***‘How Dare He!’***

by Veronica Heley

***Can anything excuse Corin’s behaviour?***

**Bruce and Leo met outside the coffee shop and scanned the interior before stepping inside.**

**‘No sign of Corin, thank the Lord,’ said Bruce, ordering a cappuccino. ‘He did say he had something else on this morning. My wife is sorry for him. She thinks he’s hiding a tragedy in his past—’**

**‘Which doesn’t excuse his attacking us for believing in God.’ Leo was out of sorts. His wife had put him on a diet and he was drinking black coffee instead of hot chocolate with cream.**

**A sharp voice broke in. ‘Corin told me you might be here. Leo and Bruce, right? One long and thin with a sour expression, and the other fat and grumpy. You are the idiots who believe in God and go to church on Sundays?’ An expensively packaged woman in her thirties slid into the vacant chair at their table. ‘I’m Crystal, by the way: Corin’s ex-wife. I understand he’s been telling you a pack of lies about me.’**

**Leo gaped. ‘No, he hasn’t mentioned—’**

**‘Oh, please!’ said the newcomer. ‘Don’t try to cover for him. I don’t care, personally, if he wants to present himself to you as a cross between Superman and the Archbishop of Canterbury. But if you leak his lies to the newspapers, I’ll sue the pants off you.’**

**Bruce blinked. He and Leo had long speculated about what had turned Corin sour. Perhaps they were about to find out? He said, ‘Yes, we know Corin. May we buy you a coffee?’**

**Crystal gestured with a beringed hand. A diamond flashed. ‘I pay my own way, thank you.’ She was exquisitely tailored and sleekly beautiful, but her voice was harsh. Her coffee came. She took it black, without sugar.**

**She said, ‘Let me put the record straight. Corin used to hang around on the fringe of our crowd. He’d won a poetry prize which gave him some kudos, and he was not unpersonable. But he was never really one of us. At the time I was engaged to my best friend’s brother. That is, until he threw me over the week before the wedding. You can imagine how upset I was.’**

**She didn’t look upset. She looked as if she were commenting on the weather. She said, ‘I went into shock. Corin took advantage of me, didn’t give me time to think. He persuaded me to marry him instead.’**

**Bruce said, ‘Couldn’t your family have helped?’**

**She shook her head. ‘Daddy was going through his third divorce, and Mummy had flown out to California for treatment after her boob job went wrong. I married Corin in a daze. I wore the going-away dress I’d had had made for the big wedding, and we had a registry office ‘do’ and tea at the Ritz instead of a reception at the Dorchester. Then he took me to what he called his love nest, and it turned out to be a rented three bed-roomed terraced house in Ealing! As soon as the door closed behind us, I knew I’d made a serious mistake. And when I enquired about the honeymoon, he said we were going to commune with nature. In other words, he expected me to go camping in the Cairngorms. I did the only thing possible. I left.’**

**Leo gaped. ‘You left him at the altar?’**

**She corrected him, ‘Not at the altar, but yes; that evening. I told him, “Our marriage was a mistake. It’s over.” He begged me not to go. He said how much he’d dreamed of having a child and that he’d always look after me. Too, too sentimental. He forced me to . . . the bruises!’ She shrugged. ‘Actually, they did come in useful. I took some photographs and used them in evidence when it came to the divorce.’**

**‘Bruises?’ Leo tried to understand.**

**‘He tried to stop me leaving. I feared for my life. I suppose he told you that the baby was his.’**

**Bruce blinked. A baby . . .? Did she mean that she’d been pregnant at the time? If so, whose baby had it been? The fiancé’s, or Corin’s? Or someone else’s?**

**She took a sip of coffee, shuddered, and put the cup down. ‘Disgusting coffee! How can you drink it!’**

**Bruce said, ‘There was a baby?’**

**She waved the suggestion aside. ‘There was no baby. That was all in Corin’s mind. I sued for divorce, using the photographs of the bruises. Daddy’s solicitor sorted everything out for me. And I moved on. I’ve been helping Daddy with his PR work ever since. As he said, there’s plenty of fish in the sea, and I’ve landed a good one this time. I’m getting married again next month, in New York.**

