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THE BANTAM ROOSTER

«Where in hell is that Ivory Pounder?»

Bantock Rossiter burst into the room without knocking. Displeasure and impatience were written all over his unusually well-chiseled features and agile body clad in lettered sweater and slacks.

Paul Hughes, at work at his study table, angrily jumped to his feet. «Damn you, you made me ruin this diagram. What do you mean barging in here like that?»

'Banty' glanced at the ink-smudged page, mumbled a feeble apology and continued, «Where is that room-mate of yours? I've been waiting ten minutes for him.»

As Paul bent over his ruined graph to see if it possibly could be salvaged he growled, «Go peddle your fish. You make me sick.»

«So, I make you sick,» Banty mimicked, «So what?»

«Just that I hate your 'intestinal fortitude', to put it bluntly. The 'Ivory Pounder', as you call him, waited here for forty minutes and when you didn't show he left for the lab to get things set up for tomorrow's class. His scholarship depends on it, remember? And besides, he gets paid for doing *that*. When I see the way you treat that guy and what you're doing to him I want...»

«What *I'm* doing to *him!*», Banty interrupted, «Look what *he's* doing to *me!* I can get anyone in that whole friggin Music Department to play for me never forget that.»

Oh, for God's sake, you're impossible. Our great big Escamillo of the gridiron. 'Banty, the fighting Cock', they call you 'Big Prick' would be more like it. You know Ron is the best musician for miles around and he's yours for the asking. Now get the hell out of here before I really blow my stack.»

Rossiter turned on his heel, stalked out of the room slamming the door behind him. As he went down the dorm steps he was fighting mad. *Who in hell does that Hughes think he is, anyway? You'd think Pearson were his goddamned floozie or bloody wife the way he acts. Ron is old enough to look after himself and doesn't need a biddy like Hughes to look after him.* As his thoughts again centered on Ron Pearson his spleen began to spend itself and all at once he felt himself actually blushing for he remembered that he had that morning put a note in Ron's PO box to the effect that he wanted to practice that evening and would pick him up at his room at 6:30. He looked at his watch and saw that it was past 8 o'clock. Could he help it if those doting fans of his had waylaid him after dinner? He'd be damned if he'd apologise to either of those guys! And yet, the more he thought about it the more he realized the whole mixup was of his own making and that he could blame no one else for it. He stopped, turned about, and headed for the Science Building. As he neared he could see

Pearson through the lighted windows of the Physiology lab, busy at his task. He entered the building, going directly to the lab. As he went through the door he put his music on a rack nearby and began to take microscopes from the shelves and place them in order on the tables.

Ron looked up, smiled a welcome and went on about his duties with a puzzled expression in his eyes for this was the first time Banty had ever done anything of this nature.

«And to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?» Ron asked.

«Never mind, just get on with your work and tell me what to do.»

A few instructions were given and Banty set about his self-imposed chores with a will.

«Why didn't they give you something in music in place of this for a scholarship?» Banty asked.

«I wondered the same thing. They told me at the Business Office that Dr. Heinritz had asked for me especially—something about my being able to draw when I took the course last year. Just the other day I asked him point-blank why he hadn't taken a pre-med major, like Paul, for his assistant and he informed me that he had always wanted to observe an artistic mind at close range. Can you beat that?»

«Yes I can, but we won't go into *that* now. Why, that scheming old bastard!»

«What do you mean by that?»

«Nothing, absolutely nothing.» Banty dismissed the suspicion from his mind. «Forget it! Are we finished?»

«Yes, just as soon as I put these slides away.»

«Well then, how about some music? Right now I really feel like singing.»

«I was in hopes you'd suggest it but I didn't want to ask for you didn't show up earlier as you said you would.»

«I'm sorry about that, Ron, I really am. I got held up in the lounge.»

«Forget it, my dear Orpheus, forget it! Eurydice can deny you nothing.»

*

The two hours that followed were never to be forgotten by either of them. The music they made was that perfect fusing of voice and accompaniment which makes the performance of Lieder the great Art-form it is. There was a ring in Banty's voice that night and an understanding of the hidden essence of the music he sang that had not heretofore asserted itself. This was a new revelation to him. Ron's accompaniments were pure poetry, perfectly attuned to the interpretation of the singer. He poured out his heart through his fingers as a libation to his god standing there beside him. They ascended the heights together and knew the brush of angel wings.

