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## BUTTERCUPS IN HER HAIR

*David Cornel DeJong*

**W**HEN SHE CAME HOME with buttercups in her hair, Martha exclaimed, "Oh, there you are," and "Oh, don't you look nice." But no one hinted that she'd been gone for more than five hours, and that they had waited, and called, and then searched. Now Martha put her supper before her, all the asparagus on toast she could eat, and then there would be strawberries in heavy cream.

She smiled at the food and then at them, before she said, "This is very nice. Oh, this is nice," and then she started eating, but her expression remained enigmatic. They were all very wise not to ask her any questions, and even tried to take the buttercups casually, as if she had a perfect right to twine them through her hair. Which, of course, she had, the boys decided a bit anxiously, while they watched Martha waiting on her.

Back in the kitchen, however, out of earshot, Mark said eagerly to his father, "I know where there's lots of buttercups, Dad. Oh, loads of them. But there are a lot of cows there, too, and of course she wouldn't want to go among all those cows, would she?"

"There are lots of buttercups everywhere," his father rebuked him. "Don't be childish."

Even so, Mark left the house, and Fred wanted to follow him but didn't quite dare, because Father looked forbidding. He saw Mark saunter up the hill, then past Joe Welch's orchard, on toward the meadow. Mark went with a bearing which was intended to hint: I'm certainly not going to look for buttercups, or cows, or any traces she might have left behind. Fred realized suddenly that Mark, for being two years younger, was allowed that much more leeway. Or latitude. That was the word they used in regard to Mother. Latitude, a word which had Dr. Lester's trademark on it, he thought resentfully.

"Besides," his father was saying emphatically, "buttercups are poisonous, you know that, don't you, Fred? That's why cow's won't eat them and they are so abundant. Mark is being very foolish."

"Yes, Father," he answered, and returned to the dining room to watch his mother eat her asparagus. She looked up and smiled and then said bemusedly, "Oh my, the time passed beyond all control, didn't it? But why not, after all?"

Before he could answer, Father started clearing his throat at the doorway, but it was Martha who said buoyantly, "Today nothing needed the clock somehow. It was that sort of a day. I think we all felt it."

"Did you?" Fred's mother asked incredulously, nibbling an asparagus stalk. "Did *you*, too, really?"

"Of course, we all did," Father said hurriedly.

"Oh darling, you are so consoling," she answered. "And Martha, too. I dare say Fred would be also, if he were old and articulate enough." She winked at Fred, and he felt both inordinately pleased and guilty. Especially guilty, because obviously Father would have to take measures again, and explain to him that all wasn't well with Mother, but that he must be brave and patient. And above all that he and Mark must be guided by Martha, especially now that they were in the country. And that Doctor Lester had advised only recently. . . .

Rebelliously Fred vowed to himself that he refused to know what Dr. Lester had advised. He didn't want to know, and above all he didn't want to explain it to Mark.

His father said now, "Fred, do not stand there with your mouth open as if you were a nighthawk ready to catch flies."

"And why shouldn't he?" Mother asked gently.

"You see," Father said sharply, "you've upset your mother again. Go and find Mark before he gets himself into all sorts of foolishness. But don't bother Joe Welch with your monkeyshines and questions."

Fred ran out of the house. Suddenly all the delight of having been allowed to quit school three weeks early to go to the country seemed very tricky and even apprehensible. It was altogether too obvious now that they had come here because Mother was "irresponsible."

He realized he wasn't running any longer, but that he was approaching the creek behind Joe Welch's place almost reluctantly. Then he sputtered to no one there on the quiet wagon path: "It isn't true. It isn't." At the same time he realized that if any grownup were to challenge him there, he'd burst out in tears. And *that* he wasn't going to

do. He started whistling stridently and unexpectedly came upon Mark, emerging from a hazelnut coppice. He made his face go hard, even while Mark started to shout: "I found it. I knew it. I know she's been sitting there. Because it's nice there, and no cows."

"Where?" Fred asked.

"Over there, where we wouldn't be able to see her anyway. Behind the bushes there. And the grass is flat where she sat, and there are buttercups all around," he continued triumphantly.

That for the time being seemed to settle everything for Mark. It wasn't necessary at all to explain anything. Together they started pushing through the undergrowth, and emerged into a little sunlit cove with high, lush grasses and buttercups, and daisies with only nubbins of buds, because it was so early in the season.

"And why shouldn't she?" Fred demanded defiantly.

"Yes, why shouldn't she?" Mark echoed, but then with his face turned away he added, "That old Martha. That Martha, I hate her. I think I'm going to kill her. Maybe. . .," he concluded uncertainly.

It was with them then: the problem. And their puzzlement, and their hopeless responsibility toward it. There it was, but they'd have to be inarticulate before it, especially toward each other. Especially Fred, because he might reveal too much, so much that they'd both start siding against Father. It was more loyal and angry to side with Mark against Martha.

"I think half-sisters are awful anyway," he said ineptly.

"I do too," Mark shouted, beating the bushes with a stick. "The old pickle-mouth."