**‘The reason I’m here is that Corin’s been sending me letters, trying to stop the marriage. He’s saying that I was sleeping around, that I was pregnant by another man while I was engaged. He’s saying that my fiancé found out and that’s why he called off the wedding. Total nonsense of course. Corin says he’d told you two all about it, so now I’m putting you in the picture. One hint of this in the papers and I’ll know who to sue.’**

**Bruce said, ‘He’s told us nothing.’**

**‘Good. That’s what I wanted to hear. Keep it that way, right?’ So saying, she gathered herself together and stalked out. Her heels were so high she walked like a model. Like a giraffe.**

**Leo stirred himself. He piled three teaspoons of sugar into his coffee and stirred it. ‘That is one poisonous piece of work. He’s never spoken to me about her. Has he said anything to you?’**

**Bruce stroked his upper lip, his eyes hooded. ‘No, he hasn’t. Let’s try to make sense of what she’s told us. Her fiancé broke off the engagement the week before the wedding. Why? It makes sense if he’d discovered she’d been sleeping around with someone other than him. If she’d been pregnant by him, he’d still have married her, wouldn’t he?’**

**‘Do you think there really was a baby?’**

**‘Corin seems to have thought so. Might it have been Corin’s? He believed in the baby and he wanted her to have it – or so she says.’**

**Leo nodded. ‘But when she realised what her future was going to be like as his wife, she walked away from him. Poor Corin. He was out of her league, but . . . but he did lay hands on her. I don’t know that I blame him for that.’**

**Bruce’s lips twisted. ‘No, but it did put him in the wrong. Her story makes me understand him better.’**

**‘Does it make his attacks on us any more acceptable?’**

**Bruce sighed. ‘No, it doesn’t. Let’s see if his behaviour changes, now he knows we’ve met her.’**

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**After they’d had their coffee, Leo did the weekly shop and went home to tell his wife about Corin’s unfortunate marriage. He was surprised to find Dora in the sitting-room, staring into the distance. His wife was always on the move, cooking, cleaning, talking to friends and family on the phone. It was unlike her to sit and do nothing.**

**‘What’s up?’ he said. ‘You’ll never guess who descended on us in the cafe . . . Corin’s ex-wife! And what a tale she had to tell!’**

**‘Yes,’ said Dora, her eyes still something he couldn’t see. ‘He said you were safely out of the way.’**

**‘Corin came here?’**

**‘He wanted to tip me the wink. That’s the way he put it. About you and Sally.’**

**‘Me and Sally?’ Leo gaped. ‘Bruce’s wife, Sally? But . . . what about me and Sally?’**

**Dora fixed her eyes on him. ‘The usual, I suppose.’**

**Leo was uneasy. ‘You can’t mean . . ? Me and Sally? No, that’s ridiculous. We’ve never, ever. And she’d never look at anyone else but Bruce! Tell me you’re joking, Dora. You know me. I’ve never looked at another woman.’**

**‘Yes. I know you, Leo. When you look at other women’s legs, your eyes go wide and then narrow. Maybe you fantasise about them. But I know it goes no further.’ She got out of the chair and brushed her hands together. ‘Of course I knew it was a lie, but it upset me for a bit.’**

**Leo reddened. ‘Dora, I have never, ever—!’**

**‘After he left, I sat here, thinking over our life together, the ups and downs, and how we’ve come through in spite of everything. What’s the matter with Corin? Even while he was telling me his story, I was wondering what made him want to destroy other people’s marriages.’**

**‘I can tell you that. His ex-wife kindly filled us in, this morning. He’s been hard done by, and it’s twisted him. Now he can’t rest till he’s made other people as miserable as he is.’**

**Dora smoothed her hair back. ‘You can tell me over lunch. Stupidly, I let his lies get to me and forgot all about lunch. Let’s go out for a change, shall we? But before we go, I think we should ring Sally and warn her what Corin’s up to.’**

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**The phone rang in the hall as Bruce let himself back into the house. Laden with shopping, he ignored it to take the bags through to the kitchen and dump them on the table.**

**He called out, ‘Sally, are you getting the phone?’ No answer. He thought Sally was probably in the garden. She loved her garden.**

**He looked out of the window but couldn’t see his wife. Not in the greenhouse. Not tying plants up on the herbaceous border. Where was she? He went in search of her, and found her in the sitting room, blowing her nose. He said, ‘What’s wrong, love?’**

