

A White Carnation

Joe Dutton

“Good morning, Miss Welch. Good morning, Miss Porter. You look particularly lovely this morning, Miss Bates.”

Miss Bates knew that she did not, but she smiled, thanked the middle-aged little man, and returned to manicuring her fingernails. The smile somehow reminded Mr. Fletcher that Christmas was near and that he would have to order candy for the girls in the office. Last year he had given them silk stockings, but some of the men had teased him about the gifts. After careful thought, he had decided that candy would be more appropriate this year.

The brisk pitapat of his footsteps sounded through the office as he hurried about, opening the window ever so slightly and depositing his black, velvet-collared overcoat, his black umbrella, and his gray homburg on the wooden hatstand. He returned to his own desk and unwrapped a cone-shaped package of green tissue paper which he had placed there. As part of a daily procedure, he took the fresh white carnation out of the package. Without smelling the flower, an act which might make him seem effeminate, he pushed it into the buttonhole of his lapel. Miss Bates grinned slyly as she watched him brush some some specks of lint from his coat and run two of his immaculate fingers across his neat, little gray mustache.

After crushing the tissue paper into a ball and dropping it into the wastebasket, Mr. Fletcher spread the morning paper open across his desk and squinted at the headlines. Newspaper stories depressed him, but they had become such a customary part of his life that he never thought of neglecting them for one morning.

“Good morning, Bob,” he said, when a thin young man reached the desk next to his. “Well, I suppose congratulations are in order this morning?”

The pale young man winced at Mr. Fletcher’s smile. “No, I’m afraid not, sir.” Trying to show that he was eager to end the conversation, he turned away from the older man’s gaze and began to thumb through the stacks of paper on his desk.

“What? You mean you let her refuse you?” Fletcher would not be put off. He insisted on hearing all the unpleasant details.

“‘Let’ is hardly the word for it, Mr. Fletcher,” he an-

swered sharply. The older man's prying questions were annoying. In the four days since Bob Mills had started work at the office, Mr. Fletcher had managed to discover a great many things about the young man. On the first day, the precise little man had calculated that Bob was in love. On the second, Bob had proudly displayed the ring that he intended to give his girl. And today, Mr. Fletcher knew the outcome of the planned engagement.

The middle-aged man rose from his desk and put his hand on Bob's shoulder in a confidential, paternal manner. "Now listen, son," he said. "Don't let this thing get you down. It's not that important. Remember that women are just like street-cars. If you miss one, there will be another coming along in five minutes. And the nice thing about it is that the next one is usually prettier than the one before. Why do you think I've stayed a bachelor all these years?" Mr. Fletcher chuckled heartily at his own witticism, paying no attention to his young friend's reaction to the tactless consolation. "Why, I remember the only time I ever proposed — of course, when I was your age, I had more girls than I had time for anyway — but this girl — Betsy her name was — was something special. She had the most beautiful blue eyes I've ever seen." A far-away, sentimental expression came across his face as he relived the love affair. "Well, I asked her to marry me and she refused. For days I was broken-hearted. Later, of course, I knew she was really crazy about me. She was just trying to play hard to get. It's a woman's favorite trick, son. Every one of them tries it at least once. So I thought I would teach Betsy a lesson. I left her house one night and never went back." He cleared his throat with immense satisfaction. "A few years afterwards," he continued, "Betsy married a banker, an old friend of mine, but from what her friends tell me, I guess she has never been really happy with him."

The seriousness of the older man's face checked Bob's imminent grin. He had not known "old Fletch," as the men in the office called him, long enough to be bored or irritated by his endless accounts of romantic conquests, stories of how women were naturally charmed by him and of how he had used various methods of his own to make himself even more desirable. As yet, the young man was only amused by the aging Lothario who insisted on delving into and solving the romantic and marital difficulties of his male co-workers. Bob still smiled gently when Fletcher, fancying himself a great man of the world, ogled and flattered bespectacled and freck-

led Miss Welch and skinny, old Miss Potter and the new girl, Peggy Clark, and Miss Bates, who deserved the attention perhaps, but who thought him somewhat quaint.

"Ignore this girl of yours for awhile," Fletcher went on. "Take out someone else for a change. How about Miss Bates?"

Bob laughed. "She is at least five years older than I am."

"What difference does that make? Some of the best times of my life have been spent with older women. They're sophisticated and experienced. You don't have to be shy around a woman who's a few years older than you, boy. Or what about Peggy Clark? She's young."

Mr. Fletcher saw the sneer on the young man's face and could not understand it. He rather liked the girl's vivid red hair, so skillfully dyed that only the sharp eyes of another woman could detect the dark roots, and the tight skirts and even tighter sweaters that she wore. He could not at all understand a normal young man not being attracted to the obvious charms of Peggy Clark.

