

The Man in the Tent

“Hello, gorgeous.”

The voice came from behind her. Clare stiffened.

The bench she was sitting on was her quiet place, her haven from the world. It leant silently and unobtrusively into the slope of the ancient hills, among bushes and bracken, with the occasional pop of poppy colour in the summer and a pervading smell of wild garlic in the spring. It was always so peaceful here away from the main paths to the summit, with the trill of birdsong and scurry of tiny feet the only sounds.

The morning frost with its nose-tingling coldness had given way to a sunny, cloudless January day, but her breath still made dragon’s smoke when she blew it out like a child.

The voice angered and frightened her. The spot was so isolated.

After a messy divorce from a serial womaniser, followed by an even messier relationship with a man married to his job, the last thing Clare wanted was male attention. Why is it, Clare thought, that all men think you like doing their washing and cooking their meals for them? A war raged in her heart against the opposite sex. Her small fists clenched in anger.

The sound of his voice violated her peace. The crunch of his boots as he moved round to the side of the bench filled her with dread.

“Just go away,” she thought. “Leave me alone.”

“My name’s Tarquil.”

The voice was pleasant, low, well-educated, not your usual rapist or sex pest. But Clare had found such people come in all shapes and sizes, and a nice voice was nothing to go by.

The unexpectedly polite introduction forced her to look at the wrecker of her tranquillity, the interrupter of her private thoughts.

He was a tall, slim man with dark frizzy hair sticking up quite high above his balding temples. His dark, equally frizzy beard was well kept and his teeth when he smiled white and even. His eyes were brown and gentle like a deer's. All of his clothes seemed to be various shades of green. He smelt of earth and grass. The original Green Man, she smiled inwardly.

The eyes were regarding her solemnly, gauging her reaction, not wanting to frighten her, as if she was some wild creature he had come across and wanted to make friends with. He looked at her expectantly.

"I'm Clare." Her reply surprised her. Why should she tell this strange man her name? But it seemed the natural thing to do. He was so at home here, he belonged on this hillside. She was no more afraid of him than she was of a rabbit or a squirrel. It was she who didn't belong. She was the intruder.

"Hello, Clare." He paused as if trying to decide what to say next.

"I've seen you here reading your book many times and I've been trying to pluck up the courage to talk to you."

Clare said nothing. She had been totally unaware in all those times of apparent solitude that she was being watched.

"What is it you're reading?"

Thinking to herself, mind your own business, instead, out of a politeness drummed into her by her mother, she showed him her book – Tolstoy's "War and Peace". She was on a drive to improve herself and read real literature.

He didn't look surprised or impressed.

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“I’m reading Virgil’s “Aeneid” at the moment. So much better in the original Latin.”

She looked at him properly now. Why should she be surprised? There seemed no desire to impress on his part. He was just telling the truth.

“Well, nice to finally meet you, Clare. I’m off to buy some methylated spirit for my lamp.”

And with that he tramped off, swinging his knapsack onto his back – green, of course.

Despite herself Clare was intrigued. Who needed methylated spirit for a lamp these days?

Then she put it from her mind. She had enough worries of her own.

She stayed away from her bench (it had someone else’s name on it but she thought of it as hers) not wanting to encounter the eccentric Tarquil again. But after a few days she thought, why should any man stop me from doing what I want, going where I want?

“Hello gorgeous.” Tarquil’s well-modulated tones came from behind her again and strangely she felt no threat from him, as if he belonged here more than she did. He was the timid wild animal, and she was invading his space.

The smell of grass and earth filled her nostrils and she looked up into his gentle smiling face.

“Finished “War and Peace” yet?”

“Not yet,” she smiled. She lifted up her book, this time a detective story by Ann Cleeves. “To be honest, I’m having a bit of a rest from it.”

“It can be a bit of a slog”

So, he’d read “War and Peace” as well!

“Where do you live?” he asked.

Clare’s suspicions rose again. Was he looking for a nice warm house to move into? Her previous boyfriend had moved himself into her house and taken over. The last thing she wanted was that again.

“In Worcester,” she said, being deliberately vague.

“I live in a tent up there,” he said pointing to the bush covered slopes, as if it was the most natural place to live in the world, as if everyone lived in a tent in the hollow of a hill.

Somehow, she wasn’t shocked. It seemed to suit him so well. But her suspicions were still aroused. It was January, the tent must be cold. Maybe he was looking for a nice warm bed and a nice warm woman to fill it. Well, it wasn’t going to be her.

