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He took the gun and used it, because the little man with yellow pointed shoes told him to.

May I Come In?

BY FLETCHER FLORA



I saw Marilla today, and it all came back with the sight of him, all the details I've tried to remember and couldn't — all the little, important details that meant so much, all about the night and what happened in the night and all things before and afterward. . . .

THE NIGHT was hot and humid. I lay in my room on a sheet sodden with the seepage from my pores, and suspended above me in the dark like a design in ectoplasm was the face of the man named Marilla, and the hate within me stirred and flowed and seeped with the sweat

from my pores, and the color of my hate was yellow.

I got off the bed and walked on bare feet across the warm floor to the window, but there was no air moving at the window or outside the window, and the adherent heat had saturated my flesh and soaked through my eyes into the cavity of my skull to lie like a thick, smothering fog over the contours of my brain. I could hear, across the narrow interval that separated houses, the whirr of blades beating the air, and because my eyes were like cat's eyes, I could see behind the blades into the black, gasping room, and it was the bedroom of Mrs. Willkins, and she was lying nude on her bed under the contrived breeze, and her body was gross and ugly with flesh loose on its bones, and I hated her, just as I hated the ectoplasmic face of the man named Marilla, with all the force of my yellow hate.

Turning away from the window, I found in the darkness a pint of gin on a chest and poured two fingers into a tumbler. I sat on the edge of the bed and drank the gin and then lay down again, and the face of Marilla was still suspended above me, and in a moment the face of Freda was there too, and I began to think deliberately about Marilla and Freda, and the reason I hated Marilla.

I stood with Freda in front of the shining glass window, and she pointed out the coat to me on the arrogant blonde dummy. I could see Freda's reflected face in the glass from my

angle of vision, and her lips were slightly open in excitement and desire, and I felt happy and a little sad at the same time to see her that way, because it wasn't, after all, much of a coat, not mink or ermine or any kind of fur at all, but just a plain cloth coat that was a kind of pink color and looked like it would be as soft as down to the touch.

"It's beautiful," Freda said. "It's, oh, so beautiful," and I said, "You like it? You like to have it?" and she said, "Oh, yes," in a kind of expiring, incredulous whisper that was like the expression of a child who just can't believe the wonderful thing that's about to happen.

We went into the store and up to the floor where the coats were sold, and Freda tried on the coat, turning around and around in front of the mirror and stroking the cloth as if it were a kitten and making a soft little purring sound as if she were the kitten she was stroking. I teased her a little, saying that, well, it was rather expensive and would raise hell with the budget, but I knew all the time that I was going to buy it for her, because she wanted it so much and because it made her look even more beautiful than before, and after a while I went up to the credit department and made arrangements for monthly payments, because I didn't have the price. When I came back down, she was still standing in front of the mirror in the coat, and I said, "You going to wear it?" and she said, "Oh, yes,

I'm going to wear it and sleep in it and never take it off," and I kept remembering afterward that it wasn't after all, so much of a coat, not fur or anything, but just pink cloth.

We went down in the elevator, and she clung to my arm and kissed me over and over with her eyes, and I thought it was the best buy I'd ever made and cheap at the price, even if I had had to arrange monthly payments. We went out onto the street through the revolving door, walking close together in the same section of the door because Freda wouldn't let loose of my arm, and the street was bright and soft and cool with the cool, bright softness of April, and it was just the kind of day and street for a new pink coat. We walked down the street toward the drug store on the corner, and I was thinking that I'd take Freda into the store for some of the peppermint ice cream with chunks of stick peppermint in it that she liked so much, and it occurred to me that the ice cream was just about the color of the pink coat, and then there were a couple of explosions inside the drug store, and after a second or two a woman began to scream in a high, ragged voice that went on and on, and the door of the store flew open, and a man ran out with a gun in his hand, and the man was Marilla, the man they were later to call a psychopathic killer.

He ran toward us along the sidewalk waving the gun, and he ran with a queer, lurching gait, as if he

were crippled, or one leg were shorter than the other, and as he ran he made a sound that was something like a whimper and something like a cry. Between us and him was a kid carrying a shoe shine box, and the kid stopped and stood stiffly with the box hanging at his side, and then the gun in Marilla's hand began to explode again, and the kid set the box down on the sidewalk and fell over sideways across it. I stood looking at the kid, and I realized suddenly that Freda had let go of my arm, and I turned to see if she was still there, but she wasn't, and I couldn't see her anywhere. Marilla ran past me, and I could see directly into his big eyes that were like black puddles of liquid terror, and he pointed the gun at my face and pulled the trigger, and I could hear the dull click of the hammer on a dead shell. I could have tackled him and brought him down, but I didn't, because just then I saw that Freda was lying on the sidewalk like the kid up ahead, but in a different position, on her back with the new coat spread open around her like something that had been put there in advance for her to lie on. I knelt down beside her on the sidewalk and lifted her head and began to say her name, and at first I thought she'd fainted, but then I saw the small black hole that was about three inches in a straight line below the hollow of her throat, and I knew that she was dead.

They caught Marilla in a blind

alley. He was sitting in a corner with his knees drawn up and his head resting on his knees, and he was whimpering and crying, and his voice would rise now and then to a thin scream of terror, and the men who found him first almost beat him to death before the police came and took him away. Right after that, the next day or so, they began to say he was crazy, that he was just a crazy kid only twenty years old, and the psychiatrists had big words for the kind of craziness it was supposed to be, but I knew that nothing they could say would do him any good at all, because he had killed a man and a woman in the drug store and the shoe shine kid on the street, and above all he had killed Freda in her new pink coat.

