

The devil incarnate of Midanvale

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the very essence of submission and devotion, searching his master's stony face for the first sign of mercy. All was absolutely still in the room for nearly half a minute as Nilo held his blue eyes unwavering on his master's brown ones; but in the end it was Laertius who looked away first — and I knew Nilo had won.

I then saw something which made me rub my eyes, something I'd never seen before in all my years' service with Laertius, and never expected to see. Laertius told the boy to get up, and himself rising from the couch put his arm round Nilo's slim waist, straining the boy's hard, athletic young body close to his side, and talking to him all the while in urgent, vibrant tones, as they paced the room together. My eye took pleasure in the contrasted colours of the scene — the green Assyrian carpet on which they walked, my master's Tyrian purple toga with its threads of silver wire, Nilo's glistening golden-brown legs and his muscular torso clearly outlined by the tight white singlet. From my point of concealment I couldn't catch all they said, but there was no denying the extraordinary tenderness and affection in Laertius' voice, the forgiveness offered (and dutifully received), and even — most unexpected of all — the occasional twinkle in his eye as they shared some joke together, which I couldn't hear but guessed to be at the expense of the old senator who had started it all. So much humanity and warmth I had never conceived to exist in Laertius at all; but he seemed now in a moment to have bridged that unbridgeable gap between master and slave, and to be treating Nilo like a son — the erring boy that it is a father's special delight to forgive after punishment and love again. How long would it last, I wondered. I had not recovered from my amazement when, still talking, they passed together out of my sight into an inner room.

The Devil Incarnate of Midanvale

by Chick Weston

This would all not have happened if Bill's mother had not slipped on the staircase and fractured her ankle. Had she not slipped, then Bill would not have had to cancel his holiday arrangements the night before our departure, and we would have travelled down to the coast in comfort in his new car.

But, because she slipped and fractured her ankle, I suddenly found myself without my holiday companion, and it was too late for me to cancel my leave at the office. There was nothing for me to do but to go on my own, and in my car. My car, or jalopy I should call it, was of very ancient vintage, now really intended merely for taking me from my home to the sports club or to visit friends, and no longer for long country trips.

The following morning I set off with some misgivings, and travelled at a leisurely pace, realising that I could not complete the journey in one day. All went well until I reached the long winding hill before Midanvale. Then the jalopy became temperamental, and it was with difficulty that I coaxed her over the brow of the hill and was able to let her run quietly down into the town. The hotel was situated on the river bank, and since it was already late afternoon I decided to spend the night there. The hotel was full but I was able to engage one of the small bungalows overlooking the river.

Having showered and changed I decided to take the car to the garage on the next corner. A mechanic heard my story and looked under the bonnet, then grinned at me, and said: «Say, this jalopy is a mighty sick girl! The job will take a couple of hours and we close in a few minutes.»

«But I must be off first thing in the morning — can you not just fix her up temporarily?»

«Nope. I doubt whether you would get out of town, but if it is really urgent, I have a place just down the road where I do repair work in my spare time. If you like, since you brought the car here, I'll just get the O.K. from the chief and I'll work on it tonight.»

«I would be most grateful if you would get her repaired.»

«O.K. then.» He turned towards the office and shouted: «Chiefy, this man is in a hurry to get out of our fair town in the morning. Can I take the job along tonight and fix her?»

«Sure, Don, you go right ahead» came the deep-voiced reply from the back of the garage.

We managed to get the car started and in a minute were in an old dis-used yard with a pit and a lean-to shed.

«I'll nip home now and have supper and start immediately afterwards», said Don.

«Right, I'll see you later then. I'll also get along and have something to eat and put on some old clothes in case I can give you a helping hand.»

A little after an hour later I was back, wearing an old pair of trousers I used for fishing and an old sweater, although it was pretty hot that night. Don had not yet arrived, but he came along a few minutes later, looking very neat and clean. After a brief greeting, he stripped off his jacket, shirt and trousers under which he wore a pair of football shorts and then donned a set of old, rather tattered overalls. He set about stripping and cleaning the generator and cleaned out the fuel system. All the time he worked with a quiet efficiency, talking very little, and occasionally asking me to hand him some tool or passing some general comment. I was however able to study him carefully. He was in his early twenties, had a very pleasant face that could hardly be called handsome, but a lively, friendly smile, and an obviously cheerful disposition. His physique, from my brief glance at his upper body as he changed, was extremely solid and well tanned.

«Well, that is that», he said at last; «now we'll just try her out». The trial run was successful and she behaved beautifully. I asked Don how much I owed him and he named a very reasonable price.

«Thanks a million. I am most grateful to you».

«You're welcome. Glad to be of service, and glad to get the extra dough. By the way, what is the time?»

«Good heavens. It is just after half past eleven. I did not realise how the time was flying».

«Oh blast», muttered Don «there won't be a drop of hot water at the house for a bath, and just look at me».

«Why not come back to my bungalow at the hotel then; I am sure there will be hot water there.»

«Thanks, I really need a good scrubbing. Gosh, how can you let your car get into that condition. She is a bit of an old crock, but you should look after her better than that . . . the dirt in the engine was incredible.»

«I know and I blush with shame, but come on, let's get going.»

A few minutes later we were in the bungalow and Don stripped off his overalls, shorts and shoes and got under the shower which was recessed in the

corner. In the meantime I brought in his other clothes and laid them on the bed, and then stripped and tied a towel around my middle. After a while, during which time we had been talking about inconsequential matters, Don turned off the shower and drew aside the shower curtain and emerged drying himself.

