***‘EXCUSE ME!’***

***Two old friends meet for coffee and trip over the man from Mars.***

by Veronica Heley

‘Watch it!’

Too late. Bruce tripped over an outstretched foot and would have fallen if he hadn’t managed to grab hold of a table. A man hurrying through the precinct on Bruce’s heels stepped round him and sped off into the Saturday morning crowd.

‘Sorry!’ Bruce said to the people at the table.

‘Sorry!’ sang out the man behind the newspaper, whose foot he’d fallen over.

‘That’s all right.’ Bruce, bald and brown, wasn’t one to make a fuss, though he was shaken.

His large friend Leo helped him upright, muttering under his breath.

‘What?’ Bruce steadied himself. ‘Where shall we sit?’ They were beside a popular cafe, but all the outside tables seemed to be taken.

‘Be my guests,’ said the man with the outstretched foot.

Bruce hesitated. Some time ago this man had mocked Bruce and Leo for helping two dog owners in distress. He’d said, ‘Why bother?’ He’d laughed at them for being family men, and for being Christians.

Leo steadied Bruce with a hand on his shoulder. ‘Let’s go inside.’

Bruce shook his head. He and Leo had failed to defend their values and their belief in God earlier. Were they being given a second chance to do so? He said, ‘Thank you, Corin. Appreciated. They’re busy here today.’

He sat, and Leo – looking annoyed – also took a seat. After their first meeting, Leo had wanted to knock Corin’s block off. Leo’s colour was high. He still felt the same?

Bruce, on the other hand, had always wondered if God had wanted him to meet Corin again. Weeks had passed and now he’d tripped over the man’s foot. Had Corin tripped him up on purpose? Was he taking another opportunity to make fun of people whose way of life was so different from his own? Or was this God creating an opportunity out of an accident?

Leo ordered coffee for them both, while Corin folded up his newspaper and set it aside. Apparently he meant to be civil to them.

‘I always seem to be falling over you . . . or you over me, rather!’ He gave a short laugh. ‘I should explain that I wasn’t trying to trip you up. I was aiming for the man behind you, the one who ran off without waiting to see if you were hurt. But you came round the corner and got in the way.’

Leo looked round to see if they could move to another table. ‘That’s all right.’

Bruce said, ‘Why were you going to trip him up?’

Corin reddened. ‘You’ll laugh. I was being public-spirited. Not like me, what? I’d heard there’d been an increase in shop-lifting in this area . . . not that it bothered me. While I was sitting here, I realised that the window of the shop opposite reflected what was going on inside the jewellery store behind me. I could see a woman with a child who looked about ten, picking up various bits of pieces of jewellery, trying them on, and putting them down again.

‘Then she put some of the pieces into a Tesco bag she had on her arm, and not back on the counter. She came out of the shop without paying for anything, handed the Tesco bag to the child and walked away. That was puzzling, but what happened next was even more so. The child came into this cafe and gave the bag to a man sitting there.’ Corin pointed to a table nearby.

‘I thought this must be the child’s father, and that she would sit down with him. But no. Having handed over the bag, she ran off after the woman . . . who was waiting for her on the corner. No sooner had the child gone than the shop assistant shot out of the jewellery store, looking up and down the road. Presumably looking for the woman, who by that time had disappeared.’

‘I get it,’ said Leo. ‘The woman stole the goods, handed them to the child to pass on and made her escape. If she were caught, the police couldn’t prove anything because she would no longer be in possession of the goods. The child, in turn, only kept the bag long enough to pass it on to the man. I suppose he was the woman’s accomplice?’

‘I assume so from his subsequent actions. He didn’t look at the shop assistant when she shot out of the jewellery store. He didn’t show any sign of haste but called for his bill, paid, picked up the Tesco bag and made ready to leave. He was going to pass right by my table so on impulse, I put out my foot to trip him up . . . and you walked into it instead. And so he got clean away.’

Bruce and Leo looked at the jewellery shop. The shop assistant was still there, talking on her phone. Reporting her loss? A couple of teenaged girls were signalling to her that they wanted some service.

Two cups of coffee came. Leo stirred sugar into his. Bruce had his black.

Leo asked, ‘You’re going to report what you’ve seen to the police? They can issue a description of the people concerned and alert the shops to be on the lookout for them.’