The night-watchman brought them crashing to earth with his raucous voice proclaiming it was past closing time. They walked silently back to the dorm still caught in ecstasy. As they rounded the last secluded dark corner before reaching the lighted dorm entrance Banty stopped, hastily took Ron's face between his two large hands and kissed him full on the mouth. With 'that something' in his voice Ron had never before heard he said, «This has been 'my hour of knowing' and you were there beside me. We can never be the same again.» Words would not pass the constriction in Ron's throat. In a sort of exalted agony he threw his arms around his beloved's neck and reverently put a seal on the kiss the other had given. They parted at the door.

Ron was thankful no one was in the room when he got there and then he remembered this was the time of night Paul always went to walk his girl from the library to her dormitory. He wanted and desperately needed this time to relive every precious minute of the past several hours. He would go to bed and feign sleep when Paul came in for he simply could not endure another of those one-sided, far-into-the-night discussions about Janice's desirable physical attributes, her clinging-vine adorable character and her potential as an ardent lover. He had often thought of how wonderful it would be if he could discuss his own amourous feelings for 'Chic' (his own private term for the Banty Rooster) as openly as did Paul for his paramour, but this was, of course, impossible. He hurriedly undressed and with an ever so slight twinge of conscience crawled naked between the sheets. As he lay there in the dark, his mind ardently active with remembering, he gradually became frightened and then terrified with the knowledge of his deep, pent-up desires and fierce compelling insistence upon physical expression, purely sexual in nature, of his love for his 'Chic', the Banty Rooster. Sleep came long after Paul had come in and was safe in the arms of Morpheus.

*

A bull-session was in progress in room 301 of the men's dorm. Ron Pearson, pajama clad, sat at his desk pretending to listen but his mind was elsewhere. He secretly enjoyed these meetings for several of the men possessed handsome bodies and took an actually studied pride in exposing as much of them as possible. His thoughts ran to another day and age: the Dialogues of Plato—the sculptures of Phidias and Praxiteles—those stories in 'Black Sparta'—certain lines from the 'Iliad'. Paul tried repeatedly to draw him into the conversation but with little success. Bull-sessions, no matter how high-flown at the beginning, sooner or later turned to sex and women. He always lost interest when this happened. Right in the midst of Les Hopkins' recounting of a 'hot time' he had had in Toledo the past summer there was a knock at the door. Les stopped talking and all eyes were riveted on the entrance as Paul sang out, «Come in.» There stood Rossiter clad in robe and slippers. He sized up the situation (even Paul's scowl) and smilingly said, «Carry on, men. I came to see Ron here.» The conversation resumed but Hopkins reserved the remainder of his succulent tale for a later date.

«Ron—Public Relations wants the Male Quartet to go on a ten day trip to advertise the college. You are to come with us. You'll have to arrange for someone to take your lab work while you're away.»

«Lord, Chic, I don't know if that will be possible.»

«Of course it will. I've talked to your Prof and he will let you go if you get someone he approves of. You've simply got to come with us.»

«Chic, you know there's nothing I'd rather do. The only person Dr. Heinritz would have is Paul and I simply can't ask him to do it.»

«Stop making the shrinking-violet, Eurydice. (That's of your own making, remember?) You know he can't refuse you anything. Besides, his Janice is in one of the classes, don't forget that.»

«Well . . . Maybe he would if . . .»

«OK. Now that's settled. By the way, that old fart Heinritz likes you, did you know that?»

«He certainly keeps it to himself, if he does. Oh Chic, I do so want to come with you.»

«Good. Keep your legs crossed, Paderoosky, and we shall not fail.»

The conversation on the other side of the room had returned to safer ground. One of the men called out, «Say Banty, what do you think the chances are of Pike winning the Fish Bowl game?» Rossiter came over to the group, and being in an unusually expansive mood, began to give his views on the subject. As they became more heated in their argument he sat down on the floor, leaned back against one of the beds and drew his legs up with his knees under his chin. Since Chic was there the discussion took on an entirely different aspect for Ron. He left his chair and came over and stood near his idol. Banty looked up, spread his legs and drew Ron down to a like sitting position between them. Ron knew he blushed but even Paul was so intense in argument he did not notice it. As Banty talked he drew Ron gently back against his hirsute chest, his legs holding the slighter figure in a sort of vise-like grip. The heat of the athlete's body was terrifying for it seemed to sap the other of every bit of energy he possessed. (Rossiter was one of those people with a temperature slightly above normal. He had repeatedly been examined by doctors who found no organic cause for it and agreed that his metabolism was just higher than most.)