He was about to make another suggestion when his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the nine o'clock bell. Old Mr. Winslow had already put on his green eye-shade and was pretending to read the reports on his desk. Stevenson's bald head was bent over a drawer in the olive-colored file cabinet. The other men were busy at typewriters, upon which they pounded fiercely, or were scrawling across lengthy government forms, flipping over the pages with a loud rustling noise, expressing their contempt and exasperation. Everyone was accounted for, everyone except Peggy Clark who was in the habit of appearing fifteen or twenty minutes late in a breeze of strong-smelling perfume. Fletcher, although reluctant to postpone the solution of Bob's problems until the lunch hour, hastened back to his desk, while Bob, in a happier state of mind than he had believed possible, smiled after him.

The morning passed as it ordinarily did, accented only by the nine-thirty arrival of Peg Clark, the click of type writer keys, the sound of paper being crumpled and thrown away, and the asthmatic wheezes of Ned Baker. At eleven o'clock, a group, consisting of all the men in the office except Bob, Fletcher, and old Mr. Winslow, formed around Peggy's desk. Their whispers were broken now and then by the sound of suggestive masculine laughter and Peg's soft giggles. Although she had worked in the office for only about three weeks, the girl was already famous for the risqué little stories she told him and for the disarming way she used her eyes in

telling them. Undoubtedly, Bob decided, this was the reason for the conference and for the scornful expression on Miss Bates' face as she passed on her way to the pencil sharpener.

Bob slipped away from Mr. Fletcher during the lunch hour. He did not particularly relish the idea of hearing the older man expound his theories on the feminine heart or the prolonged accounts of his youthful escapades. For the time being, Bob preferred to suffer his rejection alone and in silence. The cheerful attitude he had maintained during the morning had gradually slipped away and given place to more melancholy thoughts. He had not yet reached the point of realizing that embarrassment more than disappointment was the cause of his unhappiness.

When he returned from lunch, he found Peggy Clark seated on the top of Mr. Fletcher's desk; the little man himself was beaming up at her in childish delight. Peggy's head was tilted at just the right angle so that her long red hair fell coquettishly over one of her brown eyes. The two were whispering confidentially, and old Fletch giggled happily as Peg leaned over to straighten the white carnation on his lapel. Neither of them seemed to notice the sly winks and snickers which were being exchanged from desk to desk around them. Nor were they aware of the indignant stare from Miss Bates whose teeth were clenched tightly together and whose face was scarlet. Peg was smoking a cigarette the little man had lighted for her. With a long, red fingernail she picked a bit of tobacco off her tongue and blew a large curl of smoke into the air. She looked down and thought of how stupid Fletcher's shiny black shoes with their pointed toes looked beside her own high-heeled green slippers with straps encircling her slender ankles, but the smile on her red lips betrayed none of her thoughts. When the one o'clock bell rang, she lifted herself from the desk and, after brushing one of her hands lightly across the back of Fletcher's neck sauntered back to her own work.

Undisturbed by the looks which Peg threw over her shoulder every now and then to Mr. Fletcher, Bob settled down to work again. Others in the room did not fail to notice these subtle cues, however, and throughout the afternoon knowing smiles and sarcastic whispers were hidden behind cupped hands.

Shortly before quitting time, Bob rose and walked to the window from which he could watch the miniature people and automobiles hurrying along the street ten stories below.

He had almost forgotten his own worries in contemplation of old Fletch and the redhead. Little Miss Potter walked up to his side and tugged at his coat sleeve. "What's been causing all the disturbance back here today? Is it Peggy Clark?" Miss Potter had always found newcomers eager to divulge office secrets which were kept from her ears.

Bob looked down into the woman's sharp blue eyes, and remembering what had been whispered to him about Miss Potter's influence with their employer, he decided to be as non-committal as possible. "To tell you the truth," he answered, "I haven't noticed anything today. I've had several reports to finish."

Miss Potter's sneer informed the young man that he was not a good liar. "Well, mark my words," the harsh little voice said, "that girl won't be in this office much longer. She's a born trouble-maker. If I were her mother . . ." The spinster shook her head disapprovingly at the girl and clicked her tongue loudly, obviously not knowing at all what she would do if she were Peg Clark's mother. Her thin lips tightened into a single straight line. She turned abruptly and in a very business-like manner returned to her desk, her movements followed by the eyes of everyone in the office.

Only a few minutes later, desks were being straightened, windows closed, and overcoats put on. Bob smiled because five o'clock always occasioned more activity than had been evidenced in the office all day.

He had just pulled on his gloves and stepped out into the cold night air when he was jabbed in the side by Ned Baker's pudgy elbow. The fat man's face was beaming with good humor. "Bob, this is too good to keep," he spluttered. "I've got to tell someone before I burst," he chuckled. "Guess what?" He hesitated, hoping the young man would venture a guess. "We've arranged a date for old Fletch with Peg Clark. Isn't that the tops?" He broke into a fit of laughter, his face turning red and his eyes glistening with happy tears.

Bob glared at him angrily. "What the . . .? What was the idea of doing that? Fletch is harmless . . . he's . . ." His words trailed off as the fat man shrugged his shoulders and, still giggling, walked away with Bob staring after him.

