

A Brief's Encounter

by Sue Morris

The setting is the reception area of the Civic Hall Chambers. The present head of Chambers, Stuart Weatherby has been made a judge. The new head of Chambers, Gareth Annerlie QC, a contemporary of Stuart from their school days, will be succeeding him. This evening is a joint celebration for them.

Present at the start of the evening are Anne Weatherby, Stuart's wife, Gareth, and "Ginny", more properly called Aloysius Gynnsticke, a fellow member of Chambers. They are mingling with the invited "guests" (audience). Anne is conservative, with a small "c", she is putting on a reasonable show of being chamber's first lady, but the smile is somewhat forced and she appears a little distracted, as though her thoughts are elsewhere. Ginny is his normal self, insisting that everyone's glass is permanently full, especially his own, and greeting all and sundry with great gusto. Gareth is being the perfect host; polite and welcoming as necessary. He is also scanning the room generally as though looking or waiting for someone.

As the evening starts the above exit discreetly in different directions, as Stuart enters with Brenda Bolton.

STUART Here we are, Brenda, this is where it all happens. You finally get to see where I work - all will be revealed.

BRENDA Oh, yes. *(In a very definite tone)* I'm sure it will be, Mr Weatherby.

STUART Stuart, please, Brenda. Let me introduce you to a few people. *(He takes her arm and propels her forward into the room)*

Ginny comes to meet them

STUART Ah, Ginny, allow me to introduce Brenda Bolton to you. Brenda, this is Aloysius Gynnsticke - known to us all as Ginny - for good reason. Brenda is the lady without whom my home would be full of cobwebs - and I would never have a clean shirt on my back.

GINNY Dear lady, a pleasure... *(He takes her hand and kisses it)* ...but you've not got a drink, we must remedy this at once, at once! Allow me. *(Brenda is propelled onwards to get a drink from the table as William Oldsmith approaches).*

Stuart sees William and calls to him.

STUART Ah, William, there you are. *(He walks away slightly from Brenda and Ginny, who continue to talk quietly and goes over to William).* A good turn out for me, eh?

WILLIAM For you and Gareth, Stuart. *(A moment's hesitation)* You said there were a couple of things you still needed to speak to me about.

STUART *(Looking around the room, scanning the ladies present and therefore not really*



listening to what William is saying) What? Sorry, yes... perhaps we could grab five minutes later, whenever you've a moment.

WILLIAM Of course.

STUART *(Still not really listening and dismissive of William)* Right... if you'll excuse me, there's Sally Collins. I haven't seen her since - well never mind, in ages shall we say. Used to be a pupil of mine. Lively girl our Sally, but then you wouldn't be interested, I suppose, with all those boy scouts to keep you busy. *(He turns back to Brenda)* Brenda, don't worry about getting home later, I'll sort that out for you.

Stuart runs his hand down Brenda's back a little suggestively. She freezes, obviously not liking it. Stuart darts off to find the elusive Sally. William excuses himself and goes over to talk quietly to Anne, who has re-entered during Stuart's last speech.

GINNY Well, dear lady, now that we're quite old friends - oh, do let me top up that glass of yours...

BRENDA No, no - I'm fine really.

GINNY No? Don't mind if I do?

BRENDA No, of course not.

Ginny tops up his glass.

GINNY Right, now where was I? Oh, yes... *(He scans the room)* Motley crew in tonight. Do you know any of them?

BRENDA Very few. This isn't where I'd usually socialise. I know both the Weatherbys, of course, and I've seen Mr. Oldsmith, is it, at the house a few times, when I've been there cleaning. *(After a slight hesitation)* Which is Gareth Annerlie, Mr. Gynnsticke?

GINNY Ginny, darling girl, Ginny, please. Only take the full moniker from His Honour - or Her Honour, God help us, these days. Gareth, you say? Our new head of chambers...

Gareth enters, generally scanning the room

Ah, here he comes. Speak of the Devil and he shall appear. Gareth, old chap, there's a charming lady here who wishes to be made known to you, lucky dog. *(To Brenda)* I shall be quite outshone now, I fear - Queen's Counsel, head of his chambers. I shall retire to regroup. *(He kisses her hand once again)* Until later, dear lady. *(He exits)*

GARETH I'm sorry, have we met?

BRENDA No, no, I'm Brenda Bolton. *(She proffers a handshake.)* I work for the Weatherbys. I help Mrs. Weatherby with the house and that sort of thing. I've never been here to the - *(a little uncertain she is using the correct word)* Chambers before, so as he was having this party, he - Mr. Weatherby - kindly invited me along this evening.