Ron was in a kind of stupor but divinely happy. He had never before been in such close proximity with a male body. As Chic talked or sat listening to the others his hand began a kind of restless movement over Ron's shoulders, neck and ear lobes. Without the others noticing it his hand slipped under the pajama coat and he began gently to massage and caress the torso underneath. «God, oh god, if he keeps that up much longer I'll explode», Ron thought, and tried half-heartedly to disengage himself from the vise which held him. Chic took no notice of this but kept up the titillation with even greater intensity. Suddenly Ron jerked himself free, jumped to his feet and ran from the room.

«What in the devil is wrong with him?» Paul expostulated disgustedly for he never could understand why Ron took so little interest in these 'man-talk' discussions.

«Perhaps I had better go find out.» Banty said as he got to his feet and hurriedly gathered his robe about him. «Maybe it was that fish we had for dinner. Mine tasted like asafetida and old glue.»

When he got to the lavatory he heard the rush of water and over the roar shouted, «Ron? Are you all right? What's the matter?»

«Nothing» came the reply from behind a locked cubicle door.

«Are you sick or something? Is there anything I can do for you?»

«No, thanks. I'll be all right. I must have eaten something that didn't agree with me.»

«I thought as much. It must have been that damned fish we had for dinner. Sure I can't do anything for you? Well, good night then, Padde-roosky. Take care and be sure to ask Paul to take over while we are away. See you tomorrow.»

*

It was the first day they were on the road. Arrangements had been made for them to spend each night in the homes of alumni. Ron feared, since he was the odd man, that he would be quartered alone but what followed that night was in essence repeated the whole time they were away. His heart almost jumped out of his mouth when he heard Banty casually say to the grad in charge of arrangements for their housing, «Pearson and I will bunk together for I promised old Heinritz I'd look after him. He's sort of special in the old boy's books, you know.»

They were lodged in a comfortable old house with high ceilings, much red plush and heavy mahogany furniture. The room assigned to them was as Victorian as an antimacassar with its great double bed and horse-hair chairs. A large gilded radiator and an electric bulb in the oil lamp were the only unauthentic things of the whole exhibit. As they surveyed the room Chic laughingly pointed to one of the chairs and said, «Don't you dare sit bareassed on that thing. I tried it once and it was worse than sitting on a porcupine. I don't want to spend the rest of the night pulling quills out of your rump.»

The two men hugged the radiator as they undressed, for the air in the room was frigid. Banty shed his clothes as if he were eager to be free of them, Ron more reluctantly for he was fascinated by the marvel being unveiled before him. Finally Chic stepped out of his shorts and stood magnificent in his nakedness. Seemingly unconscious of the effect he was having on his friend he flexed and unflexed his muscles, adjusted the appendages of his anatomy and admired his biceps as he talked.

«When I took my physical this fall the Doctor told me to be careful of straining myself for fear of hernia. The way they test you for such a thing is to push two fingers rather forcefully in the groin . . . like this . . . and then have you cough a couple of times. Here, let me show you. Do exactly as I just did and you can feel the lower diaphragm move when I

cough. There! Did you feel it? Now get rid of those shorts and let's see how you stack up.»

«Oh, I'm all right. I don't think I could stand that.»

«Come on. Don't act like a giddy school girl. We're all men here. Take 'em off or I'll do it for you.»

Reluctantly Ron removed his shorts.

«Gad what a man! What are you ashamed of, anyway? Now come here and let's see if you're in danger or not. Now cough! Cough again! Why, my lad, you're worse off than I am. Ron, you must be very careful from now on, really careful. When you lift anything do it with your legs . . . like this . . . and not with your back. And be especially careful when you reach, playing tennis and the like. I'm really very serious about all this, young man.»

«Thanks, Chic, I will. I've always known there was something funny about me for these things will disappear nearly every time I cross my legs. See?»

«Well I'll be damned, so they will. Now if you could just make that thing disappear as well you could be Eurydice sure 'nough . . . Come on, let's get to bed. I'm cold and you're shaking like a leaf.»

With several giant strides Chic crossed the room and jumped into bed. Ron struggled into his pajamas, turned out the light and cautiously felt his way to the bed. As he crept under the covers beside Chic he felt him tugging at his sleeve.

«What in the devil did you put those things on for? Don't you know it's much healthier to sleep stareo? You may be a jim-dandy pianist but you sure are dumb when it comes to more practical things. Sit up! Now raise your hips! There! Now come here and get warm. How do you expect me to get any sleep with you quaking like a frightened rabbit?»

Finally after he was thawed out and practically giddy from the heat of the body pressed so closely to his own, with his heart pounding like a trip-hammer Ron managed to say in Chic's ear, «Doctor Pearson is not satisfied with the diagnosis of the patient's condition and wishes to complete his examination. Is the patient willing?»

«Ready and willing!» was the urgent reply.

by JERRY MANDER



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