***‘WHY SHOULDN’T I?’***

The ‘man from Mars’ challenges our friends’ faith.

 by Veronica Heley

Bruce looked about him with a hunted air. Bald and brown, he tried to laugh at himself as he dropped into a chair. ‘Anyone would think we were fugitives from justice. I found myself checking out who was in the cafe before coming in.’

 Leo, fitting his considerable bulk into the next chair, agreed. ‘Thank the Lord, the enemy is nowhere to be seen. And don’t say he’s not the enemy. He may not be gunning for us with a rifle, but he upsets my digestion every time I see him.’

 ‘Mine, too. What are you having? Capuccino for both of us?’ Bruce gave the order to the waitress, and relaxed. ‘Sally and I have been discussing what we should give up for Lent. I suggested she gave up gardening, and she threw a cushion at me.’

 Leo laughed, shaking his head. ‘You couldn’t keep Sally out of her garden. She’d die.’

 ‘There you are!’ A beefy hand was clapped on their shoulders, and the man they’d been avoiding lowered himself into a nearby chair. ‘I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Thought you might have given up coffee for Lent . . . not that you would, of course. All mouth and no trousers, eh? Pay lip service to your religion, but don’t actually do anything for it?’

 Uninvited, the newcomer, Corin, joined the two friends for coffee at every opportunity, while continuing to make fun of their faith. Bruce’s wife Sally called him The Man from Mars. Now, he said, ‘I know what it is. You’ve seen the error of your ways and have given up religion for Lent.’

Leo reddening, half rose from his chair. ‘That’s not—’

Bruce laid a restraining hand on Leo’s arm, persuading him back into his seat.

 Leo subsided, muttering, ‘If we hadn’t ordered, I’d have walked out.’

 Bruce said to Corin, ‘I see these weeks of Lent as the farmer and the gardener do, preparing the ground for summer and harvest time. How do you see them?’

 ‘Well, the travel catalogues come in, and I consider where I might like to go for Easter. I quite fancy a singles holiday somewhere in the sun this year. Sun, sex and sangria. Be honest, if you weren’t two married old-stick-in-the-muds, you’d be panting to come, too. And before you say that it would be ruinous to my health and wealth, I have to say, “Why shouldn’t I?”’

 Bruce signalled to Leo not to argue. Corin enjoyed baiting them and could reduce Leo to seething point in a few minutes.

 Corin said, ‘Actually, I came to warn you. There’s a spot of fun brewing. I did think about leaving you in ignorance, but . . . no, it’s more fun to look forward to it, isn’t it? You know there’s this terribly serious, really dull procession on Good Friday, where people process from different churches to the town centre for an open-air service? Well, some of us who enjoy a good laugh are going to come along in our cars, with music blaring out . . . and not the wailing stuff *you* try to sing . . . and there’s going to be a klaxon or two and someone else is bringing a football rattle and, what’s it called, a vuvuzela? That horn that they blow at football matches, the sound goes straight through you. That ought to stir things up a bit, don’t you think?’

 Leo said, ‘You can’t do that!’

 ‘Why not? It’s not breaking any law that I’ve ever heard about.’

 ‘The police will stop it. You know they always walk with us.’

‘Ah, but I’ve heard there won’t be any police presence this year. The cuts, you know. It’s a perfect opportunity for ordinary people to express our disapproval of what you do.’

 Leo got up and stamped out, leaving his coffee behind.

 Corin laughed as if he’d scored a point.

 Bruce didn’t laugh. He sipped his coffee and said . . . nothing.

 ‘Well?’ Corin had expected to get a bigger reaction from Bruce. ‘Aren’t you going to tell me it would be a sin to harass this pilgrimage of yours?’

 ‘You’ve already told yourself that. That’s why you came to warn us.’

 ‘How ridiculous! I’m looking forward to it.’

 ‘I thought you were going away for sex, sun and sangria at Easter?’

 ‘Why shouldn’t I?’

 Bruce didn’t reply but sat back in his chair, smiling faintly.

 Corin took the cup of coffee which Leo had left behind, emptied sugar into it with a liberal hand, and drank it with an air of enjoyment. ‘Have you seen the news? Depressing, isn’t it? I intend to enjoy life while I can.’