‘Why should I? It’s not my job to catch criminals.’ A lazy grin. ‘If you’re so keen to interfere, why don’t you report it yourself?’

Bruce shook his head. ‘I didn’t see the theft, so I could only tell them what you’ve told us. That would be hearsay and not admissible in court.’

Leo also shook his head. ‘I did see the man, but only for a fraction of a second while he was dodging around Bruce to get away. I didn’t see him accepting stolen goods, and I don’t think I could tell you what he looked like. It happened so fast.’

Corin disclaimed responsibility. ‘It’s the shop-keeper’s own fault if he was robbed. There should have been more staff on duty.’

‘That girl might lose her job because of the theft.’

A shrug. ‘Not my problem. The owner will have insurance. No one is really hurt by a spot of shop-lifting. I’m amazed I even thought of interfering. I suppose you two, being such upright citizens, would have brought the man down with a rugby tackle.’

Bruce was thoughtful. ‘But you did think about trying to stop him?’

A languid wave of the hand. ‘A moment of insanity.’

‘I wonder, have you ever stolen from shops yourself?’

A laugh. ‘Of course not. I’d have been terrified of being caught.’

‘Not if you’d had a couple of accomplices, as that man did.’

‘Well, it was all rather amusing, but I’m not going to lose any sleep over it. I wouldn’t have bothered to tell you if you hadn’t fallen over my feet.’

Leo caught Bruce’s eye, and signalled that they should leave.

Bruce understood, but didn’t move. Instead he said to Corin, ‘I remember you said that you cared for nobody, and that nobody cared for you.’

‘True enough. Early retirement, nice pension, mortgage paid off. Free as air, that’s me.’

Bruce said, ‘I told my wife what you’d said and she nick-named you “the man from Mars.”’

‘Really? How odd.’ Two sharp lines appeared between his eyes.

‘She thought you were trying to tell us that you were lonely, that you didn’t have any family or friends.’

A strained smile. ‘Which came first; the chicken or the egg? Everyone comes from someone.’

‘But you’re not in touch with your family?’

An airy wave of the hand. ‘Some families are best seen once a year – if that.’

‘And friends?’

Leo gave Bruce a sharp look, thinking he’d overstepped the mark, but Bruce was concentrating on Corin and either didn’t see, or didn’t care to see the warning.

‘Of course I have friends!’ Corin lifted his empty coffee cup to his lip and tried to drink from it.

‘I apologise,’ said Bruce, ‘that was personal.’

‘Yes, it was.’ Corin put his cup down, managed a light laugh. ‘How on earth did we get on to the subject of my life, anyway?’

Leo wanted out. He shot his cuff to look at his watch. ‘Look at the time, Bruce!’

Bruce wasn’t finished yet. ‘Maybe I’m wrong. I thought perhaps you were lonely and, possibly, in trouble.’

‘That’s absurd. Now you’re beginning to annoy me.’

Leo had had enough. He stood up. ‘Corin, I don’t know what you’re playing at and I don’t care. If I’d witnessed the crime, I’d have reported it. As I didn’t see anything, I can’t. But how you can sit there and do nothing about it beats me.’

Corin grinned. ‘Easy. You should try it some time.’

‘Not I,’ said Leo, who looked as if he were going to thump the table. ‘You allowed thieves to get away with stealing goods, which is the same as aiding and abetting them. But what do you care, so long as you don’t have to shift yourself to do anything about it?’

Corin sneered. ‘Who made you the judge of my behaviour?’

‘God did. Yes. Right. I said “God” and I meant it. Even a small child, when faced with injustice says, “It’s not fair!’ An appreciation of right and wrong is hard-wired into us by God. You can deny it if you like, but we were all born with it.’

Bruce moved to stop Leo, but failed. ‘Not now, Leo . . .’

Leo said, ‘You aren’t particularly wicked, but you’ve put yourself and your own convenience first so often that you’ve managed to forget what’s right and what’s wrong. And that’s why you’re a lonely man without friends and family.’ He flexed his shoulders. ‘Well, that’s me done for the day. I’ll pay the bill, Bruce, and wait for you up the road.’ He marched into the cafe to pay.

Bruce took out a business card and put it on the table in front of Corin. ‘When you feel like talking, that’s my number.’

