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POOR LITTLE RICH BOY

BY FRANK WHITFELD

(Conclusion)

«Look, David. I can't promise to pay it back, anyway not at all soon. I have a job to make ends meet as it is.»

«It's a present, Jim. Cut out this paying-back nonsense.»

«Would twenty pounds be alright? Can you spare that? It's about all you've got here. You're a real friend, David. I just don't know how to thank you.»

«We'd better go into town tomorrow; I'll cash a cheque.»

It was wonderful to see Jim himself again. The rest of that evening was perfect. Two weeks later he asked me for money again.

«I'm ashamed, David. I wasn't really truthful. I didn't tell you how bad things were. I owe money, I'm being pressed for it.»

He knew I had money. How could I refuse when it meant so much to him? Twenty pounds, well, I could spare it. The week after that he asked again. Then the bombshell.

«David, I hate to say this, but I think our evenings here had better stop.»

«Jim, why? Are you tired of me?»

«You know it's not that, but I still need money. If you don't come here any more then I can't ask you for it. And I don't want to ask you. I'm dreadfully ashamed, so... we'd better pack it in.»

I tried to take his hand, but he wouldn't let me. «Don't make it hard for me, David. I hate this just as much as you.»

«But I must see you, Jim. I must come here to you. It's the only thing that makes life worth living, Jim, please let me, please.»

He took me in his arms and kissed me.

«We do need each other, Look, David. I've an idea. You say you can't live without this, I can't go on without money. I'll give you what you want, David, and you give me what I want and need.»

«You mean... I *pay* you for this?»

«Don't put it like that. Let's just say that you have plenty of what I need: I have just what you want. What do you say?»

What could I say? I needed him so desperately. After all, what was money to me. And so, my weekly visits to Jim continued.

One day after breakfast Guy came to my room.

«I've had news for you, David. Your father is ill.»

«What sort of ill?»

«It seems to be some tropical infection, rather obscure. Now don't look so worried; he's in hospital, and receiving expert attention. They say his condition is not a cause for anxiety, though recovery may be rather slow. They will keep us informed regularly.»

It was strange that although I had never felt much affection for my father I was pretty upset by the news. I couldn't bear to think of him ill and all those thousands of miles from home. I wrote to him several times, something I had not done for years, but he never replied. Maybe he was not well enough to write, or perhaps he just couldn't be troubled. Anyway, I gave up trying, and didn't write any more.

The reports on his condition arrived fairly regularly, and were not specially disturbing, though they were not specially encouraging either. Somehow I never seemed to get to know any more about it.

Jim drove me into town several times, chiefly so that I could cash cheques, and sometimes we stayed in to see a film and have dinner. Twice we went to the little pub, and on each occasion Leo was there. The first time he was rather distant, just waved an airy acknowledgment but did not come over to speak. The second time Jim called him over to join us, and he was very affable.

I decided he was rather fascinating, but in a strangely unpleasant way. I had to keep looking at him, admiring his unusual colouring and rather hot amber-coloured eyes. But I could not really like him or feel at ease with him.

Spring deepened into summer, and summer's golden days slipped through my fingers quickly, much too quickly. I suppose that happens when one is happy.

The money business between us had become established. I just slipped ten or twenty pounds to him now and then, and we didn't discuss it. He was good and kind

to me, and gave me something to live for. I never felt that it was just because of the money that he let me go to him. I think. I hope he was happy too.

From time to time Guy enquired about Jim, and I was usually rather vague and said that I quite liked him and he was certainly an improvement on Marks. I mentioned also that I had taken Jim to a film several times when I wanted company. Guy did not make any comment, and that seemed to be alright.

One evening Guy nearly caught me coming away from Jim's flat. Somehow that evening time had escaped us, and I had quite a shock when I saw how late it was. I was hurrying across the garden when I ran straight into Guy.

«David! What on earth are you doing?»