For a moment the young man considered trying to catch up with Mr. Fletcher and warning him, but he hesitated. "After all, what good would it do?" he wondered. "What could he say? 'Don't go with Peg Clark; she's too experienced for you.' That would be ridiculous. Fletch is old enough to take

care of himself," Bob decided. But he could not control the sickness he felt in his stomach as he shoved his hands deep into his warm pockets and walked away in the opposite direction. He wondered why he felt this way. If anyone else had decided to go out with Peggy Clark, he would have been only mildly amused, but the idea of Fletcher, whom Bob suddenly realized was painfully naive, with the slim red-head was almost repulsive to him.

Even if he had tried to catch the middle-aged little man, he would have failed. Farther down the street Mr. Fletcher was hurrying along at great speed, hoping to reach the florist shop before closing time so that he could select a fresh white carnation. Having made his purchase, Fletcher hastened to his shabby room in a downtown boarding-house. He had decided not to eat that evening because pay-day was still a week away and three days earlier he had made Ned Baker a loan of ten dollars. If he had been entirely honest with himself, he would have admitted that he did not feel much like eating anyway. In spite of his blase attitude about women, he was more than a little excited by the prospects for the evening. He was thrilled by the thought that he, in an office full of much younger men, should be the first to attract the new girl's attention. He hoped that someone from the office would see him with Peggy Clark so that they would all know about the date in the morning. Of course, he would tell Bob himself, but he preferred that everyone else should learn about it in a less direct way.

He spent almost an hour and a half in preparation. He brushed his clothes carefully and polished his shoes until he could see his reflection in them. With a tiny pair of scissors he clipped the neat gray mustache. He took infinite pains in combing his hair so that the small bald spot at the back of his head would not be noticeable. The final touch was, of course, the white carnation, which he unwrapped slowly and which he was happy to sniff in the privacy of his own room. After several moments of indecision, he decided not to take his umbrella, although he was certain it would rain before the evening ended.

By twenty minutes past seven o'clock, ten minutes before Peg was to meet him, he arrived at the drugstore which she had chosen for their meeting place. She had explained that her mother would not approve of her going out with an older man. Mr. Fletcher glanced at his pocket watch and slid onto one of the stools at the dirty soda fountain. The sleepy-eyed soda clerk, his white jacket splattered with chocolate syrup,

surveyed the dapper little man curiously. Mr. Fletcher ordered a cup of coffee, and when the soda clerk's sticky fingers had pushed it toward him, he started to plan the evening. He thought that they would probably go to the movies and afterwards to a little restaurant near the motion picture house. He hoped that Peg did not drink. He did not, and it would be embarrassing if she wanted to go to a bar. He had already slipped a package of cigarettes, the brand which Peggy always smoked, into one of the big pockets of his shabby overcoat.

When he had finished his coffee, Peg was already ten minutes late, but Fletcher had not expected her to be prompt. It was not until almost eight o'clock that he became seriously concerned. He wondered if Peg's mother had discovered their plans and had forbidden her daughter to leave the house. After all, Peg only twenty. He could not blame her mother for any suspicions she might have. He had already felt some qualms himself. He had never before indulged in a May and December romance, and although questions of propriety did not usually bother him, he was sorry that the date had ever been arranged.

At eight o'clock he decided, to his relief, what he would do. He would telephone the girl, apologize to her mother, and ask Peg to forget all about him if she could. Once the decision had been made, he did not hesitate in carrying it out. He asked the clerk for change, found the correct telephone number, and made the call. "Hello, is this Miss Clark?" he spoke into the receiver. "This is Raymond Fletcher."

Afterwards Peg's exact words were blurred in his mind, except for a few which lodged there so indelibly and so painfully that he was certain he could never forget them. "You didn't take me seriously, did you?" she had laughed. That low, mocking laugh had been the most terrible sound he had ever heard. "Don't be an old fool!" Her voice was high and angry. For a moment, but only for a moment, he felt that that was exactly what he had been — an old fool.

His face and eyes stung with humiliation when he stepped out of the phone booth. Almost mechanically, he yanked the white carnation from the buttonhole, dropped it on the floor, and crushed it under one of the brightly-polished black shoes. He turned the collar of his overcoat up around his neck and left the drugstore.

It was raining now and the bright neon lights of the city were reflected as fluid streaks of color on the wet pavement. He

did not wait for a bus, but walked out into the rain, letting it beat gently against his hot face. His head throbbed miserably, until the air and the cold rain slowly relieved the ache. "Why did she do it?" he wondered. "What reason could she have had? Perhaps she was ill and did not mean a word she had said. Maybe the telephone conversation was only a performance for the sake of her mother. Being so young, perhaps she had heard about his reputation and was a little frightened. Yes, that was it. She was frightened, because he was such a man of the world and she was so young." He would not — could not accept the idea that he was unattractive or old and foolish to her. He was only thankful he had not spoken of the date at the office during the day.

In spite of the rain, the colorful displays in the shop windows cheered him a bit. He stopped to admire an expensive suit in one of the windows and wished that he could own it. When he finally climbed the squeaky wooden stairs at the boarding-house and unlocked the door to the quietness of his room, he regretted throwing away the white carnation. He would have to buy another in the morning.