**She turned away from him and put up a hand to hide her face.**

**‘Sally, love? Something’s upset you?’**

**To his alarm, he saw she was weeping.**

**She said, ‘I do understand . . . I wish you’d told me . . . I know I’m not up to your . . . I should have seen it coming, but . . . you know me! I’m so stupid. I didn’t realise! And you’re so kind, you didn’t want to hurt me.’**

**Subduing an impulse to shake his wife, Bruce said, ‘Tell you what, love?’**

**‘That you . . .’ She gulped. ‘That you didn’t fancy me any longer.’**

**‘What!’ He started to laugh. Then realised she was desperately serious. ‘Sally, my darling, what on earth makes you think that?’**

**‘I’d rather you told me outright, instead of trying to hide it from me. It’s bound to come out. Everyone says the wife is the last to hear about it.’**

**‘Hear what? Sally, I can’t believe that you—’**

**‘I mean, it’s all right about you marrying me for my money, because I’m a terrible housekeeper and you do all the shopping and cooking —’**

**‘Sally, stop right there!’ He felt this heart thumping in his chest. Yes, she had brought money to their marriage, but he wasn’t short of a penny and he certainly hadn’t married her for that. So what nonsense was this? He said, ‘Idiot! Look at me!’**

**She lifted her eyes to his, and what she saw convinced her that his love for her was both true, and deep. She drew in a long breath.**

**The phone rang again. And again they ignored it.**

**Bruce said, ‘Sally, I married you because you walked into my heart and made it yours. Every day, I give thanks for you.’**

**‘Do you really?’ She tried to smile. Not a good effort.**

**‘Do you want me to put it in writing?’**

**She did smile properly then, and let him put his arm around her.**

**In the silence they heard someone leave a message on the phone.**

**Sally said, ‘That’s Dora’s voice, isn’t it? She sounds upset. Something’s wrong?’ She fished for a handkerchief. ‘You’d better take it.’**

**‘Only if you’re safe to leave for a minute.’**

**She blew her nose. ‘I promise not to move. You have the rest of the day to prove you really do love me.’**

**Bruce got to the phone as Dora rang off, so he played back her message.**

**Dora had said, ‘Sally, I’ve had Corin round, making up lies about Leo. Trying to break up our marriage. Leo and I are a bit worried that he might try it on Bruce as well. Can you ring me on my mobile?’**

**Bruce looked at Sally. ‘Now I get it. Corin’s been round here this morning, feeding you lies about me?’**

**She nodded. ‘I suppose I’ve always thought you couldn’t really love me as I love you. You’re so much cleverer and—’**

**‘I wasn’t clever enough to see this coming. Sally, why don’t you ring Dora and re-assure her that we’re not heading for divorce and then I’ll tell you what happened this morning. It may go some way to explaining why Corin is acting the way he does.’**

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**Dora said to Leo, ‘I get what you’re saying about Corin, and I suppose I ought to feel sorry for him, though not very much. The point is, what are you going to do about it?’**

**Leo was grim. ‘How dare he! I’m going to knock his block off.’**

**Dora smiled, but shook her head. ‘I don’t want you going to prison for assault. He’s not worth it. But you and Bruce are going to have to put him straight.’**

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**Sally said to Bruce, ‘Corin’s playing a dangerous game. He upset me terribly. I used to feel sorry for him, but not now. What are we going to do?’**

**‘I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to frogmarch him through the streets and force him to grovel at your feet until he begs you to forgive him.’**

**Sally giggled. ‘You wouldn’t. You couldn’t!’**

**‘That’s better.’ He was relieved to see the lines of strain disappear from her face. He said, ‘I love it when you laugh like that. So, what am I going to do? I really don’t know. He’s sought us out, and attacked everything we believe in. We’ve made allowances, we’ve welcomed him into our houses, and he repays us by trying to break up our marriages.’**

**Sally said, ‘I feel such a fool. I believed what he said.’**

**Bruce frowned. ‘He lied to you and he lied to Dora. I wonder if he believes his lies. It’s possible. Crystal says there was no baby and no abortion, and I must confess I really don’t know who is telling the truth. She may have money and be about to make a brilliant match, but I can’t say she struck me as being a happy woman. As for Corin, you’re right, he’s playing a dangerous game and he’s got to be stopped. Leo and I will have to try to make him see sense. What we shall have to say to him, I really don’t know. It’s time for some serious praying.’**