«Just taking the air.» I hoped my voice didn't sound as odd to him as it did to me. «I didn't feel sleepy, and it's a lovely evening. I often do this, you know.»

«But it's quite late, and not all that warm. You should be wearing a coat.»

He didn't seem in any way suspicious, but after that we were more careful.

Not long after that the money business cropped up again. Jim was being specially nice to me that evening, and I felt so happy. He was playing with me, teasing me a little as he often did. Warming me up, he called it. Then quite suddenly he sat up and looked at me rather straight.

«How much do you think I'm really worth to you, David?»

«I don't understand.»

«Remember that letter you wrote me, that last really marvellous one? You wrote there that you'd do absolutely anything for me. I just wondered how far you really meant that.»

«Why, Jim, you know I meant it. I would do anything I could.»

«Like giving me fifty pounds?»

«Fifty pounds! That's a lot of money.» I felt quite startled, it was so unexpected.

«I wonder what anyone reading that letter would think.»

«You haven't shown them to anyone?»

«Of course not, David, don't look so scared. But if I did, well, I don't think he would say fifty pounds was a lot after all you said.»

«You want fifty pounds, Jim; is that it?»

«Well, yes I do, pretty badly.»

Suddenly I felt scared. Jim was being perfectly nice, not in any way threatening, yet behind what he said were implications so frightening that for a moment I felt quite ill.

«Jim, promise me that you will never show those letters to anyone, I should never have written them. Will you destroy them, Jim? Please.»

«But I treasure them. I couldn't possibly destroy them if you really meant what you wrote.»

«I did; you know I did.»

«Do you want to stop all this, David? I'll stop tonight, now, if that's what you want.» He got up and moved away from me.

«No, Jim, that's not what I want. Don't even suggest it.»

He came back to the bed and sat beside me. I wanted him so badly I didn't care about anything else. He let me draw him to me, but just lay there, making no move.

«Please, Jim, please.»

«And my fifty pounds?»

It was so little beside my need. «Yes, yes. I promise.»

He took me to him, and colour came back into the world.

Sometimes when I was alone I worried about the letters. Jim was so nice that I never feared for one moment that he would ever make use of them, but suppose somebody found them. I decided that I must persuade him to let me have them back, or to destroy them, but I could never nail him down about it. He would laugh, change the subject, take my mind off it which he could very easily do. When I was with him everything was alright, but sometimes when I was alone that little niggling fear would start, and would grow and grow.

And yet, what had I to fear? The money did not matter, there was plenty to satisfy Jim, and if he wanted and needed money, well, bless his heart, he should have it. Nothing I gave him could ever match what he gave me. So life moved on, happily, peacefully.

And when life is happy and peaceful it seems that things will be always that way, so that when the blow falls the shock is all the greater. I was with Jim one evening, not worrying about the time because Guy had told me that he would be back late. One

minute I was lying in Jim's arms, serene, content, the next moment Jim had leapt up leaving me shocked and bewildered, the door had been flung open and Guy was in the room, his face white and grim.

«Get your clothes on, David.» I hardly recognised the cold, contemptuous voice as his. And when I did not move: «At once, David.»

Jim was standing against the far wall, his face also white and frightened. He made no attempt to hide his nakedness, and he looked like some magnificent stricken animal, so that I longed to comfort and protect him. Somehow I managed to get my clothes on, and all the time there was a ghastly silence. When I was ready Guy motioned to me to go. As I reached the door I looked back at Jim: his face was quite desperate.

«I'd never have harmed you, David. I'd never have harmed you.»

Guy moved between us. «See that you are out of here by nine o'clock tomorrow, you and all your things. And think yourself lucky that you are getting away with this.» Then he moved me through the door, and in silence we went back to the house.

I was shaking violently and could not stop.

«Get straight into bed.» Guy said, still in that cold, dead voice.

He went away, and soon returned with two tablets which he made me swallow.

«Those will make you sleep. I shall deal with this in the morning.» Without another word he turned and left me.

