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Autor: Gibbons, Orlando
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Cranberry Red

A Cape Cod Story

by Orlando Gibbons

The moment he saw the bog, Oliver knew he would like it. It stretched towards a few hills in the distance, its flat green surface crisscrossed by small, regular canals. Here and there, a tall tree offered rest to the eyes. Mrs. Briggs' house, a rambling mansion of the 1880ies, stood at the entrance, surrounded by a few box-like houses like a mother hen by a few chicklets.

«The cranberries will be ripe in a few weeks,» Mrs Briggs remarked as she helped him take his luggage out of the old car. «Then we'll have a crowd. Right now, it is lonely. No one will bother you, Mr. van Buren. I gave you the front room, second floor. I only hope the ceiling isn't too low. You are very tall. Some coffee later?»

«Thanks, yes,» Oliver answered following her up the stairs. There were a few excellent sketches on the wall and the bathtub was positively luxurious. He changed and went down to what Mrs. Briggs called the parlor.

«Nice table you set,» he remarked, «just like coffee time in Europe.» Mrs. Briggs flushed. «I know, you just returned from there. And Helen told me of your concert tour, of your . . .» She broke off, embarrassed. Oliver decided to make it easy for her. After all, she was the aunt of Helen, his fellow student from music college who had gotten him here.

«Yes, I sort of flunked out,» he said. «That's why this place will be fine. A wonderfully long stretch of land.» He glanced out of the window. Something red was moving.

«A Brava,» Mrs. Briggs explained. «A Portuguese from the Azores. They work here. They always wear red shirts. Later, there 'll be more. Now we have a few unmarried young men, keeping the bogs in shape.»

Oliver nodded. Soon Mrs. Briggs left, explaining dinner would be at seven after her husband's return.

Oliver went to the piano. An old Blüthner, solid, heavy. As soon as his fingers touched the keys, they felt at home. He struck a few chords, began a piece by Brahms, then went into the first movement of a Prokofieff concerto. There, at a certain point before the fast run, his fingers stopped as though hit by a stone.

Oliver rose quickly, went to his room, threw himself on the bed . . . Biel, Switzerland . . . A sold-out concerthall. He had just finished a complex Mozart sonata, started on the Prokofieff when it began. A choking tension had invaded him making him feel as if drugged. His heart beat so fast he could not hear anything and then he had blacked out.

What followed was a nightmare, fortunately blurred in his memory. Mrs. Sydel, his agent, had arranged a speedy return by plane. In New York, Oliver discovered that Bob, his roommate, had disappeared, without explanation. The landlord was reluctant about it. Then Mrs. Sydel had completely taken over, let him out of his contract — five more concerts — had found the Briggs house, pacified the landlord and sent him off. Of course, she knew about Bob, Oliver was certain. Bob had been in trouble before. His infatuation with truck drivers

and dockworkers bordered the suicidal. Even at the start when Oliver, a green-horn from El Paso, Texas, had taken the apartment with Bob, Mrs. Sydel must have guessed. Oliver, himself weary and disillusioned at 27, had to give Mrs. Sydel credit for still handling the Oliver van Buren account, though he was down and out . . .

Soon Oliver had established a routine. In the morning, he sat in the garden with some music books, or talked to Mrs. Briggs who was painfully happy to have company. He went for walks in the bog, he drove her to the village for shopping. Mr. Briggs, at first suspicious, had softened, obviously glad his wife had company. Oliver practiced in the evenings — for some reason it seemed easier. One Thursday, as he stepped out for a walk since the light was particularly entrancing, he nearly fell over two small children.

«Why, hello,» Oliver called out, «where do you come from?» The children smiled, their eyes dark and luminous in their coffee-colored faces. «From there.» The girl pointed to one of the shacks. «We live here. We come to hear the Big Music. Ar you making it?» When Oliver admitted it, the boy came closer. «My name is Rico. I am seven, Maria is only five.»

From then on, Oliver deposited the children at their home at night. They had established their rights, they counted on him, talking about Father — Nico Rodrigues — and Manuel, their cousin who lived at the other end of the bog and played the guitar. They would bring him over soon so Manuel could hear the Big Music. Could they?

Oliver said yes, but forgot all about it because the next weekend it started again. It began with insomnia, two nights, three nights. He couldn't get much food down. No walks in the bog, no mornings in the sunny garden. He was lying on his bed, feeling throttled. Then the Wave assaulted him, the panic, the attack, and he gave in so that he trembled. He fought through a state between faint and sleep, at the end yielding to the underworld. Finally, the morning led him gently back to life . . .

Mrs. Briggs never asked questions. When he came down again, she only said: «You must eat more, Oliver. Even your hair suddenly seems tired.» «It always does when I am sick,» Oliver answered. «The blond simply fades and I look like a mouse.»

