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## BRUCE AND ERMENGARDE

*George P. Elliott*

**B**RUCE AND ERMENGARDE walked down the long, green-carpeted aisle between desks of typists, Bruce forging slightly ahead all the way. None of the typists paid any particular attention to them; Ermengarde was hardly known outside her own unit, and Bruce went past them to Mr. Brownell's office at least once or twice a week. And, of course, none of the typists bracketed the two together in their minds, for they knew that Ermengarde was a junior personnel officer and Bruce her unit chief. Neither they nor anyone else in the whole bureau suspected that there was anything more between them.

They walked to the desk of Mr. Brownell's secretary.

"Hello, Marie," said Bruce, "is John busy?"

"I'm sure he's not. Go on in."

Marie did not notice Ermengarde hold back nor did she hear her half-whisper, "You go on in by yourself, Bruce," and if she had observed this she would not have thought much of it; Ermengarde was thought to be very shy.

"Nonsense," Bruce answered her in an undertone. "John isn't so bad as all that. You ought to meet him formally. He's a human being."

He put his pipe in his tobacco pouch, stuck the pouch in his coat pocket, and opened the door.

"Hello, Mr. Brownell, I hope we aren't bothering you."

"No, no, come on in, Lapin. How do you do, Miss Cline. Sit down, sit down. Well, how's she going today?"

Ermengarde dropped her eyes and smiled nervously. Her hands were shaking so hard that she spilled cigarette ash onto her lap.

"We came to ask you for a special favor, Mr. Brownell, one I hope you will find it possible to grant. We would like an extra hour of lunch time to go to the City Hall and apply for a marriage license. The office

is closed during the lunch hour or we would go then of course, in conformance with our strict twelve to one policy. I thought it would be permissible to take it. . . ."

"My God, man, of course, of course, take all the time you need. But this is a surprise! Allow me to congratulate you. It makes the second romance in the bureau since I came out here. Thomson and his wife, you know. Well, I must say it's a fine thing indeed. Yes sir."

He shook Bruce's hand vigorously, and smacked Ermengarde resoundingly on the cheek. Only Bruce did not seem to be ill at ease.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Brownell," he said as he opened the door.

"Well, now, wait a minute, when's the great day?"

"Friday afternoon. At the court house. A very quiet civil ceremony."

"Well, well. How splendid. I suppose you have a vacation coming up next week? Although you picked a bad month to take it. Not much doing now."

"No, we're just spending the week end in Carmel, cottage of a friend of mine. Then back to work."

"Well, well. Good luck to you. So long."

He laughed with professional heartiness.

"Good-bye," said Ermengarde very low.

Marie watched with large eyes. When they were out of earshot, she turned to Brownell.

"Hey," they said in unison, "what's going on around here?"

They laughed.

"I hadn't heard anything about this, Marie. How long has this been brewing?"

"Are they getting married?"

"Well, they wanted an hour off to get a marriage license."

"My God, I'd read about it, but I never knew it to happen to people I knew. He's a nice guy too, in a way."

"I'll be damned. Well, it's a funny world."

"That was a funny way to tell people, Mr. Brownell, asking you for an hour off that way. You'd think they'd just announce it regularly."

"Yes, you would, Marie. They knew perfectly well they could take an hour for a thing like that. Well, live and learn."

Exactly forty minutes later no one in the whole bureau was working, except Bruce and Ermengarde and the PBX operator. It took forty

minutes only because Miss Bridgman was talking on the phone to Washington and couldn't be told until she was through. When she heard about it, she laughed for five minutes and then made Foerster, her superior, go out with her for a couple of highballs. One of the file clerks was a southerner. When she heard about it, she threw onto the floor a pile of case dockets she was holding, and swore. "I'll never speak to *him* again; it's always the man's fault in a case like this. Any girl would do like Erma in her place. But that pip-squeak! He should be shot. If this was Houston he would be too, I can tell you that." The first person Marie had told was Louise, the receptionist, because Bruce had, as everyone knew, laid most elaborate siege to her the year before and, as everyone thought, had not been repulsed or even severely set back in his advances. Louise said, "Well, I'll be—" and shook her head. She didn't say much but stared at the poster on the wall opposite her for a long time. Later she called Marie up on the phone and said she wasn't really very surprised. Martha, the Negro typist, when she heard about it locked herself in one of the booths in the women's toilet, and cried and cried. Which was the strangest of all, for Martha had scarcely so much as smiled at Bruce or said hello to Ermengarde.