I felt deathly cold and kept shivering. I could not get to sleep. Every time I closed my eyes I seemed to see Jim standing as I had last seen him, his face white and full of horror. At last the tablets began to work. I seemed to feel numb and terribly tired. Eventually I slept.

The tablets must have been pretty potent, for the next thing I knew the room was flooded with sunlight and one of the servants was waking me and giving me some breakfast on a tray. I felt frightful, absolutely doped. I could not eat anything, but I drank some coffee, and presently I began to feel better. I was amazed to find that it was after half past ten.

Then gradually I began to remember the awful scene of the night before. Bit by bit it came back to me, but somehow I just couldn't believe that it had really happened. I seemed to hear Guy's voice saying: «See that you're out of here by nine o'clock.» Nine o'clock! And now it was nearly eleven. In a panic I dressed and hurried across to the flat, but even as I climbed the stairs I knew that I was too late; Jim had gone. The full sense of loss came to me then, and throwing myself on his bed I wept bitterly.

It was there that Guy found me hours later, and took me back to the house. I think he was shaken by my extreme grief, for I did not have to face the terrible scene I had expected. He spoke at great length, on the whole quite kindly, but very little of it got through to my numbed brain.

«I shall not tell your father of this.» that much I did take in. «I could not burden him with such a thing while he is ill. Whether I shall have to tell him later, I must consider.»

«What about Jim? I am entirely to blame. Promise me that no harm will come to him.»

«I shall do nothing. In the circumstances I feel I have no choice, though I bitterly regret this. I think, however, that Webb will have learnt his lesson. I blame myself entirely for not having foreseen this. There will certainly be no opportunity for such a thing to occur again.»

The glorious sunshine of the next few days seemed a mere mockery of my misery. I saw nobody, spoke to nobody save an occasional few words with Guy. I was once more just as I had been at the beginning of Spring, but now with the memories of Jim always with me my loneliness was intolerable. I did exercise the dogs in fields near the house. They at least seemed pleased to see me, and they seemed to be my last link with Jim. My life had become once more a dreary, pointless existence. I was alone in some dreadful limbo.

But even that was not all. One morning Guy told me gravely that the latest report on my father was less satisfactory. Later that day a cable informed us that he was dead.

I suppose what I felt was less grief than self-pity... My sense of loss and deprivation was acute. Now I was utterly alone, there was no one, no one at all.

I scotched any idea that I should fly out for the funeral. I am dead scared of air travel, and suffer badly from travel sickness. It all seemed quite pointless to me.

and I felt I couldn't take it. I think Guy was relieved at my decision, and he assured me that my father's colleagues in South America would attend to everything.

The manager from the bank came out to see me, and was very kind. He and my father's solicitor in London were executors of the Will, and he told me that apart from a few legacies everything would come to me, though the fact that father had died abroad was going to slow things up. However, if I needed to borrow to tide me over he could easily arrange that. He had a lot to say about new responsibilities, but I hardly listened. I scarcely took in details of what he told me, but it seemed my father had much more money than I had ever thought. I was now extremely wealthy, and it meant absolutely nothing to me.

If only Jim were here, he was so sensible and kind, I could have talked to him, he would have advised me. If only I could find him, but he might be anywhere. And then, when my despair had become almost unbearable, quite by chance I came across the card Leo had given me. Of course, what a fool I was, he might very well know where Jim was.

Guy had gone to London that day. I suppose he was attending to things I should have been doing, but I felt lost and helpless.

I telephoned Leo twice but could get no reply. The third time he answered.

«Who is that? Oh, the boy David! Well, you've certainly waited a long time before ringing.»

«Leo, I want to see you urgently. I can't get into town, could you possibly come out here?»

There was quite a pause. «Leo, are you still there?»

«You mean today?»

«If you possibly can, I remember you have a car.»

«Yes, I think I can. What about your tutor?»

«He's in London, won't be back till late. But don't come to the house. Meet me by the lodge gates: what time?»

