

TWO CAN PLAY

Bertram Chandler

He said, "I had a funny dream last night."

"There is nothing more boring than being told about other people's dreams," she told him.

"Yes. But this was an odd sort of dream. A nightmare, almost..."

"Even worse."

"But it was - odd..."

"All right," she grumbled, "If you must. But I'll need another cup of coffee to give me strength to hear about it."

He went through to the kitchen, refilled her cup and his own, brought them back to the bedroom. As she was taking her first sip from the fresh cup he said, "I suppose that it all started with the aphides..."

"Not again!" she complained. "You're a monomaniac on the subject. You tell everybody how they started on the acacia, then spread to the hibiscus, and then even began nibbling the new, tender shoots of the ivy..."

"I don't think they're all the same species," he said, "But the ones on the acacia and the hibiscus are both black..."

"What about your bloody dream?" she demanded. "Let's get it over and done with."

"All right. You know that I didn't spray last night."

"Too well. You were belly-aching all through dinner that you should have sprayed, even though it was blowing a howling south-easterly and raining cats and dogs."

"Well, I should have sprayed, but I didn't. And it sort of nagged. Weighed on my mind, you might say. Anyhow, I had this dream..."

"Make it short," she told him. "It's time we were up and dressed."

"I had this dream. The moonlight was streaming in through the bedroom window, and I saw someone standing there in the beam of it, I wouldn't say that she was transparent, but she was sort of translucent..."

"She?"

"Nobody you know, darling. Come to that, nobody I knew. Until then. Her skin was a sort of pale olive green, and it seemed to have a roughish texture. Her hair was a brighter green, with golden blossoms in it. Her face? I couldn't see it clearly, but I know that she was beautiful..."

She said, "You have an odd taste in girlfriends. Who, may I ask, is the original?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody?"

"Yes. Can't you see? — she was a dryad."

“A dryad?”

“A wood nymph. Didn’t they teach you Greek mythology at the school you went to? The dryads were the souls, as it were, of trees. They lived in the trees, but they were the trees. If you killed a tree, you killed the resident nymph...”

“Gawd!” she muttered.

“I knew who she was, of course,” he went on. “Those yellow blossoms in the hair made it obvious. And I could see the filthy black specks on those same blossoms, and clustering thickly around the end of each hair tendril. She looked at me reproachfully and asked, ‘Aren’t you going to spray me?’”

“And was that all you did to her?”

“Yes. I got up - only in my dream, of course - and went out to the shed for the spray. Then I got back to the front garden she was just merging with the acacia. But I could see her smiling at me, could see the gratitude in her eyes...”

“So you plastered the poor wench with that muck that smells like a dogs’ public convenience?”

“I know it stinks, but it’s fairly effective. And you must keep it up.”

“I know, I know. How many times have you told me?”

“Anyhow, I was spraying away, pumping for all I was worth, when I hear a buzzing noise. You know the sound that a swarm of bees makes? Well, it was like that. But more sinister. It frightened me. But I went on spraying and went on spraying, even though there was a dark cloud over the moon and I couldn’t see a thing. It wasn’t cold, though. It was hot, unpleasantly hot. I was sweating like a pig. I could hardly breathe. And the air was... stinking. No, not the smell of the spray. Worse - much worse. And behind me a voice said, ‘Stop!’”

“I stopped. I forced myself to turn round. I could see him standing there, even though it was dark, even though he seemed to have brought his own personal darkness with him. Like a cloud it looked - and it was a cloud. A cloud of flying insects that hovered about him, that obscured his face. I was glad of that. I didn’t want to see what he looked like. I had already seen too much - the rottenness, the oozing putrescence that should have been dead but wasn’t, the tattered lips Over black, crumbling stubs of teeth. Just an oozing black shadow, he was, but there was this faint, yellow-green light that picked out an occasional detail - and every time it was a detail that I’d sooner not have seen...”

“It’s your own fault,” she said. “You shouldn’t have made a pig of yourself over that cheese last night. You know it always makes you dream.”

“But this dream was... different. And just as I had known who the girl was, so I knew the name of this... demon.”

“Old Nick, I suppose.”

“Don’t be funny. It was Beelzebub, of course. Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies. And he asked in that putrid voice of his, the voice that sounded like bubbles of stinking gas gurgling up from the depths of a cesspool, ‘Why do you kill my people?’”

“I was frightened, but I remembered the dryad, how she had looked when she came to me for help, more woman than tree, and yet, somehow, alive with the magic of all flowering plants. I remembered her - and remembered these horrid black specks in her beautiful hair, the pest that would kill her unless I

took action. And this memory gave me the courage to answer. ‘They’re pests,’ I told him. ‘They’re ruining my garden.’”

“He laughed - an unpleasant sound like defective plumbing. It stank like it, too. He asked, ‘Didn’t one of your scientists, a certain Doctor Einstein, point out the relativity of all things?’ ‘What do you mean?’ I asked him. ‘What I say,’ he replied. ‘And what Doctor Einstein said. Literally and metaphorically. But poison away, my friend, poison away. Slay your thousands. But remember that two can play at that game.’”

“And...?” she asked.

“That was all,” he replied.

“Just a nightmare,” she told him. “Too much cheese before turning in, and this obsession of yours with the spray gun...” She paused, listening intently. “Would you mind turning up the radio? This is one of my favourites...”

There was guitar music, and the mournful female voice tunefully demanding, “What have they done to the rain?”

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