They weren't fired and no one made unpleasant remarks to them — indeed, an office banquet and a kitchen shower were given in honor of their marriage — but they did have great trouble getting a place to live. Bruce had moved in with Ermengarde, but it was a two-room apartment and very crowded. There was barely room for his books, and they had to store his mobiles — he had three large and a half a dozen small ones. But finally they found a flat on Russian Hill where the landlord, an Italian, didn't object to mixed couples, and they moved in. The breakfast-nook window had a view of Alcatraz Island and behind it a sign on a hill on the north side of the Golden Gate saying "Welcome Home, Well Done"; the living-room windows looked upon the clotheslines of half a dozen neighbors; and the bathroom window was frosted against the lightwell. But fortunately the ceilings were high enough to permit Bruce to hang all but one of his mobiles.

He was very fond of them; he would rest his eyes, he said, by watching the mobiles for a while when he had read too much. Ermengarde, who was not at all interested in them, was annoyed by having them in the apartment, though she would never admit her irritation, he loved them so; one of the two that he hung in the bedroom — The Sleeper — was an especial trial to her because she suffered from night blindness

and was always terrified of bumping into it in the dark. She never actually collided with it, but one night when preparing for bed, on her way from the bathroom to the window to raise the blind she brushed against The Sleeper and set it revolving. There was enough light to give it ghostly outline, and Ermengarde lay for hours in a state of fascination and annoyance watching it slowly wind and unwind itself, kept ever moving by the light, night breeze. She would have gotten out of bed to stop it, since it bothered her so much, except that Bruce had explained to her, with patience and firmness, that the delicate balance of a mobile — so delicately constructed — must not be disturbed in any way once it is correctly established. He had spent most of every evening for the first week after they had moved in, while Ermengarde unpacked clothes and dishes and arranged furniture, situating and securing the mobiles: Before on one side of the false fireplace and After on the other; Déjà, a small but very delicate one, over the magazine table; Nimbus in the pantry (Ermengarde had been afraid to use the Mix-master because the vibrations might affect Nimbus, but Bruce assured her it was all right, said, literally, that her fears were absurd); Whisper and, of course, The Sleeper, in the bedroom; Skew in the entrance hall; and by way of joke, hanging in the bathroom exactly over the toilet seat a pernicious looking arrangement of sheet metal called Damocles. Bruce would not permit Ermengarde to dust them; rather, every Saturday morning when she vacuumed the place he himself, using an especial attachment he had had made for the purpose, would clean every wire and piece of cardboard on every one of his mobiles.

Bruce was, apparently, happy, although not even Ermengarde could tell very accurately when he was unhappy. He would become very irritable if things went wrong — anything from a rattle in the six-year-old car they bought to a new evidence of war profiteering — but once things straightened out or once he had made up his mind that there was nothing he could do about them, he was back to his patient self again.

And Ermengarde loved him very, very much. She loved everything he gave her which she had never had before: he taught her how to brush her teeth in a more thorough way, he insisted that they always get their eight hours of sleep, he would tell her dirty jokes with a certain air, he took her with him wherever he went. And he was frank about, even sought out occasions to discuss, everything that had always been forbidden her: religion, sexual perversion, divorce, patriotism,

rebellion — he was afraid of none of them. The motto on his bookplates was Duty, Knowledge, Honesty. He read constantly; they went out only once a week, Sundays, to a movie, unless there was an especially good play or concert in town. And he set her upon a course of reading; she had of course gone to college, working her way through and majoring in home economics as her mother had wished, but Bruce was constantly shocked at her ignorance and set her the task of making up her deficiencies. She loved him for his thoughtfulness; she had always felt, flappingly, very badly read, but she had never known where to begin to make her way through the wilderness of knowledge. When she had tried before to cultivate herself, she had usually turned quickly back to the Bible, though she no longer believed in it, because she had heard it said that the Bible was a masterpiece of literature and she already knew it so well. She had formed the habit, when she had first come to San Francisco and gone to work at the bureau leaving her family and friends behind, of long daydreaming and taking long walks by herself and playing records alone. The only deprivation she really minded from her marriage was having to give up records; she had at least two hundred jazz pieces and a good player, but Bruce didn't like jazz, so they only played it when friends came in. They would play half a dozen discs, and then Bruce would interject his favorite piece, a Mahler symphony; the part he seemed to like best was a loud tremolo sostenuto which made *Déjà* shimmer like a weeping willow; he would play the passage over and over, insisting that everyone enjoy the thing, then finish the symphony; and thoughtfully, puffing his pipe, he would turn off the player and start to talk about something serious. There were a few, not many, bureau people whom they invited in for dinner occasionally, but on the whole they lived a retiring life. Ermengarde became expert at cooking without eggs — Bruce was allergic to them in even the minutest quantity — and she felt more loved and alive than she had ever hoped to feel in all her life. She was afraid, really, of only one thing — sex. She was almost never satisfied when they made love, and she knew that Bruce liked it much less when she was not satisfied. After all, he had never, as he said, failed with another woman, and she had been a virgin at twenty-five. But he assured her it would all change later with experience. They discussed the problem frequently, but even after a year of marriage sex was no better for Ermengarde. She only hoped that it would not turn Bruce away from her, and tried to compensate for her lack in a thousand little ways else.