GARETH I see. *(Making polite conversation)* Have you been with them a long time?

BRENDA Yes, I have, not quite ten years in all. I've followed his career, watched him climb up the ladder - and you too, through them, and the papers. You hear a lot in my job, and people on their own a lot sometimes need someone to talk to, and I've watched their boys grow up, do well for themselves... *(Her voice trails off)*

GARETH Have you any family of your own?

BRENDA Oh, yes, two boys, the same as them. They're grown up now too, Tom and Philip. Philip's done well, he's got his own little shop, and he helps his brother. Tom struggles a little...he had an accident, knocked down by a car. He was a very talented little footballer, some of the scouts from the big clubs were really interested in him, but his legs were badly broken.... there was no question of him trying to play football after that, not professionally. Broke his heart too... it all happened some time ago, ten, eleven years...

GARETH *(He is looking intently at Brenda)* That must have been about the time you started working for Stuart and Anne...

BRENDA That's right, not too long before... Mr. Weatherby became head of your chambers a little while after... I was still married to my first husband then ... the name was Owens..

Gareth and Brenda stare at each other, not speaking. We switch to Anne and William who have been quietly talking at one side. Gareth and Brenda exit after a moment, Brenda has put her bag on the table while she talks to Gareth and leaves it there as she exits.

WILLIAM For God's sake Anne, you owe that man nothing. On the contrary, he owes everything to you... everything.

ANNE Oh, William, I'm beginning to wish I'd never told you about... *(She is too distressed to finish)*

WILLIAM Who else could you turn to? I've always been there for you. Oh, Anne, when I think of what you've put up with all these years...

ANNE Please, William, not tonight, don't make a scene. I'll be the one who suffers later, if you do.

WILLIAM He's moving on, Anne. Let him go it alone.

ANNE I don't know, William...

WILLIAM Don't you want to?

ANNE *(Quickly)* You know that's not it..

WILLIAM It's decision time Anne. Something's got to be done.

He storms off as Jessica Raymond approaches them.

JESSICA Anne! Hello, how are you? It's an impressive turnout. I'll bet you know everybody here? I still feel like the new girl on the block. *(Jessica senses that Anne is upset and tries to lighten the mood)* I ..er hope it wasn't something I said?

ANNE *(Putting on a false smile)* Good Heavens no, Jessica, not at all. *(Anne is dragging a handkerchief through her hands)*

JESSICA I suppose it must be quite sad to leave and move on after all this time.

ANNE You did it though, didn't you? New firm, new town, new home, everything.

JESSICA Yes, well, sometimes a clean break is the best. A completely fresh start.

ANNE Maybe you're right... a clean break. *(She loops the hanky into a knot and yanks it tight)*

Stuart approaches

STUART Ah, two of my favourite ladies. Anne, Douglas Lord is over there, go and chat him up, there's a good girl. Invite him for dinner or something, you've known him for ever, and he could be very... *(He glances at Jessica)* ...it would be a nice thing to do now that he's on his own.

He looks lecherously at Jessica who meets his stare blandly

ANNE I was just talking to Jessica, Stuart...

STUART *(Without removing his gaze from Jessica)* Now, dear, if you would.

ANNE Of course.

She exits. Unnoticed Ginny re-enters the room and stays quietly to one side watching

STUART It's good to see you, Jessica. All settled in now?

JESSICA Yes, thank you, Stuart, or getting there at least. I've been here a few months now.

STUART It's a lot harder for you solicitors to move. Taking on new problems left behind by your predecessor, bringing with you some of the problems from your last place.

Jessica gives him her full attention

STUART Barristers now, we just pick up the papers, do the business and then pass it back to you.

JESSICA Not just a barrister any longer, Stuart... His Honour, now surely.

STUART Imminent, my dear, imminent. You're looking very well, Jessica... have you been away?

JESSICA Yes, last week-end, fresh salt air and a bit of sunshine works wonders you know.

STUART Fit too. *(He undresses her mentally)*

JESSICA I do my best. I found that working out at the gym helped to ease the tension when I was going through my divorce. I've tried to keep it up, since the move.

STUART I can see that. We mustn't lose touch, just because I'm off to the bench. You must make a point of letting me know when you're in court. Come round the back to see me. I'll tell my usher and clerk to let you through any time.

