

OF MIXED DESCENT III

Ted was fifty-eight when his wife died. She developed cancer and he nursed her tenderly for eighteen months. He gave up his job in order to do so, and they lived on his savings during her illness. They had a happy marriage, and were very close. No children had been born to them, and they had depended entirely on each other for companionship, neither of them being particularly extrovert or sociable. After her death, he was very lonely. He had few real friends, and his mates at work had largely forgotten him since his leaving. He had never cared for pubs and clubs, and was not going to start trying to be the clubby sort at the age of nearly sixty. He tidied the house but couldn't bring himself to clear his wife's room. He cooked scrappy meals for himself, went for long walks, frequented the cinema and the public library, and listened to the radio. He was a Methodist, and attended church each Sunday, and although he tried joining the men's social club, he couldn't get on with it, so he joined the Bible class instead, which was more to his liking.

It seems to be a law of life that a lonely widower will always find a woman to console and comfort him. If he is left with young children he is even more favourably placed. Women are queuing up to look after both him and the children. On the other hand, a lonely widow or divorcee has no such natural advantages. If not exactly shunned by society, she is usually made to feel decidedly spare. A lonely widow will usually not find men crowding around anxious to give her love and companionship. If she has children, the men will usually run a mile. She will be left alone to struggle on and support herself and her children, and usually her life will be one of unrelenting hard work.

Winnie had been alone for longer than she cared to remember. Her young husband had been killed early in the war, leaving her

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with three children. A meagre pension from the State barely covered the rent, let alone compensated for the loss of her husband. She took a job in a paper shop. The hours were long and hard – from 5 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. She got up each morning at 4.30 a.m. to get down to the newsagents to receive, sort, pack, and put out the newspapers. Her mother came in each day at 8 a.m. to get the children up and off to school. It meant that they were alone for about four hours, but it was a risk that she had to take. Winnie's mum suggested that they should all come and live with her, but Win valued her independence, and refused unless, as she said, "I jes' can't cope any more". That day never came. Winnie was the coping sort.

They met in the paper shop. She had served him for many years, but never noticed him particularly amongst all her other customers. It was when he started hanging around in the shop for longer than necessary to buy a morning paper that she, and the other staff, began to take note. He would buy his paper, then look at another, then look at the magazine shelves, sometimes buying one. Then he would pick up a bar of chocolate and turn it over in his hand, sigh, and put it back, and buy a packet of Woodbines instead. The staff said to each other, "Something's up with that old geezer".

One day, when Ted was holding a bar of chocolate, Winnie went up to him and asked kindly if she could help.

He said, "No, dearie. There's nothing you can do for me. My wife used to like this chocolate. I used to get it for 'er. She died last year. Thank you for asking, dear".

And their eyes met with sympathy and understanding.

After that Winnie always made a point of serving him. One day Ted said, "I was finkin' o' goin' to the flicks tonight. How about comin' wiv me – if yer 'usband don't object".

She said, "I aint got no 'usband, an' I don't mind if I do".

One thing led to another, and within a year he asked her to marry him.

Winnie thought about it for a week. There were over twenty years between them; she was fond of him, but not really in love

with him. He was kind and good, though not wildly exciting. She consulted her mother, and the outcome of the female deliberations was that she accepted his offer of marriage.

Ted was overjoyed, and they had a Methodist Church wedding. He did not want to take his new bride to the house which he had shared for so long with his first wife, so he gave up the rental and took another terraced property. Winnie was able to give up the tiny cheap flat where she had brought up her children, so the terraced cottage was just for her and Ted. It seemed like a palace to her. As the weeks and months passed after the marriage her happiness grew, and she told her mother that she had not done the wrong thing.

When he was young Ted had prudently taken out an insurance policy that matured when he was sixty. He now did not have to go out to work ever again. Winnie, on the other hand, did not want to give up the paper shop. She was so used to hard work that idleness would have bored her to tears but, as Ted wanted her at home more, she agreed to cut down her hours. Their life was very happy.