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**Bruce and Leo went to see Corin. He wasn’t living in the three-bedroom semi which Crystal had described, but in a substantial block of flats in a quiet, tree-lined street.**

**When he saw who was standing on the doorstep, Corin made as if to close the door but thought better of it, and said, ‘Come in, if you’re thin! Stay out, if you’re stout!’**

**The sitting-room was furnished with angular pieces; glass-topped tables, sharply-angled chairs in oatmeal fabric; stripped wood floor, cream-coloured walls and blinds. The only picture was a charcoal sketch of a nude without a head. Bruce thought that if Corin had had this place when he married Crystal, she might have stayed.**

**Corin said, ‘To what do I owe the honour?’**

**Bruce and Leo took their time looking round and then, without being invited, or saying anything, each took a seat.**

**Corin looked uneasy, but tossed off a laugh. ‘You’ve come to tell me you’re both heading for divorce?’**

**‘Like you?’ said Bruce.**

**Corin drew in his breath. ‘Ah, so my ex-wife did find you, did she? And given you her version of what happened? In a word; she had hoped to pass off my child as her fiancé’s but when he tumbled to it and jilted her, she agreed to marry me . . . and reneged on the deal when I couldn’t offer her the lifestyle to which she’d been accustomed. Quite something, isn’t she? You should have seen her when she was younger, the most perfect flower in the garden. She’s still beautiful, but there’s a stink of decay about her now. Did you catch a whiff of that? It dates from the abortion, of course. May I offer you some coffee?’ He grinned like a death’s head. Yes, it still hurt.**

**Bruce said, ‘Yes, that’s bad. We understand and feel your hurt. Have you had any therapy for what happened? No? Perhaps you should. Perhaps nursing your pain and being unable to forgive her, has made it hard for you to move on with your life. Perhaps it’s that which makes you want to destroy other people’s faith and marriages?’**

**Corin laughed, ‘You think your marriages are rock solid? You deceive yourselves. All women are rotten and men are not designed to be monogamous. Of course you stray, both of you.’**

**Leo said, ‘You’ve got it all wrong. Because you’ve been hurt, that’s no reason to attack others.’**

**Corin said, ‘You Christians live in a false paradise. You set yourselves goals which faulty man cannot reach. Of course you fail. You only have to look at the divorce statistics to see that. You cannot tell me you have never desired another woman.’**

**Leo reddened. ‘Yes, I have looked. But I love my wife and it has gone no further.’**

**Bruce leaned forward in his chair. ‘You have studied us well, Corin. And tried to destroy us by pointing out our weaknesses, but you’ve missed the strengths. Your latest attack has merely shown me how much I love my own wife. Admit it; all your attacks on us have failed. I’m not sure whether what you’ve done is against the law of the land – possibly we could get the police to prosecute you under the law of slander? – but it is against the laws of God. And has it made you any happier?’**

**‘I don’t look for happiness. Only for justice!’**

**‘You are being twisted by hate, which can turn inward and destroy you. Leave justice to God. Try forgiveness, instead.’**

**‘Forgive Crystal? Not likely. She killed my child! And look at her! Is she sorry for what she did? No! She flourishes like the green bay tree.’**

**Bruce got to his feet, looking tired. ‘Corin, for my part, I forgive what you have tried to do to me and mine. It has not come easily to me to forgive you, but I have done so. I must ask you not to approach me or my wife again. Understand?’**

**Leo also rose. ‘I can’t say I’ve forgiven you, Corin. I’m working on it, and that’s as far as I can go for the present. But likewise; you are not welcome in my house again.’**

**Corin started to laugh. There was, perhaps, a note of hysteria in his laughter. He said, ‘And where shall we three meet again? In church, perhaps? You can’t forbid me to enter your church.’**

**‘That’s true,’ said Bruce. ‘Harvest time is upon us. A time of thanksgiving for all the good things in our lives.’**

**‘The book says that what a man sows, so he shall reap.’**

**‘If he sows misery, he will reap a bitter harvest. But if he sows forgiveness, he will find peace. Perhaps by Harvest time you will have found something in your life to give thanks to God for. And if so, we will see you then.’**