He left, too.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Leo went home and told his wife Dora all about it. ‘. . . and he sat there, grinning, saying it was all the shop-keeper’s fault and that nobody was hurt by a little shop-lifting! If I hadn’t walked away, I’d have hit him.’

‘What did Bruce say?’

Leo frowned. ‘Not much. He’s much quicker with words than I am, usually. He thinks the man’s asking for our help, which is ridiculous! If Corin had his way, we should all stand back and let thieves walk off with whatever takes their fancy. So I told him what for!’

Dora kissed the top of her husband’s head. ‘Good for you! Bruce wasn’t hurt when he fell, was he?’

‘No, no. Though he was a bit quiet afterwards. Shook him up. Bound to.’

‘It wasn’t done on purpose, was it?’

‘No, of course not. The clumsy oaf . . .’

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

‘Did he trip you up on purpose?’ asked Bruce’s wife, Sally.

‘N-no. Sort of accidentally on purpose,’ said Bruce. ‘He was considering whether he ought or ought not to interfere when he saw me. Without thinking it through, he thrust out his foot and I fell for it.’

‘You think he meant to involve you?’

‘Oh yes. He didn’t need to tell two strangers the story of the shop-lifting and its aftermath, and certainly not in such detail. He knew he ought to have done something about it, but couldn’t quite bring himself to take action. Leo’s hammering away at him probably didn’t help. Corin’s the sort who likes to think he makes up his own mind what to do. He’s contrary enough not to be swayed by someone else’s opinions.’

Sally laughed. ‘Leo is a bit of a bully, I suppose, but a nice one.’

‘He was spot on about us being hard-wired for justice.’

‘So what did you say to the man?’

‘Nothing much. I was trying to think what our old friend Kerry would have said or done, and in the end I said nothing. I did give him my card. If Corin should ring any time . . .?’

‘Treat him with kid gloves?’

‘Treat him as if you were a doctor’s receptionist and he were gravely ill.’

‘Oh, you mean . . . off-hand, and all superior?’

Bruce said, ‘Cheeky!’ and gave her a kiss. ‘We are so very fortunate, Sally, compared to others. There are so many lonely people in the world.’

Sally patted his cheek. ‘There’s a lot of selfish people, too. Corin’s selfish, isn’t he?’

‘Self-centred. I wonder what he has done, to turn out like this? I seem to remember something in the bible about only harvesting what you’ve planted. Or reaping what you sow?’

Sally remembered the words in a different format. ‘“The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others, harvests a crop of weeds.”

‘Maybe I’m asking the wrong question. Perhaps I should ask what has been done to him to make him so self-centred?’

‘Being you, you’re suspending judgment, right? Now, talking about harvest, my dahlias are going to be perfect for decorating the font in the church this year, but I did wonder about mixing them with some golden rod. It’s spectacular this year. What do you think?’

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

It took Corin five days to phone.

‘I’ve got your card here. You’re an accountant, right? I need advice about some of my shares.’

‘Then you need a stockbroker, not an accountant.’

Silence. Corin didn’t put the phone down, and neither did Bruce.

Eventually Bruce said, ‘You’d like us to meet?’

‘I suppose so. Though I can’t think what you can do for me, if you’re not a stockbroker.’

Bruce smiled to himself. Corin was anxious for contact, wasn’t he?

Corin said, ‘How about a walk along the towpath at Brentford? It’s quiet. We wouldn’t be interrupted.’

A strange choice of venue. Was it chosen because it was unlikely they’d be seen together? ‘Why not? When?’

They met on a warm, muggy morning. The sky was clouding over, threatening rain. Corin was wearing an open-necked shirt and jeans, with trainers, but carrying a collapsible umbrella. As was Bruce.

Corin said, ‘Has your angry friend calmed down yet? Anyone would think I’d insulted his grandmother. Shall I be called out to fight at dawn? Pistols for two, breakfast for one?’

‘It’s distressing to have one’s beliefs mocked.’

A short laugh. ‘Well, he must be used to that. I mean, who believes in all that rubbish nowadays? I suppose a few children may, if they’ve been indoctrinated by old-fashioned parents or grandparents. When they grow up, when they realise what the world is all about, they grow out of it, don’t they? It’s only common sense.’

Bruce was silent, praying for the right words to say. He seemed to feel a quiet, calming hand on his shoulder, and a voice saying, ‘Don’t judge him yet.’