Winnie was forty-four when her periods stopped. She thought it was the menopause. She felt a bit odd, but her mother told her that all women feel a bit funny during the change, and not to worry. She continued in the paper shop, and brushed aside any feelings of queasiness. It wasn't until six months later that she noticed she was putting on weight. Another month passed, and Ted noticed a hard lump in her tummy. Having experienced his first wife dying of cancer, hard lumps were a source of deep anxiety for him. He insisted that she should see the doctor, and went with her to the surgery.

Examination showed her to be in an advanced stage of pregnancy. The couple were shattered. Why this obvious explanation had not occurred to either of them before is impossible to conjecture, but it hadn't, and they were both knocked sideways by the news.

There wasn't much time to prepare for a new baby. Winnie left the paper shop that day, and booked with the Sisters for her

confinement. Hastily, the bedroom was prepared, and baby equipment bought. Perhaps it was buying the pram and little white sheets that affected Ted so profoundly. Overnight he changed from a bemused and bewildered elderly man to an intensely excited and fiercely proud father-to-be. Suddenly he looked ten years younger.

A fortnight later Winnie went into labour. We had arranged for a doctor to be present at the delivery, because there had been so little time for antenatal preparation, and because Winnie, now forty-five, was decidedly old for having a baby.

Ted had taken note of our requirements and advice about preparation. He couldn't have planned it more carefully or thoroughly. He had told Win's mother not to come but that Ted would inform her when the baby was born. He had obtained books on childbirth and baby care, which he read all the time. When she went into labour he called us, full of joy and anticipation, tinged only with a little anxiety.

The doctor and I arrived at almost the same time. It was early first stage, and it had been agreed that I should stay with her throughout labour, from the time of arrival to the third stage completion. The doctor examined her and said he would leave and call back just before evening surgery to assess progress.

I sat down to watch and wait. I advised that she should not lie down, but walk about a bit. Ted took Win's arm and gently and carefully led her up and down the garden path. She could quite easily have walked it by herself, but he wanted and needed to be protective, quite forgetful of the fact that only two weeks earlier she had been dashing off to the paper shop. I suggested she should have a bath. The house boasted a bathroom, and so he heated up the water, and gently helped her in. He washed her, carefully helped her out and then dried her. I advised a light meal, so he poached an egg. He couldn't have done more.

I looked at his library books: Grantley Dick Read's *Natural Childbirth*; Margaret Myles's *Midwifery*; *The New Baby*; *Positive Parents*; *The Growing Child*; *From Birth to Teens*. He had been doing his homework.

The doctor returned just before 6 p.m., and there was no real change in the early labour pattern. We agreed that, in view of her age, if the first stage continued for longer than twelve hours, Winnie should be transferred to the hospital. Both Ted and Winnie agreed to this, but hoped it would not be necessary.

Between 9 and 10 p.m. I observed a change in the labour pattern. Contractions were more frequent and stronger. I started her on the gas and air machine, and asked Ted to go out and phone for the doctor.

When he arrived the doctor gave her a mild analgesic, and we both sat down and waited. Ted courteously offered us a meal, or tea, or drinks, whatever we wanted.

We did not have long to wait. Just after midnight the second stage of labour commenced, and within twenty minutes the baby was born.

It was a little boy, with unmistakably ethnic features.

The doctor and I looked at each other, and the mother, in stunned silence. No one said a word. I have never known such an unnerving silence at a delivery. What each of us was thinking the others never knew, but our thoughts must all have been about the same question: "What on earth is Ted going to say when he sees the baby?"

The third stage had to be dealt with, and this was conducted in dead silence. While the doctor was busy with the mother, I bathed, checked, and weighed the baby. He certainly was a beautiful little thing, of average weight, clear dusky skin, soft curly brown hair. A picture perfect baby – if you are expecting to see a baby of mixed racial origins. But Ted wasn't. He was expecting to see his own child. I shut my eyes in a futile attempt to obliterate the scene to come.

Everything was finished and tidied up. The mother looked fresh in a white nightgown; the baby looked beautiful in a white shawl. The doctor said, "I think we had better ask your husband to come up now."

They were the first words to be spoken since the delivery. Winnie said, "I reckons as 'ow we'd best get it over wiv'".

I went downstairs and told Ted that a baby boy had been safely born, and would be like to come up.