They asked him why he had killed all those people, and they didn't even make any distinction between Freda and the others, and he said he hadn't hated any of them or anything like that, hadn't even wanted to kill them at all, but had killed them anyhow because he'd been told time and again to do it and finally had to do as he was told. They asked him who had told him to kill the people, just any people, and he said it was a thin little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin who wore yellow pointed shoes. The man had appeared in all sorts of odd places and told him to go out and kill some people.

It was part of the big lie, of course, that ridiculous part about the man

coming and telling him to kill some people, it was part of the plan to keep him from paying for killing Freda, and anyone could see right through it, it was so transparent. You can buy some psychiatrist to verify something like that any time you've got the price, and I knew they'd hang him in spite of what any psychiatrist said, because God wanted him to hang just as much as I did, God and I hated him equally for what he'd done to Freda right when she was so happy.

I waited for them to try him, and finally they did, and I went and sat in the court room every day to watch him and to feel the yellow hate like pus inside me. He sat at the long table with the lawyers who defended him, and he always sat with his head bowed and his hands folded on top of the table in a posture of prayer, but once in a while he would look up briefly into the crowd, and the light of terror and inner cowering were there in his great liquid eyes, and I felt a fierce exaltation that he was suffering, and that the suffering he now felt was only the beginning of the suffering he would feel before he was through. He looked very small in the chair by the big table, hardly larger than a child, with narrow shoulders slumped forward and a slender neck supporting a head that was too big for his body, and the head looking even bigger than it really was because of the thick black shining curls that covered it. I kept watching him sit

there like he was praying, and I kept thinking that he could pray all he wanted to, but God wouldn't hear him, and that he could plead and lie and try all the tricks he could think of, but no one would believe him or pity him or do anything to help him, no one at all.

They put him on the stand at last to tell about the man who had come to tell him to kill, and he described the man again, just as he had to the psychiatrists, his pointed nose and pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes, and he spoke in a very soft voice that could barely be heard but contained all the time, somehow, the threat of rising abruptly to a shrill scream. It was all put on, part of the plan, but he was very clever, a great actor, and he told how the man had appeared the first time while he was standing on a bridge looking down at the water, and had sat down beside him another time in a movie theater, and had met him another time while he was walking along a path in the town park, and had then begun coming to his room late at night to knock softly on the door. No one was supposed to believe that the little man had actually come to him in those ways, or in any way at all, but everyone was supposed to believe that it had happened in his mind, that the little man was an hallucination of insanity, but I knew it hadn't happened that way either, that the man hadn't even appeared in Marilla's mind, and

that it was all a story made up to get him out of it. I knew they'd hang him, and I tried to feel within myself the way he'd feel while he was waiting, and walking out to the scaffold, and standing there in the last instant with the black hood over his head and the rope around his neck.

But in the end they didn't hang him at all.

They let him out of it.

They said he wasn't guilty because he wasn't in his right mind and wasn't responsible for his acts, and they sent him off somewhere to a place with cool white rooms and a cool green lawn and doctors to look after him and nurses to wait on him.

I thought a lot about the twelve people on the jury who let him out of it, and I began to hate them the same as Marilla, and I wished they were all dead, dead as Freda, but the more I thought about them the more they seemed like all other people, and after a long time I realized it was because they really were like all other people on earth. Freda was dead, and no one cared, all the people on earth had said it was all right because of a ridiculous story about a little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes who had told a man named Marilla to kill her. Always I saw the face of Marilla and the face of Freda, and they seemed to get mixed up with other faces that I'd never seen before, and I wondered if I was insane myself, but

I wasn't, of course, any more than Marilla was.

And now I lay in my room in the hot and humid night, and across the interval between houses, behind the futile beating of blades, Mrs. Willkins' gross body stirred in her black and gasping room.

And there was something else. Something new.

A man was walking the dark and airless streets of town beneath layers of lifeless leaves.

He walked with mincing steps, and he was far away in the beginning, when I first saw him, and I lay on my bed in my room and followed his progress with cat's eyes through light and shadow across the pattern of the town. At times he was swallowed completely by darkness, and then no eyes could see him but mine, but the people who stirred in wakefulness in the houses he passed could hear the echo of his mincing steps, and he moved with surety of purpose and a pace that never varied through the silent, dappled streets until he came at last to the corner above my house and down the street to the house itself. Without moving from my bed, I could see him standing on the sidewalk below with his face lifted into the milky light of the moon, and then he came up across the porch into the house and up the stairs into the hall and stood outside my door.

I waited in the hot stillness, and after a while he knocked softly, and

I got up in the dark, and my hand, swinging out, struck the tumbler on the table by the bed and knocked it to the floor with a sound of brittle thunder that rocked the room. I waited until the reverberations had diminished and died and the soft knock was repeated, and then I crossed to the door and opened it.

The warm fog inside my skull pressed closely on my brain, and though my head didn't ache exactly, it felt very light and queer. The man in the hall looked at me and bowed in a peculiar, old-fashioned way from the waist and smiled politely.

"Excuse me for disturbing you at this hour," he said, "but I must talk with you about a number of people. About Mrs. Willkins first of all, I think. May I come in?"

He was a little man with a long pointed nose and a pointed chin. He wore yellow pointed shoes.

I saw Marilla from my window. He was walking in the yard below with the same man in white who comes now and then to my room, and he sat for a while on a bench under a tree, and I could see him quite clearly. The queer thing is, there was no hate, no longer any hate, and I'm thinking that perhaps I will be allowed to walk in the yard soon, and that Marilla and I may meet and sit together under the tree and talk about these things that happened. It will be pleasant to talk with someone who knows and understands. . . .