Within a month after the war was over, the bureau had been reduced by one-fourth, and one of the personnel staff had to be laid off.

Bruce, at ten o'clock on the Monday morning after the final big lay-off, buzzed for Ermengarde. She came into his little office and smiled at him affectionately.

"Hello, Erma," he said. He was absorbed in lighting his pipe, sucking it vigorously, studying the coals. Finally he looked up at her. "I'm afraid we'll have to terminate you this week."

"Terminate! What are you talking about? I've been here three months longer than that Marcia, and I do better work than she ever did. She's stupid."

"I realize that, my dear. There is no question about it. Normally, there would be no question about your staying."

She was still mad.

"All right, I'll stay then. It's only fair. It's the best job I ever had. It won't be so easy for me to find another one, you know that, Bruce. Anyhow," she added more quietly, "*we could* use the money."

Bruce lips became a thin line. He spoke almost effeminately.

"It is considerations such as that which make it imperative that you go and not Marcia. I must not prejudice my permanent status in the civil service by any such indiscretion as this. You surely realize that. Think of it, think what our enemies would be able to pin on me. As it is, there is absolutely nothing for which we could be blamed in any way."

"I know you're right, Bruce. It's just that I hate to give up this job so much. It'll be so hard for me to find another as good. And," she added in a very low voice, "it's nice working near you."

"Of course I'm right. It's the only way that makes sense. Come on now, we'll go see Brownell."

She was staring bleakly at the pen holder on his desk. Tension made pale blotches appear on her face. Pain, before she had known him, had filmed her eyes over against all the world; now with Bruce who had all her trust the pain was shining clear and hot, and it was wanting to be soothed, not to be throttled into submissiveness until it should be added to the enormous reserves of despair which all her life had been accumulating within her.

"Pull yourself together," he said and got up. "John always likes to tell departing personnel good-bye. He's in now."

The pain disappeared from her eyes; but they were obscured as by

a faint breathing on a cold window, and it took a decimal or two more of effort for her shoulders to square themselves for her journey again to Brownell's office.

The typists lining the green aisle scarcely glanced at them, and Marie said "Hello" to Bruce who reached her desk first.

"Is John busy?"

"He's on the phone, but he'll be through in a minute. Sit down and wait."

They waited in silence.

When they went in, Brownell shook their hands heartily and offered them cigarettes, which neither took.

"Mr. Brownell," said Bruce, "Ermengarde is having to leave. We are forced to a reduction in force in the Personnel Division, as you know, and I'm afraid it's Ermengarde's turn."

"Why, that's a great pity, Mrs. Lapin. We've enjoyed having you with us from the very first. It has proved to more than myself the folly of discrimination. You and Martha have both acquitted yourselves with the utmost credit."

Ermengarde murmured a thank-you. Bruce took out his pipe and lit it.

"Let me see, Lapin, who does that leave in your unit?"

"Wallace, Thurman, Mary Risko, and Marcia Leopardi."

"Um hmmm. Yes. Well, Marcia Leopardi. She's that heavy-set girl, glasses?"

"Yes."

"Didn't she come considerably after you, Mrs. Lapin?"

"Well, yes, Mr. Brownell. About three months."

"Then why are you leaving first?"

Bruce spoke.

"We thought it would be best. Other considerations entered into the picture of course."