JESSICA I'm usually dashing whenever I'm at court, but I'll bear it in mind, Stuart.

STUART Always so busy whenever I ask. *(Slight pause)* Oh, by the way, did I tell you that I bumped into your old senior partner last Tuesday night at a dinner.

JESSICA No.

STUART Yes, I had quite a long chat with him. A few of our chambers were there, actually. Tim and Ginny, can't just recall whether Gareth was there or not. Pity, what happened at your old place... must have been so very... difficult - for all of you. *(He turns to go and then swings back to her)* Don't forget now, about calling in to see me. I shan't. I'll put a reminder in my diary. I'll expect you, don't let me down this time. We can have lunch - or something. *(He accompanies this remark with a suggestive stroke of her arm and then exits)*

Jessica watches him go she doesn't see Gareth come up behind her

GARETH Hello. I've been looking for you.

Jessica spins around to face him

JESSICA Gareth. You gave me a jolt.

GARETH Not an unpleasant one I hope?

JESSICA Hardly. *(She smiles at him a little self-consciously)*

GARETH I was beginning to think that you were avoiding me.

JESSICA On the contrary. I've been trying to ring you most of this week. In fact I rang last Tuesday, but I couldn't get you. Were you out ?

GARETH I should have been as it happens, but I got stuck in Carlisle County Court, and then in traffic. The only plus factor was that it got me out of one of those horrendous formal dinners - that's where I should have been.

JESSICA I was ringing to thank you for last week-end. It was wonderful. I enjoyed it so much. *(They gradually move towards each other over the next few lines until Ginny joins them)*

GARETH The sailing?

JESSICA The sailing.

GARETH The hotel?

JESSICA Oh, definitely the hotel.

GARETH And dinner?

JESSICA I was actually thinking of after dinner.

GARETH I've not stopped thinking about it.

After a moment, Ginny joins them, complete with glass as ever

GINNY Dear hearts, a charming picture... *(As Jessica and Gareth move away from each other)* please don't stop on my account, it warms the old cockles just to see you. I'm simply an old romantic at heart you know. Indeed I am.

JESSICA An old rogue, more like. *(She smiles affectionately at him.)* How many hearts was it at the last count, Ginny? I heard about that lady clerk from Bob Foster's chambers, ruined her expectations you did, and broke her heart. He's not been able to get any sense out of her for weeks now, you scoundrel.

GINNY A mere flirtation, my dear Jessica. She clung to me like a spar in a shipwreck. What could I do? Had to make a sharp exit. Could have ended up riveted for life, perish the thought. No-one could live with me anyway, can barely manage it myself, thinking about it. Try not to mostly. Anyway, enough of me, what about you two, eh? Is this a romance I see before me?

GARETH Well, if you'd go away Ginny... *(He looks meaningfully at him)*

GINNY My dear boy, say not another word. I'm off.

JESSICA *(Laughing and grabbing at Ginny's arm as he makes to go)* No, no, Ginny, you stay and talk to Gareth. I need to speak to Stuart. There are some dates I have to check with him. I know I shouldn't do it this evening, but I'll take the opportunity while I've got it. *(To Gareth as she exits)* I'll see you later.

GARETH You certainly will.

GINNY A delightful girl, Gareth my boy, delightful.

GARETH You're preaching to the converted, Ginny.

GINNY That was perfectly obvious when I came in. *(He becomes serious for once)* Beware of Stuart, Gareth. He has a way of discovering one's tender spots and putting pressure on them. At that dinner we went to last Tuesday - you didn't miss anything by the way, as boring as these things always are - he spent quite a while talking to Jessica's old senior partner. Had to ask my dinner companion who he was, as I didn't recognise him. Had their heads together for some time. Didn't like the look of it at all. Saw him

talking to Jessica just now, didn't like the look of that either. She's done you good, my boy, and vice versa, don't let him spoil it for you...

GARETH Again? At the risk of repeating myself, you are preaching to the converted. Did you hear what he was saying to her?

GINNY Not close enough, I'm afraid.

GARETH *(In exasperation)* All my life that man's been there, dogging every step, like a Nemesis.

GINNY *(Apologetically)* Hate to correct my head of chambers, but got that the wrong way round, dear boy. Although people think of her as destiny, Nemesis was actually the Greek goddess of retribution. *(He raises his glass to Gareth)* Maybe you'll be his, one of these days.

