

Smart Fly

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SLOWLY and carefully I studied the signature sprawling lazily across the bottom of the page in grandiose style, so typical of Latin penmanship. Brushing aside an inquisitive fly, I reread the note and pondered at length upon its awkward phrasing. "Yes," I said, at last addressing the buzzing marauder, "Carlos is licking his wounds, all right." It was all between the lines, his strained gaiety, a vain attempt to disguise the frustration, the bitter disappointment that was gnawing at his heart. Of course, the question that persisted in bothering me was whether his simple melancholy was justifiable. From the sidelines it appeared that congratulations, rather than condolences, were in order for my friend, Carlos.

Three years had slipped from the calendar since Senor Carlos de Santosy Rodriguez and I first clinked glasses in a toast to our "salud." It was one of those unbearably hot afternoons when every caballero of any means was to be found comfortably installed in his favorite seaside haunt, or delving into the nightmarish concoctions that only the bar barons of Panama City can toss together in the name of a cocktail. Finding myself in the latter category, I had lost no time in seeking the soothing shelter of the Blue Room. There was certainly nothing blue in the mood of the cosmopolitan conglomeration of humanity collected in that delightful oasis. No doubt, my favorite haunt owed its name to the dirty blue cloud that hung heavily above the patrons of Bacchus, thick as the smoke that rose above our revered sires at Bunker Hill.

Casually edging my way between a platinum-plated blonde and a Brazilian

brass hat, I wandered over the glass-topped bar and settled myself atop a stool 'longside the person of El Senor Rodriguez. By the time the Pacific had swallowed the sun's last blistering rays, I had wangled a dinner invitation out of the congenial gentleman.

It turned out that my swarthy host for the evening dwelled in a modest hacienda embodying some 20 or 25 rooms rivaling Grand Central Station in dimension, and the Waldorf in splendor. It rambled comfortably over the side of one of the hills for which smart suburban Nueva Vista is noted and lost itself amid a grove of mango trees. There I met Joyce, fresh from the States, destined within a month to take over the reins of this palatable tropic retreat.

I confess that my friend must have found me a tenacious "amigo" in the days that followed. I saw a lot of the Latin playboy—and a lot of Joyce, too. It was plain as the black and white labels on his private stock of Scotch, Carlos was crazy about the girl. She hadn't forgotten to bring along her bag of wiles and she wasn't missing a trick. Joyce wasn't exactly my idea of the American beauty, but she hadn't wasted any time corralling this Latin King Croesus, lock, stock, and mango tree.

The sad part was the fact which Carlos didn't realize that this be-rouged scavenger was no more a Newport "niftie" than I was "Lippy" Durocher. Joyce wasn't the first of the chorus girl line that I had encountered in my extended vacation south of the border. There were plenty of them down there, all of the same kind, all with the same purpose. No longer able to knock 'em cold up North, the cuties had headed

for warmer environs and softer shoulders such as possessed by Carlos.

Not many weeks passed before I had found it necessary to depart from this paradise of palm trees and dry martinis. My Uncle up in Washington was demanding my return. It seemed that he no longer deemed my Palm Beach suit either appropriate or becoming to a zealous patroit of my calibre. As a result, my good-will excursion might have remained only a choice bit of memory, had not Carlos followed me from New Guinea to Tojo's backyard with his faithful letters, each a detailed chronicle of his young marital adventure.

Each new letter told a tale of fresh difficulties confronting my friend. The veneer was wearing thin on his Newport addition, and the Flatbush core beneath this paper shell was becoming more and more evident, more and more annoying to his Latin pride. It hadn't taken too long for Carlos to discover that Joyce cherished no noble desire to fulfill her maternal duties, to perpetuate the lineage of Santos y Rodriguez. She had filled his cup to overflowing, having candidly admitted to being engaged to a Stateside admirer at the time when she took Carlos "for better or for worse." The news that a third gentleman, Senor Jose de Hernandez y Rodriguez, was vying for the affections of Joyce failed to diminish the growing consternation of her Latin protege. One minute she was threatening to acquaint the miserable Carlos with the dear meaning of the word, alimony, and in the next breath, exalting him to the clouds—in quest of a new hacienda.

It all boiled down to one thing; Joyce had become a maze of contradictions too complex for the naive nature of her hus-

band, and this other fellow, Rodriguez, of no kin to the illustrious Carlos hadn't helped matters any. I knew it was only a matter of time until my friend would send a letter such as now lay on my desk. He had found out the meaning of alimony, to the astounding tune of twenty thousand a year.

Watching that inquisitive fly nosing around an empty candy wrapper, I wasn't quite sure whether Carlos was mourning the abrupt departure of his erstwhile mate or the depleted state of the family finances. At any rate, it appeared that he had learned lesson number one where that conniving Dan Cupid was concerned, and I was glad. Besides, Rodriguez could plant a few more banana trees. Those things grow up overnight and the family fortune would soon appear respectable enough.

On the other hand there was the telegram posted from San Jose, a nice little spot over in Costa Rica, which had arrived only one day after the letter: "AMIGO STOP JUST MARRIED NEW YORK DEBUTANTE ANITA CARLYLE STOP CARLOS."

The fly paused briefly in mid-air, contemplating my vulnerability as I reflected upon the high-sounding name of Anita Carlyle. I remember when she made her debut at the Roxy over in the Bronx. That was six years ago. She never quite made the coveted door to the "legit" theatre, but she had held top billing at Harry's Place over in Flatbush before hitting the down grade.

I shot a warning glance upward as the fly executed a steep dive on my right ear, and prepared to defend myself. "They don't come any smarter than Anita," I concluded as my intruder returned to the attack. I swung hard and missed again.