 ‘Sex, sun and sangria?’

 ‘Definitely.’

 ‘And upsetting other people?’

 Another loud laugh. ‘As for disrupting the procession, it’s a free country. We can demonstrate as much as we like. Long live free speech.’

 ‘Free speech is fine, so long as it doesn’t harm anyone.’

 ‘That’s the beauty of it. We will co-exist, occupying the same roads, each of us expressing our opinions about God.’ He put down his empty cup and got up to leave. ‘Do remember to thank Leo for the coffee when you see him.’

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Thinking over Corin’s threats – for that is what they had been – Bruce called in on Leo and his wife Dora instead of going straight home.

Dora let him into their retirement flat, saying, ‘I hope you can calm him down, because I can’t.’

Bruce saw what she meant. Leo was trying to re-hang a picture which had fallen off the wall. Normally deft with hammer and nails, he was making a right mess of the job. ‘What I’d like to do to that. . .!’ He bashed his thumb and hopped around, nursing his injured hand.

Bruce said, ‘Corin did come to warn us. And he said “thank you” for the coffee.’

‘I suppose you paid for it.’

‘I did,’ said Bruce. ‘I think we’d better call a strategy meeting, don’t you?’

Dora said, ‘Do sit down, Bruce. And Leo, let me look at that thumb. Do you need a plaster on it?’

‘I need . . . what I need is . . . Bruce, I don’t understand how you can be so calm! For months that man has been making fun of everything we hold dear and now he’s inciting others to join him in disrupting our witness to the community. What harm have we ever done him?’

‘We disturb him merely by existing. If we didn’t step out of our churches and appear on the streets, we would be something he didn’t have to think about very often. He could ignore us. But now, as he sees it, we’re going on the attack. We’re going to invade the streets, to claim them for ourselves. We’re going to remind everyone that we believe that Christ died for us, and that we want to show that we care, that we remember our part in his death. That is hard for him to accept.’

‘Why should he care what we do? Think of his plans for Easter. “Sex, sun and sangria.”’

 ‘He said that to annoy us. Also, perhaps, he’s trying to convince himself that that is all he wants out of life. He’s in a dark place, hiding from the knowledge that God loves him, no matter what he has done. He is afraid that love and forgiveness can never be for him. And so he sends out contradictory signals.’

Dora said, ‘Do you remember that poem . . .? Something about a swimmer who wasn’t waving, but drowning . . . only everyone misinterpreted his actions? You think that while Corin makes threatening noises, in reality he’s in despair?’

‘If he thinks,’ said Leo, ‘that I’m going to plunge into the waves to rescue him, he’s got another think coming!’

Bruce laughed. ‘Thank you, Dora. That’s exactly it. Every time I think about Corin now, I’ll think of him struggling in a heavy sea, trying to attract the attention of someone who might be able to rescue him.’

Leo sighed, heavily, and deeply. ‘All right, then. Strategy meeting. What do we do about him and his gang of nasties?’

Bruce leaned back in his chair. ‘I am not even sure that his threat is a serious one.’

‘Why on earth would he say these things otherwise?’

‘To stir us up? He certainly set you off, didn’t he? Let’s try to look at it from his point of view. He’s not a church-goer but over the past few months he’s proved that he still has a strong sense of right and wrong. Perhaps he’s been looking for answers in churches locally, and not finding them.’

‘Our church is all right.’

‘But some are not. Perhaps life has been too easy for the general run of people in recent years. The media have convinced us that we deserve luxury and unlimited freedom of expression. This has made us self-centred and careless of others’ feelings. Some of us have begun to fudge issues, telling ourselves that it doesn’t really matter if we cheat a bit here and there, or lie to save ourselves a spot of trouble. We have forgotten that we are here to serve God and love our neighbour.’

Leo reddened. ‘I can’t say I love Corin.’

‘I am sorry for him but no, I can’t say I love him. I think my dear wife does. He calls in on her now and then. She goes on about him being more sinned against than sinning, and I . . .? I try to make allowances.’