GARETH You never know, and I accept the correction. You see, they didn't do Greek at the school Stuart and I went to. And what about you, Ginny, which of your tender spots has Stuart applied pressure to?

GINNY Oh, Lord. I couldn't say, or remember. I've fully anaesthetised myself, over the years, to the likes of Stuart. *(He indicates his glass)* And I'm far too lowly a member of this profession to have ever been seen as competition for whatever he may have set his sights on. *(He sees Stuart approaching and drains his glass)* Anyway, if you'll excuse me, I can't face our new judge on an empty glass.

He exits as Stuart enters and joins Gareth

STUART Gareth.

GARETH Stuart.

The two men face each other for a moment unspeaking. Stuart breaks the moment

STUART Marvellous to see all the old faces here tonight. You'll know most of them as well as I do, I should think.

GARETH Yes. We go back a long way, Stuart.

STUART We do, don't we? School, university, chambers, and I always just nipped in there ahead of you didn't I...

GARETH And now, the bench, of course. Oh, and let's not forget the marriage as well, Stuart...

STUART Of course. Lovely girl -er - Claire wasn't it?

GARETH I see you remember it so well, but then, it was a long time ago, and obviously meant so little to you.

STUART You wrong me, Gareth. I remember it very well. I got head of chambers not that long afterwards, but of course you weren't really in the race at that time. Pipped at the post

again, as they say. (*Stuart turns to go*)

GARETH Yes. All obstacles removed. The accident - really quite helpful to you wasn't it? I'm sure you remember that.

STUART Very sad. A young lad like that. It took us all a long time to get over it, but we all stood together, supported each other.

GARETH Oh, the perfect husband, everything - just as it should be, as you would want it.

STUART Yes. Oh, I was speaking to Jessica a little earlier. Lovely girl. I've asked her to call to see me next time she's in court. Made her promise she would. I'm sure she will too. So trustworthy, reliable, and very... attractive.

GARETH Leave her alone Stuart.

STUART What's the matter? Can't take a little competition? No, maybe not, but then it gets so boring coming second all the time, doesn't it?

He exits before Gareth can reply, and we switch to Anne and Brenda as Gareth also exits in the opposite direction to Stuart

BRENDA For God's sake, you more than anyone know what he's like. Why don't you just leave him? Anne, shall I tell you who I really am?

ANNE What?!

BRENDA Before I married my second husband my name was Owens. I have two sons, as you know. One of them is called Tom.

Anne looks at Brenda horrified

BRENDA But I *know*, Anne, I know what really happened that night.

ANNE What do you mean?

BRENDA Whose hands on the wheel? Whose feet on the pedal? Whose fault?

ANNE There's nothing to be done.

BRENDA Oh, there is.

The two women stare at each other for a moment

ANNE Perhaps you're right.

Anne walks to the other side of the room. Brenda watches her for a moment and then seemingly satisfied exits in the opposite direction. Anne almost collides with William as she gets to the other side of the room.

ANNE I must find Stuart.

WILLIAM *(He holds Anne by the arms as she is obviously distressed)* You're upset. I'll get him for you.

ANNE I'll go alone. It's time to sort things out.

WILLIAM Leave it to me.

They part company exiting in opposite directions. Brenda re-enters. She left her bag on the drinks table earlier when talking to Gareth. She checks it is still there and goes over and picks it up without saying anything. She checks its contents as she leaves and seems satisfied that everything is there. She exits again. Ginny enters with a fresh bottle

GINNY *(Staring around the room, his sight is a little unfocused at this point as he takes a good slurp from his glass)* Ah, alcohol levels replenished, let us sally forth. Where is every body? All my chums vanished? Can't see 'em anywhere. So damned crowded tonight, can't see a soul. Right, Ginny old thing, fortify your soul, and your soles *(drains glass)*, and let us go find them all. *(He exits, then after a moment he shouts from off stage)* Oh, my God. Foul play, foul play. I say!

Ginny hurtles back in, breathless, and shakily pours himself a further glass. Everybody else follows from different directions. The last in from the opposite direction to Ginny are Gareth and Jessica. Gareth is straightening his tie and smoothing his hair, Jessica is missing a scarf she was wearing earlier and the top couple of buttons on her blouse/dress are now undone. Ginny spies Gareth and dashes over to him.

GINNY Gareth, Gareth... *(Taking a large slurp)* - never meant it y'know. Nemesis - you - him - my word on it. Just a jest. *(Another large slurp)*

GARETH Ginny, what are you talking about?