He went to the piano and tried a few pieces for children — at least he could halfway master those. Later, when he walked into the garden, the children shrieked with glee. «We came every night,» Maria explained, «but you did not play. Why?» «Don't ask questions,» Rico scolded her. «I go get Manuel, he heard you tonight.» He scampered off and before Oliver had time to rally, Rico returned, dragging someone after him. Oliver took a good look.

Manuel was not only handsome, he moved with the grace of a young animal. His arms, protruding from the faded red shirt, were much too muscular for the small, thin-fingered hands. In his brown face, the eyes appeared paradoxically blue, and they kept gazing at Oliver. As Oliver stretched out his hand — an enormous hand with long, strong fingers — Manuel moved back. «You play the piano long?» he finally asked. «Ten years,» Oliver answered. «Your hand, let me see your hand.» «I am six feet two,» Oliver said, lifting his hand, «dont forget that.» But the children had started yelling. «Didn't I tell ye, didn't I tell ye, like asparagus stalks, like real stalks.»

Manuel whirled around. «Don't you talk like this. Go on, go home.» He shooed them off. «I would like . . .» he began but then started running away like a frightened animal.

The next morning — a Saturday — always appeared to Oliver like an extension of his dream. He had taken a pill, fought his way through a dark forest, pursued by apparitions, when Manuel materialized before him, half naked. Oliver felt the smooth shoulder under his hand, wanted to speak, but woke up instead. Now as he sat in the sun-flooded garden, a book on Verdi on the table, a huge truck drove by. From the open back, someone waved at him. Then suddenly a piercing screech, a cloud of dust, another screech. The truck had driven onto a sandbank. Oliver ran toward the truck. Among the men crowding around the wheels he recognized Manuel, half naked, his torso smooth as mahogany wood. The other men, shoving, shouting, pushing, paid no attention to Oliver. When Mrs. Briggs' car drove around, the truck was free of the sandbank. While she talked to the Bravas, Manuel managed to step close to Oliver. «Come tonight to the dance. I play. I want you there.» For a split second a warm hand pressed on Oliver's back. The others could not see it. Oliver wanted to ask where it would be, when, how to get there, but Manuel had jumped up on the truck and the huge vehicle rushed off in a spray of sand and dust.

Fortunately, Rico knew everything. The dance, he explained, was at the Northern end, near the tall oak tree. He even thought he might join Oliver at ten o'clock but, as it turned out, his parents knew better. Oliver followed the main canal, crossed two bridges, took a turn, then spotted a few figures, heard voices mingled with music. Someone was playing a guitar, someone who had never learned to read music but followed the instincts of a perfect ear. Oliver's heart did a jump. This was a Fandango, a melancholy, sombre plaint, interrupted once in a while by a sudden, passionate outburst. Now Oliver recognized Manuel, sitting on a tree stump, his red shirt open over the smooth chest, a small gold chain with a medal around his slender neck. Nearby were gathered a dozen people — Oliver could not quite make them out. They beat the rhythm with their hands. Then a man and a girl got up and danced, slowly, with measured steps, performing a ritual they had brought over from the Azores. There were, Oliver discovered, only two women. Soon the young men were dancing together, in perfect rhythm, circling around each other, all except two who were apparently too drunk to keep on their feet.

Oliver, hidden by the oak tree, was undecided. He didn't wish to intrude, he was an alien, he didn't belong here. At the same time, he did not want to go back without having spoken to Manuel. At this moment, a fist grabbed him, shoving him forward. A drunken voice roared something in a foreign tongue.

Oliver managed to stay on his feet. The two drunken Bravas were jabbering away, making threatening gestures. The music had stopped. It had become too quiet.

«He is my friend,» came a loud voice out of the dark. Manuel, holding Oliver by the shoulder, pushed him gently forward. Others lighted a few flickering torches. «He plays music like this.» Manuel put his fingers to his lips. «At Mrs. Briggs' house.»

The tension was broken. They all smiled at him, crowding around. Manuel opened another bottle of rum, a glass was given to Oliver. Then the dancing started again. This time two young men rose to perform something which was

obviously a dance of affection. They came close to each other, they fell apart, they came close again and as they passed Oliver, he noticed that their hands were clenched and their eyes held each other in a firm grip. As Oliver sat there, listening to Manuel playing his sad, fervent music, he felt a sweet contentment stealing over him — something he had not known since childhood . . . Only when the torches gave out, did the dancers stop. Oliver had hoped to be alone with Manuel but it didn't seem possible before the others. Or was Manuel embarrassed? In any case, Oliver let himself be taken home by Rico's uncle, back to Mrs. Brigg's house.