«Six o'clock, I can't manage earlier. Alright, see you then.» And he replaced the receiver.

That afternoon the weather changed, and by the time I went down the drive to meet Leo a misty drizzle had started. At first I thought he wasn't there, then I saw him sheltering under a tree.

«Hullo, Leo. Thank you for coming.»

«Ah, the boy David. Very nice to see you again.» He pressed my hand warmly. «But we can hardly stand in the rain for our little conference.»

«I can't take you to the house. I don't want anyone to know you have been here.»

«How very sinister you make it sound. Well, how about that famous flat of Jim's?»

«It is empty; we can go there.»

I felt extraordinary going back into the flat where I had not been since the day Jim went. Dozens of memories crowded back, and it seemed unbelievable that he would not suddenly walk in.

«My dear David, what a dreary little place. Surely you could have done better for Jim than this?»

«Leo, I asked you to come here because I hope you can help me. Do you know where Jim is?»

«Ah, so that's it; I rather thought it might be. Oh yes, I know where he is, at least. I have a very good idea.»

«Please tell me, Leo. I must see him.»

«We'd better get this straight, David. I have no intention of telling you where Jim is. You will not be seeing him again.»

«Leo, why? What do you mean?»

«Simply this, my dear boy. Jim has moved out of your life, and has handed you on to me.»

I just stared at him. I didn't know what to say.

«Let's not waste time with protests and arguments. You see, David, you don't have any say in the matter. You will do exactly as I wish.»

I felt the first flush of anger rise in me. «I certainly will not. You'd better go. Please get out.»

He smiled at me, that sly, sidewise smile that seemed to mean so much.

«I'd better make myself clear. Jim did not only hand you over to me. Poor Jim, he was in a sorry mess. Surely you wondered what he needed all that money for. I'm afraid I'm a very expensive friend at times. Jim had been a very foolish boy, and

had to pay for it. When he left here he had only two assets. The first was his very handsome body, but, you see, that didn't appeal to me. Jim is not my type. I like pretty little boys like you, especially when they are so very rich. No, the only other thing Jim had to sell was some interesting letters, very, very interesting.»

«I don't believe you. He would never do that.»

«He had no choice. I felt you might not believe me, so I brought one with me, only the first one, see? Not very exciting; you did much better later. And so, you see what I mean when I say that you will do exactly as I wish.»

«You swine. You filthy blackmailing swine.»

I threw myself at him, beating him with my fists. In a flash he had seized my wrists and wrenched my arms behind me, twisting them brutally, then threw me on the bed where he pinioned me. I kicked violently at him, all I could do, but with a swift movement he trapped my legs with his and held me in a vice. I struggled desperately, but he was far too strong for me, holding me with contemptuous ease.

«Oh no, dear boy. Better behave or you are liable to get hurt. And better control that nasty temper. I happen to have a temper too, and if I lose it you might regret it very much indeed.»

«What do you want?»

«Well, David, I think we might combine a little pleasure with our business, don't you?»

I tried again to struggle free, but it was hopeless.

«Surely you have seen how futile it is to resist? I'm a great deal stronger than you, David, and I happen to know quite a few unpleasant tricks I'm sure you would hate. I think you had better know who is master.»

His body was thick and muscular, with none of the grace of Jim's but immensely, terrifyingly powerful. His attack was ruthless, savage, and I resisted him with everything I could summon. But soon I realised with despair that the resistance was only within me, my body was in fact responding to and obeying his.

When it was over I lay shivering, hurt and humiliated by the act so brutal and without pleasure. He had moved away, not holding me kindly as Jim had always done. He came back and stood above me, his hot eyes half mocking, half serious.

«Too rough for you? You're not with gentle, kind Jim now. You'll get used to it, you'll get to like it my way.»

He started dressing, and when I did not make a move, pulled me up from the bed. «Better get dressed, boy.» His amber eyes glowed at me, and I flinched, fearing that he was going to hurt me. Quickly I started to dress.

