

FALSE PRETENCES



John O'Loughlin

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CDM Prose

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PARTY POLITICS

"Don't you object to people staring at your wife?" asked a voice behind me, causing me to start suddenly out of my daydream. I turned around to see who my latest potential tormentor was, and discovered the pale, rather lean face of Major Ronald Saunders staring up at me from behind his dense whiskers. He smiled defensively, as though to apologize for this sudden intrusion into my private world, and cast a veiled glance in the direction of Leslie Richardson, a glance I automatically followed, though only to the extent of acquiring the briefest of confirmations that someone evidently had eyes for Susan. "He's been staring at her, on and off, all bloody evening!" the Major continued, ignoring my feigned indifference.

"You oughtn't to let her out of your sight, old man!"

I gently shrugged my shoulders, as though to demonstrate indifference, then drank a little more of the sweet wine I held between clenched fingers in one of the thinnest glasses I had ever beheld. What did it matter to me that someone was staring at her? Let him, if that was all he wanted. Voyeurism was all the rage nowadays, anyway. And if he had more concrete objectives in mind, so what? Let him satisfy them, though preferably on terms acceptable to myself. I wasn't one to be offended by this show of interest in a woman with whom I had long ceased to be in love. Indeed, if I thought it could increase his pleasure, I would have gone across to where Susan was standing, interrupted her conversation with the other women, and lifted-up her skirt, so that he could see what type and colour panties she was wearing. Only I knew that at present, since I had watched her dress before coming along to this informal gathering, and knew exactly what she was 'up to' underneath her skirt. It would have been nice to show those purple nylon panties with the frilly edgings to Dr Richardson and thereby enable him to flesh out, as it were, his growing appreciation of her physical anatomy. Nicer still to be showing off the seductive curvature of her rump and hips, the enticing sexuality of her thighs, which the skirt she wore was discreetly hiding. Then he could have made up his mind about her and taken whatever measures he thought necessary to extend his appreciation, with or without my knowledge and consent.

"Too many people stare at other people's wives these days," Major Saunders went on, even though I had said not a word about his allegations and knew better than to spoil other people's fun.

"Well," I said, growing slightly weary, "at least she's a rather pretty woman, so one can't entirely blame a handsome young man like Dr Richardson for taking an interest in her. I'm not at all possessive myself."

"Really?" the Major exclaimed, evidently feeling a degree of surprise was called for here. "You wouldn't like another man to get her pregnant or give her the clap or whatever behind your damned back though, would you?"

"Not particularly," I conceded. "But, then, she'd have to put up with the consequences, not me." No, that wasn't quite true, and I half-regretted having said it. But even if she got the clap, as he put it in that colloquially military way of his, she wasn't likely to become pregnant, since she had regular recourse to the pill. Besides, she knew that I had no desire to give her children, since I loathed them. A child from her and we would part company. I had made that fact perfectly clear to her some time ago, after she broke with her former husband, who wasn't even her first. Now she took it for granted and swore that she had no real desire for motherhood again anyway, since looking after a genius was more than enough work. And if she needed any extra work, she could always write a new novel or take up full-time teaching again. As for the clap ... no decent man would go near her if he suffered a dose of it, least of all Dr Richardson. As usual Major Saunders was exaggerating, as they usually did in the army.

Possibly on account of celibacy, or something. "Anyway," I added, after my reflective pause, "Susan's too possessive, where I'm concerned, to risk putting our relationship in jeopardy over someone else. She's got a martyr streak in her – fidelity to me at the expense of more traditional responsibilities, including motherhood. She needs the pride that comes from living with someone famous and moderately well off. It appeals to her ego and sense of being a truly modern, or liberated, woman."

"But don't you think that most women are possessive where we men are concerned?" Major Saunders rejoined, as he blew out the red-tipped match he had just used to light a cumbersome-looking cigar.

"Oh definitely," I agreed. "They can't help it, for we're sexual subjects to

them and the sexual is ever a part of the sensual realm, the realm peculiar to female priorities. Even the so-called liberated ones are possessive in that respect. They need our bodies for their sexual fulfilment, even for reproductive purposes, and so they cling to us, metaphorically speaking as well as literally, like leeches. My wife's just the same, even though she's resigned to not being a mother to any child of mine."

Major Saunders momentarily concealed himself and part of me in a dense cloud of tobacco smoke, probably more out of a desire to hide his embarrassment from me than to savour the dubious aroma of his latest fat cigar. I waited patiently for the air to clear, as from the onslaught of battle, before continuing the conversation, but he beat me to it.

"You know, I just can't understand why you refuse to become a father," he confessed, blowing more smoke in my face. He was doubtless envious of my freedom from parental responsibilities and troubles, I thought, and had determined to test my will, in consequence.

"Frankly, I detest children," I informed him, almost hissing the words in my besieged condition. "Especially young ones – for instance, babies and tiny tots. They're far too raw, too natural and ... uncultured. A man of genius, who cultivates the most artificial standards in his work, as in his life, can hardly be expected to abide with his very antithesis – a creature in which natural determinism predominates over free will to such an alarming extent ... that there seems to be very little of the latter in evidence. Even my wife is at times too naturalistic for me, though, being an intelligent woman, she does at least possess a veneer, as it were, of culture over her sensuous nature. Fortunately, however, she doesn't require children from me, since she had two of them by her previous marriage and they're away at boarding school most of the time. She pays for that, I might add, not me."

I was lying slightly, but it didn't matter too much. I knew, anyway, that Major Saunders had little interest in Susan's children by her previous marriage, only in her lack of them from her current one. But that was simply because he couldn't understand why she tolerated me. No doubt, his concern over Dr Richardson's behaviour this evening was a manifestation of jealousy on his part, born of fear, perhaps, that young Richardson would beat him to her affections?

"Well, I think children are the very *raison d'être* of marriage," he opined, showing grim determination not to be side-tracked. "Otherwise, why get married in the first place?"

"For a variety of reasons," I declared, undeterred by the latest smoke screen he was puffing up, as though to intimidate me. "Not least of all because one wants company and sex."

"But sex without the goods?" It was evidently his way of saying babies, and I just had to smile.

"Certainly for a man of genius like myself," I immodestly reminded him, blushing faintly unbeknownst to anyone else, since it was not every day that one described oneself in such elevated terms and thereby sought to justify one's unusual position in life on the basis that one was as far removed from the common run as men like Sartre, Koestler, Dali, Ravel, et al. "I simply couldn't be responsible for putting something new into the world naturally – through coital means. For me, only *artificial* creations count. I want that known for the record. I, Jason Crilly, absolutely refuse to be ...