"Well, that's a great pity. You've made a good team. I'm sorry to see the old bureau breaking up. Yes sir, it's too bad. It's just the way things go though."

Brownell saw them to the door, and when they had left shook his head at Marie.

"She's going," he said; "it seems to have worked out all right after all."

Bruce back in his office with Ermengarde said to her, "You see, my



dear, it's best this way. John was very warm about our work here. He fully appreciated your achievement against almost a double handicap."

After she had quit, Ermengarde spent a great deal of her time looking for a job. But at 5:20 when Bruce came home she would meet him at the flat always with a little surprise — a dress worked over, a lemon-cream pie with graham cracker crust, a new mystery by his favorite author, a cuba libra all mixed and a rhumba going on the record player. After they had enjoyed her little surprise for a while, they would go for a driving lesson. Bruce insisted, now that gas rationing was off and Ermengarde had nothing else to do, that she learn how to drive, and she was willing enough. They would drive for half an hour or so, in back streets where the traffic was light. On Saturdays and Sundays, Bruce would take her to the Golden Gate Park and out along the beach for a couple of hours.

She learned slowly, having never handled machinery much before and fearing it as well, but after a month and a couple of solos she was confident enough one Friday to take the car alone across the Bay Bridge to Oakland to have an interview for a job in a hospital. Unfortunately, as she was parking near the hospital, she dented the right front fender of their car on the bumper of a truck. She didn't get the job, and she was so rattled by the time she got home that she couldn't put the car in the garage but left it on the hillside. Bruce had explained that it was always safer, living on a hill as they did, to put it in the garage; but she hadn't the strength left to steer it in. When Bruce came home she was in the shower washing her hair. It wasn't dirty, but she had long ago learned that when she was overwrought nothing relaxed her so much as to wash her hair.

He called to her through the bathroom door.

"Hello," she said, and turned off the water a moment.

"Everything all right?"

"Oh sure."

"Why is the car on the street? Have trouble?"

"Wait till I come out," she said not very loud, and she turned on the water again.

When she had dressed and put up her hair, she was as nervous as she had been before. She had to try three times to get her lipstick on straight, and in the mirror she could see that her face was blotched. She hated it; it looked dirty, unclean.

"Hello, Ermengarde," said Bruce. He was reading a magazine. "You seem to have had trouble."

"Yes, honey," she said sitting on the end of the sofa next to him; he hated her to sit on the arm of his chair. "I hit the fender on a truck when I was parking in Oakland. I didn't leave any name in the truck because I just hit his bumper. Will it cost a lot to fix it?"

"Normally it would be a matter of five or six dollars. Nowadays body and fender work is unreasonably high. However, it's a small matter, the price of experience. But why did you leave the car on the street?"

"Well, honey, I was so upset I just couldn't bear to try and put it in the garage. It was all I could do to get home."

He didn't respond.

"Bruce, I don't think I want to drive any more. There really isn't much point in it. Everywhere I go in a car, you go too. Around the Bay I can just as easily take the streetcars and buses. It really upsets me."

"Nonsense, everyone should know how to drive. When we take our trip you can relieve me at the wheel. Many and many's the time I have told you, it's just a part of growing up. It's time you broke away from your childish fears and habits. Tomorrow we'll drive all around the Bay. It's a lovely drive and you need to learn confidence in yourself."

She could not argue with him; his arguments were as always right. Yet she ate dinner only in order not to distress him; what she ate lay uneasily in her stomach till long after they were in bed and Bruce was asleep.

In the morning an odd accident happened. Ermengarde was standing on a stool reaching for the syrup for the waffles when suddenly the coffee boiled over. Alarmed, she lost her balance; the jar of syrup banged into Nimbus, the lid caught on one of Nimbus' wires and bent it, and her hand knocked a couple of the pieces of cardboard off the mobile. Ermengarde was not injured by her fall nor was the jar broken. Bruce came running in; Ermengarde, forgetting the coffee, cried, "Oh darling, I *am* sorry," and held her face. He didn't say anything, but climbed up on the shelf to examine the damage. "I guess," she said, the pantry's not a good place for it." "I guess not," he said, but that was all. He showed no signs of anger, he didn't accuse her of anything; she

could never get used to his tolerance of her faults, for she had been raised by a carping mother.

After breakfast they went for their drive. Ermengarde got the car out of the garage and out of San Francisco itself with no real trouble. Yet whenever she would make the car buck when she started it up from a stop, Bruce would clench his fists and wince, and once when she turned left from the right side of the street, he leaped around in his seat to look back as though a whirlwind had twisted him.