«What about all that grease on your back?» I said.

«Oh Hell, I could not see that. Would you like to wash it off for me?»

Would I, really!! I was delighted, and so stripped off my towel and we stepped into the shower recess together. I started scrubbing his shoulders and back and was thrilled by the rippling muscles and smooth skin, so much so that I let my mind wander and almost unthinkingly let my right hand stray a little from its allotted task. Suddenly, without warning, Don spun round and his elbow caught me a terrific blow in the chest so that I staggered back and felt my foot slip.

The next thing I remember was opening my eyes to find myself, naked and wet on the floor, outside the shower recess, and with my head throbbing terribly. Everything was still. My first attempt to rise was unsuccessful, then I finally sat up and looked around. Everything came back to me suddenly. There was no sign of Don — his clothes were gone and a wet towel lay on the floor. Painfully I got up, dried myself and staggered to the bed. Nothing else in the bungalow had apparently been touched, but that was not my only worry. Had Don gone to fetch the police, or a gang of his friends? Then I must have passed out for when I woke up it was bright and sunny outside. My head still ached abominably, but with a vague realisation that there might be trouble I packed my bags and thanked my lucky stars that I had paid my account the night before. It was only just seven o'clock as I crept out of the room, piled my goods into the car and headed out of Midanvale with all possible haste.

I must have had a touch of concussion for my headache remained with me for several days and I had to spend most of the time lying down quietly, but I soon recovered and thereafter thoroughly enjoyed my holiday. On the return trip I drove straight through Midanvale without stopping.

Now all this happened two years ago, and the incident was all but forgotten until last night. A wealthy friend of ours had decided to celebrate his departure from our town with a grand masked ball . . . for «friends» only . . . and all of us were invited to his home. It was a fabulous party, and the costumes were magnificent. Bill went as a Roman soldier, whilst I also borrowed my costume from the local theatrical company and went as a Red Indian warrior.

At eleven o'clock our host announced that masks would be removed at midnight, but in the meantime he had two lovely prizes, one for the best costume, to be selected by popular vote, and the other for the person who could guess the identity of the greatest number of people. To decide this, each person was allocated a number, and we had to write the name of the person next to the number. I succeeded in identifying most, but there were several I could not place. The one was a mincing little creature dressed in a lion skin, so I wrote down «Puss in Boots», whilst another, a very portly gentleman in rich medieval costume, I called «Henry VIII». There was however one unknown who really intrigued me. He wore black tights which fitted over his feet, was naked from the waist up except for cross-straps over the shoulders, and his head was encased in a black mask. Over his shoulders was draped a black cloak. He no doubt represented some ancient executioner, but I suddenly got an idea and wrote next to his number . . . «The Devil Incarnate of Midanvale».

After the parade and everything was over, we went on dancing whilst our host and two friends went off to work out the winners. Soon afterwards, I was standing near one of the doors leading on to the terrace when the «Executioner» came over and whispered in my ear: «Come hither, wild man, I would have words with thee . . . and with thee alone».

We walked to the end of the terrace together and then he turned to me, put his hands on his hips and said quietly:

«So, at last I have run you to earth, and apparently you recognised me.»

«No!», I think I must have sounded quite startled, «I don't think I know you, and I certainly did not recognise you. Who are you anyway?»

«But you called me «The Devil Incarnate of Midanvale».

«That was just a joke. You reminded me of an unfortunate experience I once had there . . . at the time I thought I was going to be executed.»

My companion burst out laughing.

«Well, this joke is certainly on you. Oh, but this is priceless».

Then he whipped off his mask . . . it was Don!

He bowed gravely with a medieval charm, then looked at me, grinned and put his arm around my shoulder.

«Come, we'll take a stroll around the garden and I'll explain everything. You see, when we met in Midanvale I had only just learned the truth about myself, and considered myself to be madly in love with «Chiefy» from the garage . . . I discovered afterwards that I was merely a bit of fun as far as he was concerned. When you were scrubbing my back that night I was on the point of being unfaithful when you made the first move. I was so startled that I swung round, caught you in the ribs with my elbow and you slipped, hitting your head on the floor. I was so startled that I dried myself quickly, dragged on my clothes and fled. On my way to the garage next morning I realised that I had been a fool, had acted hastily and went back to apologise, but you had gone. Ever since then I have wondered where you were, except that I knew from your car numberplate that you came from this town . . . I could have traced you this way, but . . . well, I did not.

Then recently I heard that our host of this evening was selling his garage and having met him at a party once a year ago I phoned him and started negotiations. I could not afford the garage, but it is a first-class proposition and I put a scheme to my employer that he buy the place and let me manage it on a profit sharing basis, so now I am here as the new manager. May I have your custom? I shall look after your car well, I assure you.»

«Red man accept offer of big White Chief» I said as gravely as my excited voice would let me.

A minute later his powerful arms were crushing me as he sealed the bargain in no uncertain fashion.

«By the way», I said, «I live here in a bungalow down by the river».

«Is that so? What are we waiting for?»

«That bewitching hour of midnight» I added as we turned back to the house.

. . . As I said at the start, this would never have happened if Bill's mother had not slipped on the stairs and fractured her ankle. Had she not slipped, I should not now be lying rather weary, but gloriously contented, in my bungalow by the river, whilst beside me, still asleep, with his head in the crook of my arm, lies an Adonis, if ever there was one, a veritable re-incarnation of Apollo and Achilles, whom I had so mistakenly named «The Devil Incarnate of Midanvale».

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