GINNY Our head, dear boy, that is ex-head - *very-* ex!

ANNE Stuart?!

GINNY The same.

ANNE What about Stuart, Ginny?

GINNY Eyes staring, nay starting from their very sockets, tongue hanging out, puce in the face.

BRENDA *(Almost an aside to the audience)* I knew it was a mistake to give him the 'phone bill for your boys.

GARETH Actually, Ginny, it sounds rather like you, at the end of the day, before we get you to Fraser's wine bar.

GINNY Oh, worse, dear boy, much worse, and I fear permanent.

ANNE Permanent?!

GINNY Looks like it to me. Oh, I'm done for, this is all too much for me. *(He collapses into a handy chair as the others fuss over him)*

Enter Inspector Foot of the Yard

FOOT In that case, sir, you'd better leave it to the professionals.

BRENDA Who are you?

FOOT Inspector Foot of the Yard, Ma'am..

WILLIAM You got here pretty sharpish.

FOOT Yes, well one of your guests got straight on their mobile. We didn't quite catch the address as the signal broke up, but using my highly trained powers of detection I managed to locate its source.

BRENDA That's very impressive, inspector, how did you do it?

FOOT It's got it written, just here... *(He pulls out his invite and shows it to Anne)* on my invitation, madam. I was invited last week, by Mr. Gynnsticke here. The - er -smell of the hotpot was a bit of a give-away too.

GINNY Inspector, you must go and see to Mr. Weatherby.

FOOT Can you describe the gentleman to me, please?

There is a chorus of all the voices (except for Anne and Ginny) repeating Ginny's line...

ALL Eyes staring, nay, starting, from their very sockets, tongue hanging out, puce in the face.

FOOT Sounds more like Mr. Gynnsticke, that does, to me.

GINNY And there was something around his throat, something tight.

FOOT And was this something tight attached to anything?

GINNY Only his neck!

FOOT In that case -

ANNE You don't mean -

FOOT Yes, Mrs Weatherby, either you're guilty of persistently buying your husband the wrong size shirt, or -

ANNE No!

FOOT Yes, but I'll say no more until I've seen the gentleman. You, madam/sir... *(indicating a*

member of the audience) would you please ensure that none of these persons leave this room while I am gone, I shall be but a moment. Mr. Gynnsticke will you accompany me, to show me Mr. Weatherby's whereabouts as you might say.

GINNY If I must.

The inspector and Ginny exit together

ANNE Do you think he's...?

GARETH Let's wait and see what the inspector has to say when he comes back, Anne.

JESSICA I think we can guess what he'll say...

GARETH Guess, possibly, but we don't know... or do you?

JESSICA What?! How could you possibly.. *(she turns away upset and angry and Gareth moves to her to try to calm her/apologise etc.)*

ANNE Oh, my God! Brenda! There is something to be done, you said...

BRENDA Hey, now wait just one minute. I didn't ask to be invited here tonight, I very nearly didn't come. I'm beginning to wish I hadn't. And what about you? You and Mr. Oldsmith there have been as thick as thieves for years. Couldn't you stand it any longer? I wouldn't blame you if you couldn't, mind you, but if you thought I was going to do something, maybe it seemed a better bet to be a wealthy widow, then a wife of a nobody who used to be somebody.

ANNE Oh Brenda, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. What are we all saying? Oh, William. *(She turns to William and sobs into his shoulder).*

BRENDA I need a drink - a large one.

Ginny and the inspector re-enter

GINNY So do I, dear lady, a very large one.

The inspector breaks in on the others, who have been continuing their discussions

FOOT Ladies and gentlemen. *(No response)* Oi! you lot!

They all stop and turn to look at him

FOOT That's enough of that, thank you. I have now inspected the scene of the crime...

ANNE Crime, inspector?

FOOT Yes, madam. I'm afraid that Mr Weatherby was...

ANNE No!

FOOT Yes - murdered.

All react with gasps, shock etc.

FOOT I'm afraid that I shall have to ask you all to accompany me...

GARETH Where?

FOOT To the kitchen, the hotpot's ready and I for one am not missing out...

Foot is almost trampled in the rush as the others dash past him to get their hotpot. He regains his balance and turns to the audience

FOOT Ladies and gentlemen, I shall now go to question the suspects. I shall rely upon your assistance in continuing this when I return, after I've 'ad me hotpot, excuse me. *(He dashes off after the others with a comment such as "'ere don't you nick all the beetroot now, I'm watching you")*