"I've told you *never* to do that. Position on the road is far more important than signaling."

"I know it, I know it. It's just that sometimes I forget. There wasn't anybody coming. I could see that."

"It's not only important to turn correctly, whoever is or is not coming, it's the law. You must never forget that the law is a reasonable body of rules reflecting for the most part the judgment of men of wide experience and training."

They got stuck behind a truck on a two-lane highway going up a hill, and trying to shift into low, Ermengarde killed the motor. Bruce immediately started it up for her and used the hand throttle to get them going again. People were honking behind them.

Approaching a yellow light in San Jose, Ermengarde asked Bruce whether she should stop or go on through. He wouldn't answer, for he believed that she should make her own decisions unless it was a matter of real danger. She couldn't make up her mind whether to go or to stop, and as a result killed the motor right in the middle of a downtown Saturday morning intersection. Again Bruce got her out of her trouble, silently, uncomplainingly.

She parked then by the nearest bar.

"I've got to have a drink," she said.

He looked the bar over, decided it was all right for them, and they went in for their drink. He analyzed carefully her errors for her and showed surprise that she should have backslid. She had been so smooth before. She agreed with him, humbly, reasonably, but her shoulders drooped and did not square themselves as she sat, and her eyes were dulled now as by a warm, windless haze.

They left. They were caught out of San Jose behind a huge truck and trailer going not quite fast enough for comfort and not slow enough for Ermengarde to feel that she could pass it safely.

"Don't forget," said Bruce, "the time will come when you *have* to

pass in a case like this. Already two cars have gone around the truck and us. See that the road is clear, and shoot ahead."

After five miles she dared it. She got halfway by the truck when a bus rounded the corner several hundred yards ahead. She lost her nerve and took her foot off the throttle. Another car behind her, also passing the truck, honked. Bruce pulled the hand throttle all the way out, and she got by the truck with plenty of room to spare, but the car that was also passing forced the bus half off the road.

"That was good steering," said Bruce; "everything you did was correct except you lost your nerve. Once you get in a situation you must see it through. That's true of a great many more things than just driving."

Ermengarde as she drove on, to keep from crying, prayed to herself a foolish child's prayer to God, offering Him her life and love and all she owned if only He would see her safely home.

When a chicken ran into the road ahead of her by a farmhouse, she came to a dead stop.

"At least that was better than swerving," said Bruce. "Swerving is a fool's trick. You've never swerved yet. Good."

In the hills back of Oakland, on the drive among pine trees along the crest of the range, Bruce rolled down his window to sniff the scent of the trees. There was very little traffic. They were planning on where they would eat the lunch they had brought, and Ermengarde was more relaxed than she had been since they had left home. Going about thirty-five miles an hour, she approached a three-way intersection. A boy in a convertible was roaring past her into the intersection when a taxi shot out from the side street. The two nearly hit, their tires screeched, and they both swerved, the taxi toward Ermengarde. With a simple, unthinking impulse she trod the accelerator to the floor and twisted the steering wheel toward a large tree on the far side of the intersection. If she missed the tree she would hurtle down a thousand-foot slope into a brush valley. The car leaped forward; Bruce grabbed the wheel and pulled it back; they grazed the edge of the slope, and nearly turned over into the valley, tilting on two wheels, tires kicking gravel. By the time he had turned the car back toward the road, Ermengarde put on the brakes and they bucked to a stop.

Ermengarde fell onto the wheel, and Bruce shook himself.

"Perhaps I'd better drive back into the country," he said.

He took the wheel and they went on. He explained to her what

she should have done: stopped as she had for the chicken, and not swerved. He kept asking her why she had stepped on the gas, but all she could do was shake her head.

"You *must* control yourself. It is doubly important for you to be careful."

He did not reprove her in what he said. He did not mention the fact that a Negro, and a woman as well, is always wrong in a traffic accident. He did not even imply that she was cowardly, incompetent, flighty, childishly uncertain of herself, foolish, as she knew she was. And nothing at all that he said gave her the right to believe that he enjoyed watching her tremble and breathe fast and bite her underlip and wring her damp hands on her already wet handkerchief; indeed, she was sure she was evil and nasty even to imagine such a thing. But she did; it was all she could think about all the way home.