

The Price of Silence, and the Trophy--©2/19/24 by Victoria Leigh Bennett

Herron James looked over his bookshelves; he was pleased. The neat stripes and patterns formed by the backstraps of the books satisfied his need for order and reputation, however undeserved. Undeserved at least in part because he was an untidy mess of inchoate emotions much of the time when it came to his work of being an assistant bookseller, and though he could retell plots and stories and whole lists of bestsellers and also of quality book titles to interested customers, he had actually read very few of the books that the companies often sent him as promotions. In fact, he really didn't fancy having anyone over who would pull out the books and notice that the front covers mostly had the banners and stamps that read "first print gathering" or "remaindered to the publishing community," or the like.

As a matter of fact, while he dreamily dusted the uncreased surfaces and the dustier tops with the Swiffer of magenta feathers, he was interrupted in his reverie by an annoyance. It just so happened that his buxom new neighbor, Annabelle Quanderie, who had popped in a few days before to see about how to schedule the paper delivery for the neighborhood sales paper, had shrieked with glee and delight when she saw his shelves, and had promptly started to pull titles out and look at them. Her brow immediately recomposed its unlined alabaster front into a cute frown—if he had been an admirer of cute, which he wasn't—and her textbook cherry red lips into a puzzled bow—if he had been an admirer of cherry red, which had perplexed him, due to the way it seemed almost to be natural, and he felt tricked. Herron was of that subdivision of the male population who preferred a hint of mystery to surround him, in fact a bit more than a hint. In fact, he cultivated mystification in most of his daily routines, or at least those not centered around

selling books by indirectly bragging about his knowledge of them, often made-up or nonexistent or totally reliant upon the back cover blurbs and quick leaf-throughs. In fact, he was nonplussed and sullen if someone did not attempt to pierce the mystery, so that he could apply yet another squirt of the squidlike inkish disguising style. In fantasy, however, he tried to present a cheery manner (especially to Annabelle lately, when he ran into her outside, for reasons he allowed to escape his own attention).

“What are these notices on the front of the books?” she had asked, so clearly trusting and open in her manner that one part of him scorned her while the other part of him feared her for some quality that in turn mystified him. And just now, the annoyance that interrupted him in the middle of his dusting reverie was that thought that he had not been able to subdue her with a quick, “Oh, the companies send me those so that I can read them and market the books more knowledgeably.”

He had smiled down at her in what he imagined was almost a paternal or at least only a bit lustily avuncular manner—though Annabelle gave him a look of suspicion for a minute as if she thought him only oily—but she had persisted: “But these look like they’ve never been touched! However do you keep them so undamaged in the backstraps and covers? Wow, my books are all dogeared and tattered! Even some of the hardbacks have coffee stains and food specks on them. You seem to be a very neat person.” And what really aggravated him the most was the fact that she uttered this last not with approval and admiration, but as if she’d just found a large egg-carrying cockroach in her coffee cup.

But Fate had certain plans as it always does, not necessarily extensive plans, but it tries to arrange each little thing or big thing in its proper place to carry some part of the load of life’s meaning as seen by the preposterous Earth animals who invented the concept

of Fate (apparently in preference to Chaos and Meaninglessness, which the human animals only resorted to like whiskey and rash sex, when it had had too much Fate and needed some other anodyne). And Fate's plans in the short run were at least to have Annabelle fascinated, not perhaps in a good way, but fascinated perhaps without knowing why, with her odd neighbor. So, one day when she had successfully received her copy of the neighborhood sales paper he'd given her the information for, she dropped by in the evening when it was time for him to come home, and sat on his porch.

Now, his porch had nothing so folksy as a porch swing, nor anything so declass  in his view as lawn furniture. No, it had a full set of comfortable, padded, all-weather wooden and man-made material chairs and a loveseat, as if he'd planned some function with multiple people there, which of course he hadn't. So, not being an antisocial girl, she sat easily down on the loveseat, where there was plenty of room, and waited.

He approached on his three-wheeled adult trike (good for health, he'd told himself, and saving on car expenses except in bad weather), and it wasn't until he had put it up in the shed out back—a place for everything, and everything in its place—that he came around again and noticed that she was sitting there. He was taken off-guard, but he quickly recovered, and assumed the tutorial tone in addressing her:

“May I help you?”