He shouted, "A boy!" and leaped to his feet like a youngster of twenty-two, not a man of over sixty. He bounded up the stairs two at a time, entered the bedroom and took both his wife and the baby in his arms. He kissed them both and said, "This is the proudest and happiest day of my life."

The doctor and I exchanged glances. He hadn't noticed yet. He said to his wife, "You don't know what vis means to me, Win. Can't I 'old ve baby?"

She silently handed him over.

Ted sat on the edge of the bed, and cradled the baby awkwardly in his arms (all new fathers look awkward with a baby!) He looked long at his little face, and stroked his hair and ears. He undid the shawl, and looked at the tiny body. He touched his legs, and moved his arms, and took his hand. The baby's face puckered up and he gave a little mewling cry.

Ted gazed at him silently for a long time. Then he looked up with a beatific smile. "Well, I don't reckon to know much about babies, but I can see as how this is the most beautiful in the world. What's we going to call him, luv?"

The doctor and I looked at each other in silent amazement. Was it really possible he hadn't noticed? Winnie, who had seemed unable to breathe, took a large shuddering breath, and said, "You choose, Ted, luv. He's yourn."

"We'll call 'im Edward, then. It's a good ol' family name. Me dad's an' gran'dad's. He's my son Ted."

The doctor and I left the three of them sitting happily together. Outside, the doctor said, "It is possible that he just hasn't noticed yet. Black skin is pale at birth, and this child is obviously only half-black, or even less than that, because his father may have been of mixed racial descent. However, pigmentation usually becomes more marked as the child ages, and at some stage Ted is certainly going to notice and start asking questions."

Time went by, and Ted didn't notice or, in any event, didn't

appear to notice. Win must have had a word with her mother and other female relatives to say nothing to Ted about the baby's appearance, and indeed nothing was said.

Win went back to work part-time at the paper shop after about six weeks. Ted had longer each day with the baby and assumed most of the parenting. He bathed and fed him, and proudly took him out in the pram, greeting passersby and inviting them all to look at "my son Ted". As the baby grew older, he played with him all the time, inventing learning games and toys. In consequence, by the age of eighteen months, little Ted was very bright and advanced for his age. The relationship between father and son was lovely to see.

By the time the child reached school age, his features were noticeably black. Yet still Ted did not appear to notice. He had made a wider circle of friends than he had ever had in his life before, largely due to the fact that he took the child everywhere, and people responded to this bright, handsome little boy, whom Ted introduced proudly as "my son Ted". The child was just as proud, in his own way, of his father and as he clung to his big protective hand, gazed up adoringly with his huge black eyes. At school he always spoke of "my dad" as though he were the king himself.

Ted, approaching seventy, had no inhibitions about waiting outside the school gates along with young mothers nearly half a century his junior. Only two or three little black or mixed race children would come running out of school, to black mothers, but one of them would fling himself into Ted's arms with the cry, "Daddy."

"Let's go down the docks today, son," he would say, kissing him. "There's a big German vessel jes' come in vis mornin' wiv three funnels. Yer don' see 'em very often. An' yer mum will 'ave tea ready when we gits back."

Yet still he didn't seem to notice.

Of course there were whisperings and gossip amongst neighbours and acquaintances, but none of them actually said anything to Ted. The more unkind would snigger and say, "There's no fool

like an old fool." And the rest would laugh and agree, "Yer can say tha' again".

I have a different theory.

In the Russian Orthodox Church there is the concept of the Holy Fool. It means someone who is a fool to the ways of the world, but wise to the ways of God.

I think that Ted, from the moment he saw the baby, knew that he could not possibly be the father. It must have been a shock, but he had controlled himself, and sat thinking for a long time as he held the baby. Perhaps he saw ahead.

Perhaps he understood in that moment that if he so much as questioned the baby's fatherhood, it would mean humiliation for the child, and might jeopardise his entire future. Perhaps, as he held the baby, he realised that any such suggestion could shatter his whole happiness. Perhaps he understood that he could not reasonably expect an independent and energetic spirit like Winnie to find him sexually exciting and fulfilling. Perhaps an angel's voice told him that any questions were best left unasked and unanswered.

And so he decided upon the most unexpected, and yet the simplest course of all. He chose to be such a Fool that he couldn't see the obvious.