Dora patted Bruce’s hand. ‘You see further into people’s souls than we do. So how do you think we should deal with Corin’s threat?’

‘Not with police truncheons and water cannon. My instinct is to say we do it with love, but I am not sure how.’

Leo said, ‘You remember that a few years ago we held a real-life Passion play in the town centre? A few rowdies threw things until some of the youngsters stepped in and stopped them. Now my granddaughters are going to be around this Easter. Suppose I ask them to join us on the walk?’

Dora frowned. ‘What if things got nasty? We mustn’t expose them to danger.’
 Leo brushed that aside. ‘Sticks and stones may break our bones but playing loud music at us won’t.’

Dora objected. ‘What if the situation gets out of hand and sticks and stones are used? We’re not having a police escort this year. We can’t ask our children to run a gauntlet of abuse.’

Bruce said, ‘I think . . . I may be wrong . . . but if we spell out the risks, everyone will have to make up their own minds whether to join us or not. Some may feel intimated and make an excuse not to come. Some will weigh up the risk of being shouted out or whatever, and decide that they can put up with it to show that they believe in Christ crucified. Some may come because they are stroppy by nature and relish a fight—’

Dora said, ‘No fighting!’

‘No, no,’ said Bruce. ‘No fisticuffs. That’s the last thing we want. But some of us may actually welcome the idea that we can stand up and be counted.’

Leo patted Dora’s hand. ‘Sweetheart, I know what you’re thinking. Our son and his wife will probably sit on the fence, and so will one of the grandkids. But Chloe . . .! Now there’s one stroppy teenager.’ He raised his eyes to heaven. ‘You know perfectly well that young Chloe likes nothing more than a good argument. Chloe will want to come. In fact, it will be impossible to keep her away.’

Dora sighed. ‘Yes, I know what you mean. She’s a natural leader and yes, I know some of the teachers at school think she’s a pain, but I can’t help but be proud of the way she’s kept going to the Youth Club and has been campaigning for equal opportunities and refugees. But we mustn’t pressurise her into going.’

Leo said, ‘No pressure needed. I’ll have a word with her tonight. And, I’ll get her to

ask around, see if any of her friends will join us. I’ll lay out the dangers of the situation, never fear.’

 Dora sighed. ‘I suspect it will make her only the more eager to come.’

 ‘And is that wrong?’ said Leo. ‘“Fight the good fight”, and all that. ‘What do you say, Bruce?’

 ‘I agree with Dora that there may be some risk attached to the walk. I think we have to make that clear when we ask people to join us. But we’d be giving in to threats if we didn’t ask. I’ll ask Sally this evening. I’ll also ask around our own church to see who else will join us, after warning that things may become uncomfortable.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Dora. ‘You’re right, of course. All that’s necessary for evil to succeed, is for good men to do nothing. That’s a quote from somewhere, though I don’t know where. But I’m sure it’s right. We’re not much cop as Christians if we let a few threats stop us from standing up for God.’

 Bruce got up to leave. ‘We fight the good fight by being pilgrims?’

Leo was buoyant. ‘They won’t dare cause trouble if there’s enough of us.’

Dora saw Bruce to the door. He could see she was troubled.

He said, ‘You’re worried that someone may get hurt? We’ll pray about it, right?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘We must all pray about it.’

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It was coffee time after the church service.

‘Bruce, have you a minute?’ The minister took Bruce aside. ‘This walk of ours. You’ve got people really stirred up about it. That’s good. There’s nothing I dislike more than wishy-washy half-heartedness.’

 Bruce pulled a face. ‘I do warn them of the dangers. I worry about those who want to bring their children.’

 She said, ‘They’re quite capable of making up their own minds about it. I hear the stewards are getting some hi-vis jackets so that they can guard our flanks along the way.’

 Bruce smiled. The thought of Leo acting as a steward for the walk was both satisfactory and amusing.

 The minister said, ‘I can’t walk that far yet.’ She’d recently had an operation on her ankle and was still on crutches. ‘My husband is hiring a wheelchair for me so that I can keep up with you but this year, for the first time, I won’t be able to carry the cross. I want you to do it, not for me but for the church. For Christ.’