Corin caught at Bruce’s elbow. ‘You’re an educated man. You’ve thought about life. We only get one shot at it, don’t we? Live for the moment, right?’

‘“Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die?”’

‘That’s it. And the devil take the hindmost.’

‘What about love?’

‘A passing fancy.’

‘A wife?’

‘A wife is a hindrance to everything that makes life enjoyable.’

‘Children?’

‘A drain on the purse. Monsters of ingratitude.’

Bruce looked up at the darkening sky. ‘Yet your conscience is telling you that you’ve taken a wrong turning somewhere. Thinking in the way you do has not given you peace of mind or happiness. What is the alternative? For a start, to recognise the difference between right and wrong.’

The first drops of rain hit the path ahead of them.

Corin said, ‘What claptrap! I should have known better than to try to talk sense to you.’

Thunder growled, and raindrops hit the path with increasing force.

Corin put up his umbrella and almost ran back the way they’d come.

Bruce put up his own umbrella and followed at a slower pace. He hoped he’d said the right thing. Sometimes he had to let go and let God speak through him.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

A week passed, and harvest festival was upon them. Bruce delivered Sally and armfuls of flowers to the church and went on to meet Leo for their weekly coffee date. He was in sight of his friend in the town centre when his phone rang. It was Corin.

‘Meet me in the usual place. As soon as possible.’ The phone went dead.

Bruce relayed the message to Leo. ‘What do you think about meeting him?’

Leo was disgusted. ‘Why bother!’

‘I know. But he needs us. On balance, I think we should go.’

They found Corin sitting at the same table as before. He pointed along the row of tables. ‘The woman’s back. Without the child.’

A middle-aged, frumpish woman with dyed blonde hair was sitting by herself at a nearby table.

‘Don’t look,’ said Corin, unfolding a newspaper. ‘The man’s doing the stealing today. He’s done the chemist’s already and given the stuff to the child to pass on to the woman. But he’s not finished yet. Take a seat and watch.’

They sat, and ordered coffee. The man wandered from shop to shop with the child at his elbow. Seemingly he took no notice of the woman. Both man and child were slightly unkempt. Their hair could do with a wash and their clothes looked as if they’d been bought for colder weather.

‘On the dole?’ said Leo. ‘Husband, wife and daughter?’

The man took the child into an off-licence. When they came out, the child was tucking into some crisps and the man was carrying something that looked heavy in a Sainsbury’s plastic bag.

‘A bottle? Drink of some kind? Did he pay for it?’

The man gave the bag to the child, and walked away to look into the window of a chocolate shop. The child made a beeline for the woman, who accepted the bag and put it into a shopping basket on wheels beside her. The child then ran back to the man, and they disappeared into the chocolate shop together.

A distraught shop assistant burst out onto the pavement from the off-licence. ‘Anyone seen a man with a child? There’s a bottle of the best whisky, gone!’

The woman looked up, apparently only mildly interested. She called for her bill and made ready to move.

‘Well?’ said Bruce. Leo looked at Corin, too.

Corin reddened. ‘You want me to interfere? You want me to put myself out for a shop that should have had better security? To waste my time telling the police what I’ve seen? It will make me late for lunch. Why should I bother? Tell me that. You ring the police, if you wish.’

Bruce smiled. So did Leo. ‘You worked it out. It’s your call.’

Muttering to himself, Corin got up and went over to the woman, who was preparing to leave. They heard him say, ‘Excuse me!’ and he reached over to look into the shopping basket on wheels.

The woman started back, pulling the basket over. Packages tumbled out. Six identical packs of expensive toiletries fell out followed by a bottle of whisky, which smashed onto the pavement.

‘Gotcha!’

Corin and the shop assistant made the woman sit down again and stood over her.

The man and the child came out of the chocolate shop. The woman shouted, ‘Run!’ And they did.

But they ran towards Bruce and Leo, who stuck out a foot each, and brought them stumbling to the ground. Leo sat on the man. Whoever Leo sat on, stayed down. The child dithered. Bruce gestured to her to sit on his chair and, wide-eyed with fear, she obeyed.

Bruce got out his phone. ‘Police, please . . . Is that the police? A couple of shoplifters have been caught by a man who knows right from wrong. Your attention would be appreciated.’