As if reading her thoughts, he said “I like living outdoors. It’s not cold if you’re well wrapped up. I gather wood for a fire and have methylated spirit for my lamp, as you know.”

When he smiled his whole face lit up, not because he wanted anything but because he was genuinely happy. He was the most at peace person she had ever met.

As the weeks went on and the bluebells started to appear on the slopes, until they carpeted the ground with their mauve heads and filled the air with their strong, sweet scent, she would sit on her bench and after a short while he would join her, the green earth smell of him mingling with the spring fresh fragrances. They would chat about books and music, passions for both of them. His voice was always low and gentle, as if he was taming a wild bird, and he never sat close to her.

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He told her he earned the little money he needed for food from busking, playing Bach on his penny whistle. She wasn't sure how suitable Bach was for a penny whistle, but she could imagine him playing it like some greenwood Pied Piper.

One day, as he was walking away from her, he turned his head and sang out "I quite fancy you, you know."

She could tell it had taken him a lot to blurt out his feelings as he walked away, using a trite cliché rather than the poetry he undoubtedly knew.

Then he was gone.

Clare sat dumbstruck. So that's what he'd been doing all along. She'd been right from the start. A nice warm bed with a nice warm woman in it.

She stayed away from her bench for several weeks this time. The last thing she wanted was another man in her life.

Then again, she thought, why should I let any man stop me from sitting where I want? If she saw him again, she would tell him to leave her alone.

She picked up her "War and Peace" once more and sat determinedly on her bench. The bluebells had fallen over now, their green leaves and flower stalks turning brown. They had the acrid smell of decay.

But no low gentle voice called to her, and no smell of earth and grass came to sit next to her.

Day after day, week after week, she sat there and instead of being relieved that she would no longer have to fend him off or tell him bluntly that she wasn't interested, she began to worry. Was he ill? Had some kind of accident befallen him? Should she go and look for his tent on the slopes of the hill? Should *she* now pursue *him*?

Amused by this turnaround, she began to realise she missed him: missed his gentle voice, his knowledgeable conversation, his company. She hadn't realised how lonely she had become.

Then one day walking into town for some shopping, she heard the thin strains of a penny whistle playing Bach. Her heart jumped. That could only be one person.

Like the followers of the Pied Piper, she was drawn to the music.

"Hello, Tarquil."

The man stopped playing, startled. Clare saw he was changed. Lines had appeared on his smooth brown face; grey hairs streaked his fuzzy brown hair. He smelt of washing powder instead of grass and earth. But most of all, she realised, he had lost that sense of peace and happiness that had attracted her. Perhaps he's found himself that nice warm bed with that nice warm woman in it. She was surprised how much she minded this image. Yet he seemed so unhappy,

"Hello, Clare." He didn't smile, he frowned and looked to right and left as if trapped.

"I can only stop for a minute," he said, looking at the few coins in the hat on the ground. He sounded desperate.

"They've moved me into a flat. Someone reported me for homelessness and the council found me somewhere to live." He grimaced. "It's alright. Noisy." He put his hands to his ears. She could imagine: babies crying, voices raised in anger, loud televisions, music blaring – all the sounds of unhappy people packed close together. So different from the gentle sounds of wild animals.

"It's the bills." He sounded hunted and looked again at the few coppers in the hat. "Rent, heating, council tax. And it's all done on computers. I'm not very good with technology."

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Clare thought, why would you need a computer in a tent?

“I have to go to the library. It takes hours.”

He looked like a caged animal taken from its natural habitat and put in a zoo.

She realised then what had never occurred to her before: that some people like being homeless. Free. Costing no one anything and no bills to pay. Why shouldn't they be allowed to live as they please, causing no harm to anyone?

Without thinking Clare said, “Come and live with me.”

His face lit up, his eyes alight with desire as well as relief.

“Not really live with me,” she hastened to say. “Just say you're living with me and find a better spot for your tent where no one can find you.”

His smile broadened and somehow the lines disappeared.

“Alright,” he chirruped, carefully putting away his penny whistle, one of his few possessions in life.

“Where do you live? I'll do it now.”

A month later, on a warm late summer evening, Clare and Tarquil lay together under the stars outside his tent on the hills. A small fire burnt near to them, more for comfort than for warmth, and the smell of woodsmoke filled her nostrils.

Tarquil, naked beside her, smelt again of earth and grass. His brown skin was smooth and warm as she stroked his hairless chest. She was at peace.

There's a lot to be said, thought Clare, for living with a man in a tent.