«That's better. You needn't be afraid of me, David — as long as you do what I say. You'll find I can be very nice, and very good fun.»

When we were dressed he sat beside me on the bed. «Now I'll tell you what you must do.»

«And if I won't?»

«Ah, but you will. I had thought your father would be interested in these letters, but as he has so conveniently died the position is much simpler.»

«Yes, you can't threaten to tell my father; the letters have no value.»

«My dear David, you couldn't be more wrong. There are certain people who would be interested, very interested indeed: the police.»

«The police!»

«You really let yourself go in those letters, David; the last one specially is a most remarkable document, so precise and descriptive. I should say that if it fell into the hands of the police you might get quite a prison sentence.»

I was really frightened now, but tried not to show it.

«I suppose you intend to blackmail me.»

«Such an ugly word. Shall we say that I think you will find it worth your while to see that I keep the letters away from the police.»

«But, you see, I don't really care. I'm bloody well as unhappy as it's possible to be already. I don't care if I do go to prison.»

«You say that, you may think that now, but if it were really likely... And of course, you are not the only one concerned. There is your dear Jim.»

«Jim!»

«Oh he would be deeply involved, and as the older man would be likely to receive a much harsher sentence, I don't imagine you would wish that to happen?»

«But Jim is your friend.»

«You don't know me very well, do you? I have no scruples of that sort. You had better understand that I hold all the trump cards.»

Now I could not keep up the pretence. «Please, Leo, you frighten me. Yes, of course, I do care about myself, but I *couldn't* let anything happen to Jim. I'd rather die, I'd rather kill you.»

«No dramatics, dear boy, please. And it's all very simple, just do as I tell you. Oh yes, money will be involved, but after all I must live, and money really presents no problems to you now.»

«Sell me the letters, Leo. How much do you want to let me have them back?»

«I'm afraid that's not my way, David. I take a very long view of all this. I intend that these letters shall keep me in comfort now, and shall take care of my old age.» He smiled at me, quite charmingly. «It can all be very agreeable, really.»

I could find nothing to say. I was too frightened, too wretched.

«So this is what I wish you to do. Firstly, get rid of Guy. You are your own master now. Tell him to go.»

«But he sees to everything here; I couldn't do without him.»

«Nonsense. Your tutor? Your keeper, you mean. There's nothing he does that I couldn't do just as well.»

«You!»

«Oh yes, I shall take his place. I don't know what his salary is, but I fear I shall need a good deal more; oh, nothing you can't easily afford. I shall like living here very much. I think the staff had better go too, I'm sure I can find some much more amusing ones. I can't teach you French, of course, my French is atrocious. But I guarantee I could find you anything you want in Paris within ten minutes. Much more practical, really. Yes, Guy must go. You must tell him today.»

«Leo,» I whispered, «please be good to me... please, Leo... please.»

After he had left I sat on alone in the empty flat, lost, bewildered. There was no one, in all the world there was no one to help me.

A week has passed since then, and this morning Guy left. Why is it that I never seem to realise what people mean to me until I lose them? I am still haunted by the look on his face when I told him to go, just as if I had struck him. All this week I have longed to tell him everything, beg him to help me. But fear has silenced me.

Later in the day Leo moved in. He brought with him a boy of about my own age, very good-looking in a rather sullen way, pale with very black hair.

«This is Ron. I thought he would be nice company for you when I want to be away.»

Ron shook hands with me, his hand was cold and very hard.

«Ron is such a nice boy. But he's a little *naughty* if he is upset, so keep in his good books.»

Ron smiled at me, but his eyes were not friendly.

They have gone to unpack and settle in. If I open the door of my room I can just hear them talking, and now and then they laugh quietly together.

Oh God, I'm scared, I'm so scared it's a pain, like ice in my guts. Soon I shall hear them coming back along the passage. Oh Jesus, sweet Jesus, where will this end? What is to become of me?