*

Sunday was too quiet. Morning and afternoon went well enough yet in the evening he simply could not practice. He went to his room, gulped down two shots of whisky, but to no avail. He got out of his clothes, dried himself, put on new things, gulped down a third shot and went out. He took a new direction — he didn't want Rico to see him now. Only after he had wandered about for a long time without knowing which way, he realized he had forgotten his flashlight. Night had fallen, the stars stood cold and distinct in a velvety sky. Oliver hurried on as though pursued. The canals glittered ominously. He didn't know how long he had been walking. He only knew he was lost. The bog stretched without borders, there were no markings, no roads, just a few paths. He would have to spend the night here. He shivered slightly and went on, stumbling, over decrepit little bridges, to the right, to the left, into nowhere. He had failed miserably. He would never give another concert. Here he was, in the middle of the bog, a failure at twenty-seven. He threw himself on the soft berry bushes. His heart beat so loud it seemed to fill the night with a roar. Oliver listened. There, something else beside this thumping dull noise . . . From somewhere a few strains of a stringed instrument. Now it seemed closer, a melody from a guitar . . .

Oliver got up, followed the music blindly. He fell, he got drenched when wading through a pond, thorns scratched his arm, tore his sleeve. There, this must be the oak tree . . . he rushed, lost his footing, stumbled.

He did not fall. He held on to the tree trunk. Out of the night, a figure moved toward him. The music had stopped. For a second, a flashlight in his face. Then the voice, the hoarse voice, even now he knew it.

«What happened?» Manuel kept repeating as he guided him into the hut. «You look sick . . . sit down. Here.» Manuel lit a hurricane lamp. A soft yellow spread over the wooden walls. A glass. Something sweet poured down his throat. «Rum,» Manuel said. «Hey, you are frozen and wet.» Oliver trembled — he could hardly speak. He didn't resist when Manuel untied his shoes. Manuel then slowly undressed Oliver, rubbed him dry with a towel, and put him to bed. One more glass of rum and Oliver was asleep . . .

He woke up. For a second he did not realize where he was. The hurricane lamp was still burning. Next to him on the cot was Manuel, very still, his eyes gazing at him. Now Manuel turned, his torso glittering like stained wood in the honey-colored light. There was not a single hair on his chest. His eyes seemed unnaturally luminous. Slowly, Oliver put his arm around the shoulders, and then Manuel threw himself on Oliver's chest, half sobbing, half laughing, talking at him in his foreign tongue. Perhaps it was right that Oliver did not understand. He began stroking the firm, velvety skin. The first kiss seemed to last forever.

*

The dawn was clear and hopeful. A few clouds skittered across the blue of an endless sky. Manuel, somewhat bashful, set the coffee before Oliver. In his woven shoes, a towel around the middle, he reminded Oliver of the statues of flute players on Greek vases. They looked at each other. «Your health!» Manuel smiled, lifting the thick coffee cup. Oliver lifted his, smiling back. The peace which had fallen on him was so new, so shockingly blissful, he had to learn how to accept it.

«You feel right, Oliver?» Manuel began and as Oliver simply nodded, he went on, a little hesitant. «Will you . . . can you come here again? To visit? I know I am only a stupid Brava and you are a real American, educated and nice and you have studied . . .» «Oh be quiet, Manuel!» Oliver went around the table and put his arm around the mahogany shoulders. «I want to be with you all the time. I will come tonight. And if you feel like it, I'll teach you how to read music.» Manuel did not answer. His thin fingers laced around Oliver's enormous hand, and Oliver drew him to the window. As they gazed out into the wide expanse of the bog where the huge trees held watch over the shimmering canals, where the blueish smoke from the Brava huts rose like hopeful banners into the morning, Oiver knew the turning point had come, right here. He was not alone any longer. The Wave could not hit him any more. Manuel stood by him and where Manuel was, the dark angels of fear and destruction had lost their power.

Short Review of an important new German book

Dr. Rudolf Klimmer. *Die Homosexualität*. 260 pages. Price 5 dollars, including postage. Can be ordered through The Circle.

Despite the fact that most of our English speaking subscribers will be unable to read the book by Dr. Klimmer, *Die Homosexualität*, we feel that a book of such importance should be brought to the notice of our over-seas friends. Dr. Klimmer is a specialist in nervous diseases, medical adviser to a prison, and a medical expert in the law-courts. He practises in Eastern Germany. To give the reason why Dr. Klimmer wrote his book, we quote from his introduction: «Homosexuals form a minority group at a disadvantage. Because homosexual people start their lives at a disadvantage I decided to write this book.»

From the point of view of «The Circle», the mention of our magazine no less than a dozen times in the extensive bibliography attached to the book has shown us that the work «The Circle» has been doing for 27 years has at least not been in vain.

Instead of a lengthy review of this highly important book, we prefer to acquaint our English speaking subscribers with some pointed extracts.

THE CIRCLE

Extracts from: Dr. Rudolf Klimmer, *Die Homosexualität*.

As a practical result of looking at homosexuality from a purely biologically scientific standpoint, three facts are indisputably established, no matter whether homosexuality is looked upon as inherent or as caused by environmental influences: