you can't go away. We've only just got talking. Have another beer.»

Val protested. «I've got work to do, Ginger.»

By this time the barmaid had refilled their tankards so Val removed his gloves, and because Ginger was fiddling with a cigarette, Val paid for the drinks.

«Of course, I can be nice to people too, if I like them,» Ginger remarked, with a grin. «Know what I mean, don't you?»

Ginger's thigh was pressed up against Val's. Glancing down, Val wondered why the pants did not burst open at the seams. The pressure increased.

«You do know what I mean, Val, don't you?» Ginger persisted.

«I guess I do,» Val admitted. «What happened with the other man?»

«He tried to make me do things I didn't want to do.» He took a long drink and looked sideways at Val. «Of course,» he added brightly, «there are some things I don't mind doing.»

«Such as?» Val asked with raised eyebrows.

Ginger ignored the question. «Bit of a gay bar, this, ain't it?»

«How do you mean?»

«Take a look at some of the characters around here. We heard about this place down in Plymouth.»

«So you thought you'd come and look it over.»

«Yes, of course. Look at that fat old bloke with his fingers dripping with diamonds, and all the young fruit around him. I bet she's an old aunty.» Ginger was looking at Dooley.

«Could be,» said Val.

«I bet those fruity types do all right out of him. Why does he keep on looking over here? Do you know him?»

It was true that Dooley had taken a marked interest in Val since Ginger had joined him. Val avoided the question by ordering more beer for Ginger and a whisky for himself. It looked as though he was not going to get away too easily, and also as though he was going to pay for the rest of the drinks. The close proximity of Ginger's body also acted as a magnet.

«You going to take me home with you Val?» Ginger demanded point-blank. «Otherwise I'll have to try someone else.»

«I've only got a small flat,» Val explained. «And there's only one bed.»

«No matter,» said Ginger. «I bet it's held two people before, the size as us. I won't want anything, only the use of your razor in the morning. I never wear pyjamas. I never wear nothing in bed.»

«I guess it'll be all right,» Val said reluctantly. «If all you want is somewhere to sleep.»

«Good, that's settled then,» said Ginger with a grin. «Just for that, I'll buy you another whisky.» He threw a couple of shillings on the counter and signalled to the barmaid.

«I'll see you don't regret it. I'm not like some of our blokes,» he added. «We've got some real bad bastards, and you got to be careful with them.»

«How do you mean?»

«Well, some of them wants to be paid, and others collects things.»

«Collect things?»

«You know, little souvenirs like electric shavers and transistors radios. Little things like that, you know.»

«I shave the old-fashioned way,» Val said. «And my radio is a radiogram, a great big thing.» He thought it best not to mention his gold cigarette case. The only money he had on him did not amount to more than a couple of pounds, so he felt safe in taking a risk.

«It's different when people offer you these things,» Ginger said. «But I think it's wrong to pinch them. Lot's of the fellows come back loaded with all sorts of loot. You'd be surprised. That's why you got to be careful.»

«I'm careful all right,» Val said.

«I bet you just don't take anyone home.»

«That's right.»

The conversation was interrupted here. Val felt a pressure on his back, and turned to find the grinning face of Dooley behind him, and Dooley's fat body was relentlessly insinuating itself between his own and Ginger's. He had a smirk on his fat, carefully made-up face. He was heavily perfumed, and he wore two diamond rings, one on each hand. Ginger had spotted these from a distance.

«What the hell do you want?» Val demanded ungraciously.

«Don't be like that my dear? Anyone would think you weren't pleased to see one of your oldest friends. Who is this lovely thing you've picked up?» Dooley said, beaming at Ginger.

«We're just having a drink together,» Val explained.

Dooley looked Ginger up and down, his eyes lingering on the places where the uniform fitted most tightly.

«Nice bit of salt beef,» he remarked, «with red hair and green eyes. Very, very pretty.»

Ginger looked straight at Dooley without a flicker in his eyes.

One of Dooley's diamond bedecked hands found its way to Ginger's sleeve. «I always wonder how you get into these uniforms,» he said. «So devastatingly form-fitting.»

«We get into them easy enough,» said Ginger. «It's getting out of them that's not so easy.»

«I see. You need help?»

«We only need help with the jumper. We have to get someone to pull it off for us.»

«And the trousers?»

«They're easy. I just drop the flap, wriggle my arse, and down they falls.»

«Fascinating, isn't it, Val?»

«As if you didn't know, Dooley. You must have seen the act hundreds of times.»

«Always fresh, my dear. Always novel,» Dooley said airily. He turned to Ginger. «You're up from the coast and you want a bed for the night. Do I guess rightly?»

«Say, you,» said Ginger with a show of anger, «are you trying to take the mickey out of me?»

«Not trying, my dear. I'm sure it's already been done.» He turned to Val. «Writing any more plays lately, my dear?»

«No,» said Val. «But I've got one in mind with a fat old bitch in the leading role.»

«Really?»

«Yes, really. Dooley, why don't you go away?»

«Of course, my dear. I don't want to interrupt your little pleasures. I just wanted to say hello.»

«Well, you've said it.»

«My dear, we all know you're sailor happy.» Dooley turned to Ginger. «Watch it, sailor, and don't be put off with promises,» he said, as he ambled off.

«That nasty old bugger a friend of yours?» Ginger asked, when Dooley had gone.

«Would you think so? No, he's just someone I know.»

«Gawd did you see those sparklers on his fingers? I'd love to have a ring like one of those.»

«That's only two that he's got.»

«Rich? Lots of lolly?»

«Lousy with it.»

«Not like you. You're not rich, Val?»

«Me?» Val laughed. «I hardly ever know where the next week's rent is coming from.»

«I'm glad of that,» Ginger said. «I don't like rich people.»

«If you saw an Aston-Martin outside when you came in, that's Dooley's.»

«Blimey. An Aston-Martin!»

«Let's go,» said Val. «I'll make you some coffee when we get back to the flat.»

It wanted fifteen minutes to closing time. They moved away from the bar counter.

«Wait for me outside,» Ginger said. «I just want to go to the head.»

Val went out, and as he passed through the door, he met Ginger's pal Tommy returning. Val waited outside, a few yards down from where the Aston-Martin was parked. The fog had cleared and it was drizzling rain. Ginger was nice, but Val could not help wondering if he was doing the right thing in taking him back to the flat. He had nothing of material value to lose, if Ginger turned unpleasant or demanding. Somehow he felt that Ginger would not be like this. Ten minutes passed, and there was no sign of Ginger. He was probably in consultation with his pal Tommy. Tommy might be a complication, and there was a possibility that the two were cooking up something between them. Suddenly he was tempted to go home alone, as he had originally intended.

Then Ginger appeared, but he was not alone, and his companion was not Tommy. It was Dooley. Neither of them recognised him, and Val was too stunned to speak when he saw the pair of them climb into the Aston-Martin and drive off.

«The two-timing little twerp!» he said aloud, when he eventually recovered from the shock.

«I wouldn't think like that,» a quiet voice said behind him.

The pub was emptying and the pavement was crowded. Val turned round, and identified the speaker as Ginger's pal, Tommy.

«Are you Val?» Tommy asked.

«Yes, but . . .»

«I'm Tommy. Ginger asked me to explain.»

«I don't think there is anything that needs explaining,» Val said stiffly, as he moved away. Tommy followed.

«Yes there is. Ginger wants to see you when he comes up again, in two weeks time, if he can.»

«I don't see why.»

«Well, he wants to. This fat bloke sank his claws into Ginger as soon as you went out. Now Ginger says he's a nasty type, and he's going to fix him, see.»

«He'll probably fix it so that he gets a diamond ring,» Val remarked with heavy sarcasm. «It doesn't mean a thing to me.»

Tommy looked vaguely troubled. «He didn't say anything about a diamond ring,» he said. «He told me that this bloke promised him a transistor radio.»

«Ring or radio, so long as it has a cash value, I guess it's all the same to Ginger,» Val said bitterly.

Tommy smiled, and he had a pleasant, easy smile. «You could be wrong, you know,» he said. «Ginger's a funny bloke, but he's very loyal to his friends.»

«I hope for his own sake that he keeps out of trouble. Dooley, the man he went with, can be a very nasty type.»

«I think Ginger can take care of himself.»

«Obviously.»

They had reached the house where Val had his flat. By this time Val had had time to have a good look at Tommy. He was perhaps a couple of years older than Ginger. Beyond being tall and slim and dark there was nothing remarkable about him. He spoke quietly with a well-modulated voice. Val felt his irritation evaporating.

«Is this where you live?» Tommy asked.

«It is. I suppose you're looking for a bed for the night too?» Val asked.

«Me? Oh no. I'm going to an all-night steam bath.» He named the place, which Val knew well. «I might meet Ginger there later, or else I'll see him on the train tomorrow. Can I tell him anything from you?»

«Just tell him I might run into him one of these days, but I don't know when. Do you always stay at the baths?»

«No, only when the mate I usually shake down with is out of town. He's a long distance truck-driver and he left a message at the pub where I usually meet him to say he had to go on a trip.»

«So you go to the baths tonight.»

«Yes.» Tommy looked a little embarrassed. «I don't go for this transistor and electric shaver souvenir lark,» he added. «And I'm not all that keen on strange beds.»

«Are you disappointed your friend is out of town?»

«Naturally. But I get a good giggle out of going to the baths too, if you know what I mean.»

«I know the place,» said Val. «And I know what you mean. I might even go along there myself.»

«That would be fine,» Tommy said warmly. «We could go together, if you'd like to come. You might see Ginger there, when he gets through with what he's going to do.»

«I don't really care about Ginger,» Val persisted. «Tell you what. Let's go inside and think about it. I could give you a beer or make you some coffee.»

Tommy grinned. «That suits me fine.»

Val knew he would do no work on his play that night.