 Bruce nearly dropped his cup. ‘What! Me? Why, I . . . I’ve never thought of . . . surely there are other people better —’

 ‘You have a strong faith which is deepening year by year. I want someone who understands what it means to carry a cross in public. It will be both a burden and a blessing. But, as you have warned everyone else, I now warn you. Carrying the cross may make you a target for those who wish us harm. Promise me you’ll think about it?’

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‘How are you getting on?’ asked Leo, when they met at the cafe the day before the march.

‘I’m exhausted. People keep ringing me up, asking if they can join and bring a friend. And others ring and say they have to drop out. I can’t keep track.’

‘Neither can I,’ said Bruce. ‘Sally insists on coming. I’ve warned her. I haven’t seen anything of Corin lately. Do we know if he’s still intending to do us a damage?’ He looked around and groaned. ‘Ah. Here he comes. Prompt on cue.’

 ‘Good to see you both!’ Corin grinned as he took his seat. ‘I hear you’ve been drumming up support for your Walk for God. Must have taken you hours. How many favours did you have to call in? Well, it’s worked. I hear that the threat of interference has made more people than ever want to join your little promenade. My friends are, reluctantly, impressed, and have called off their demo. I trust that pleases you both?’

 Leo made a sound like a kettle coming to the boil, but Bruce threw back his head and laughed.

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In the glory of the Easter morning, Leo helped Bruce to fit chairs around the table for lunch. They would be seven or eight, depending on whether or not a neighbour’s mother was well enough to join them. ‘Three chairs down one side, two the other, head and foot,’ said Bruce, fitting the last chair in.

 Leo said, ‘Do you remember discussing what we were going to give up for Lent? I tried to give up chocolate. I did cut down on it, but I can’t say I was totally successful. How about you?’

 ‘I took something on, rather than giving something up. I asked God what I could do to show Corin the truth about Him.’

 ‘Little did you know how much that would cost you.’

‘True. But it worked out all right in the end, didn’t it?’

Very few of the people who’d turned out to watch the procession had actually jeered or booed. Very little of the threatened disruption had taken place. The odd car had hooted and driven slowly along beside them for a while, causing some of the women to herd the children away from the kerb. An unkempt man holding a beer can had shouted some abuse, but the pilgrims had been amused by him rather than frightened . . . and Leo’s granddaughter Chloe – it would be her who responded, wouldn’t it? – had shouted out an invitation to the man to join them! Upon which he’d lurched away, muttering to himself.

That had been a moment to cherish.

Leo said, ‘I didn’t think I’d enjoy stewarding, but in the event, I found it easier than I expected. My size and weight have been deplored by the doctors, but they helped when I had to face down the louts who thought it would be a laugh to rot up the procession.’

‘You did well, mate. Dora tells me you made them retreat just by walking towards them with a “Don’t mess with me” look on your face.’

Leo grinned. ‘It’s the hi-vis jacket that does it. And when we joined up with the people at the church on the hill the number of walkers and stewards doubled, and there was no more trouble. It was good, wasn’t it?’

Bruce nodded. Carrying a cross in the procession had been quite an experience, and he couldn’t talk about it easily. He had managed to catch a glimpse – no more than that – of what it must have been like for Jesus to carry the cross through streets he knew well; streets which were crowded with people who either jeered at him or who were silent in their sympathy. Carrying the cross had changed him, deepened his faith.

He said, ‘How strange it is that the attacks of an unbeliever caused us to rethink the event. More people turned out to walk the walk than ever before. More people were reminded of what Easter is all about. More people, hopefully, will think about God more often in the future.’

‘The enemy intended to do us harm, but ended up with egg on their faces.’

‘Sooner them than us.’ They both laughed.

‘Well,’ said Leo, ‘at least the failure of his dastardly plan means we’ll be relieved of Corin’s company for a while. He must be feeling pretty down about it.’

There was a ring at the doorbell.

Corin! Who had not, emphatically *not*, been invited.

He was bearing an enormous bunch of flowers and wearing a wide grin. ‘I’m not too late, am I? I hate to miss out on a celebration.’