“Oh, yes, I just wanted to show you that I had received the paper you helped me order, and to thank you for being such a good neighbor.” This, she knew by instinct, was overstating the case, but it had been her experience, at least, that when she overstated the case and gave someone credit for things not perhaps fully intended by them, that they responded well. She couldn't think why he interested her, but perhaps in her heart of

hearts she was responding to the tutorial tone and wanting to see if she could waylay it or disable it altogether, in one of those adventurous contests called falling in love or getting people to love you and submit to you. She was fairly certain in her heart of hearts that he wasn't her type, but thought that if he would submit to loving her like everyone else apparently did, that she might tolerate him. This was not of course her conscious thought, which was in the nature of things more self-deceiving.

He, for his part, was also ripe for the contest, but he had the intention if solicited by the machinations of Eros to make her bow to his dictates regarding a man's need for unwitting and wholehearted admiration, whether or not he'd done anything to deserve it, on trust as it were, and on trust again.

So, in this quotidian, suburban, altered version of the love of Aphrodite and Hephaestus, in which Eros is less a child-god of mischievous aspect than a heartier and perhaps more ominous fusion recipe of Eros/Norse God Loki, a little more than just mischievous, the dice and counters of heaven were set to revolve around.

Now, Dear Reader (as you were once addressed by the love-columnists, the more fulsome writers of several centuries ago, and the Victorians *en masse*), you will not like this tale much longer, as if you are still reading, you have willingly swallowed batches of acid and vitriol and are not only proof against such stuff, but also looking forward to more of it. Therefore, the fact I am about to tell you, which will truncate this tale phenomenally and make it misshapen as a written and creative artifact, will almost certainly disgruntle you and not win your favor. But in your own self-protective stance, especially if it is like to that of either Annabelle or Herron or some other variant of human mentality and physiology, you should now be told that there is another god who just sometimes happens to tilt the

tables in the pinball game of life without anyone really being aware of how it occurs. This quite minor god, often hidden and elusive for its own protection, can mightily frustrate even the erstwhile powerful like Aphrodite and Eros, can even shake the heavens and dethrone Zeus and Hera themselves for at least the tittle of time it takes to rearrange humankind a little more brightly. Be it said that even so-called Fate sometimes has to take a subordinate position when this frequently unnoticed, tiny often, hidden little genii of infinite wishes darts through the air in one of its manifestations, underestimated as only a May fly alive for a day when it's seen at all, but powerful in inverse proportion to its degree of connection.

And the oddest thing is that it can arrange those kinds of love known not only as Eros, but also Caritas and Agape, with just a flicker of its wings. Though luckily research and science cannot trace it or force it to pull a plow, as it must remain a free agent of the universe in order to function for the preservation of all things, it does leave behind little traces, sometimes known as a kind of fingerprint or sweat-stain, just an infinitesimal blip! on a mostly inattentive radar screen (not finely tuned enough, perhaps). This god might be called Kinesis, if we have to give it a name, but even that is too coarse a label.

Where, then, does this high-flown analysis leave our two characters, Annabelle and Herron, Herron and Annabelle, as I sense your impatience with not knowing my conclusion? Well, it was simply that moved by currents uncertain (so one would be forced to say), Annabelle turned sideways on the loveseat at exactly the same moment Herron approached across the porch, he intending perhaps to roust this intruder off his premises, she intending only to face him for better conversation. But her hand, lo, waved towards the

other seat on the loveseat as she sat, and because (perhaps) he was tired from a day's work and wanted to sit down, he sat there.

So, producing almost in self-defense at *his* nearness her prepared speech about the paper, nervously now that they were close, Annabelle totally accidentally (as it surprised even her) flipped her eyelashes up at him. And he, the next moment, not really hearing what she said, disturbed by *her* nearness to the point of feeling himself swoon into a sort of unwilling kind of slovenly emotion (as he would previously have thought it), accidentally touched her hand as he reached out to see what it was she was talking at him about. And though one cannot force Kinesis, who doesn't like ruffians and grabby people, it just so happened that the next moment as Herron fell deeply into the pool of her liquid brown eyes with greenish lights in them ("fairy lights," he told her much later, but that's for another story), thought to himself, "What the hell, what the hell is she doing on my porch?" and grabbed her in a staunch embrace and kissed her. And she, for some reason not resisting this overly fastidious man who for some reason had just thrown away successful management of his own solitude, giggled and kissed him back.

The rest of the story is for you to complete, Dear Reader, in your own time and way and in your own mind, not in my copy, but for your own sake, be warned, as readers were often warned in various old manuscripts, tablets, scrolls, and palimpsests, or what have you, not to disregard the forces of the gods. Any of them that you may be acquainted with, including the least of these, as you may figure it. Thank you. ("Well, will you look at that, Harry!" said Mrs. Carson across the street to her mate.)