Suddenly Fred laughed, inordinately and repeatedly. "Old pickle-mouth," he repeated, and mighty pleased with himself, Mark joined in. Still laughing they turned their feet back home, but Fred kept remembering that he should keep Mark's interest away from Joe Welch's farm. Because either he himself or Mark might say too much, to Joe, or Joe's mother, or some of the farm help. They'd been warned repeatedly by Martha not to "say too much," or better still "not to say anything."

Which was about Mother, of course. Even though that didn't seem reasonable now, because it had been Joe Welch's mother, that Mother was going to call on this afternoon. But she hadn't. After one week of carefully avoiding all neighbors, unless Father was present, it seemed that Dr. Lester had given different instructions. That in spite of the fact that Mother hadn't seen Dr. Lester at all, who seemed to be Father's

and Martha's friend exclusively. "We must allow her greater latitude, Martha," Fred had heard Father explain. "Doctor Lester says we mustn't make our vigilance obvious. She could start with calling on old Mrs. Welch. You might be able to cajole her into it."

But it seemed that after Martha's cajoling, Mother hadn't visited the Welch farm at all. She'd simply stayed away five hours, even a whole hour after Father had returned from the city. So now there was this new dilemma. Which was simple enough, if you merely believed correctly that Mother had preferred to sit in the green grass and pick but-tercups to visiting Old Lady Welch. But that was being irresponsible.

"I don't think it is," he said.

"What?" Mark asked.

"Irresponsible," he said precisely.

"Of course, it ain't," Mark said loyally. "That ole Martha, that ole pickle-mouth." Again they laughed inordinately. But they approached the house soberly, and they nodded their heads solemnly when their father met them and said: "You have an hour before bed time. Better take advantage of it and play outdoors. But stay near the house." He scrutinized them expectantly, waiting for them to explain if there was anything to explain. "Thank you, Father," they shouted, and ran toward the swing beneath the apple tree.

The next day, without actually rehearsing anything, they knew what they were going to do. When Mark said: "Let's find Mother," it was no more than a cue, for which they had both waited. It was afternoon again, and Mother had wandered away again, though all of them seemed to know implicitly that she wasn't visiting any of the neighbors. Martha by her freighted but smiling silences seemed to be challenging them. At least so Fred thought. But some illusive sort of loyalty prevented him from asking Mark if he felt it too.

During their morning games and wanderings, Fred had become more and more rebellious. Also more and more articulate to himself. Of course, Mother's unexpected and untoward leaving last month had brought everything to a head. She had stayed away only two weeks, and he and Mark were still uncertain as to whether their father had fetched her back, or whether she'd been ready to return anyway. But they had expected explanations and clarifications after her return, while trying to garner the utmost from Father's almost cryptic: "Now, Fred and Mark, you must be very careful how you treat Mother." Or Martha's:

"Poor pets, Martha will take care of everything. You mustn't worry. And we must lighten things for Father, mustn't we?"

It was more than a year since Martha had come into the family, but both boys still resented her calling their father "Father," as if she shared him equally with them. Fred especially. Because Martha was a grown-up woman of nineteen, even if things had happened to her. It seemed odd that so grown-up, competent, and calculating a young woman could have "things happen to her" like they did to children.

Martha, they had learned, had been left homeless. Homeless, because Martha's mother had remarried, and no longer wanted Martha around. And that event in turn revealed that Martha was actually Father's daughter, and that Father had been married before to Martha's mother, and that he'd been paying all these years for Martha's support. It seemed incredible and unjust, especially since they hadn't known anything about all this. According to Father, then, they hadn't been told before because Mother had insisted on keeping Father's earlier marriage a secret. But according to Aunt Emily, who was equally voluble to children as to grownups, it was Father who had insisted that his former marriage was not to be mentioned after he married Mother. According to Aunt Emily, Father had insisted that it would confuse issues, render the boys resentful, and Father vulnerable, whatever that all meant.

Then Martha had arrived. A very affable, capable, and dominant Martha, who seemed extremely domestic and who called Father "Father," and Mother, "Mom" because she couldn't bear calling her mother, which she had called her own mother, who had forsaken and wronged her. All the details, neither Fred nor Mark were supposed to understand. Hence, all their knowledge came to them obliquely, but never through Mother.

Martha had immediately proved herself to be very efficient, very eager to serve, but even more eager to take over the management of the entire household. She said she wanted to do that out of gratitude. Mother kept control of the boys, however. That was up until the time she became "irresponsible," after which Father instructed them: "Now you must do everything Martha tells you to do. Just remember that Martha loves you dearly, and is only thinking of your own good. You must not add any difficulty to your mother's irresponsibility. We must put all our shoulders to the wheel now, you know. It's a matter of co-operation."

Not until a week later, in the midst of a geography lesson at school,

did that word co-operation suddenly assume a menacing meaning. It meant co-operation against Mother. Fred had meant to think more about it, perhaps with the help of Mark, but then the great excitement, that they would be allowed to leave school three weeks before the term ended in order to go to their country place, simply had swamped everything. It was an amazing privilege, and young Mark especially seemed to have been thrown completely out of balance by it. But he himself had also started obeying Martha much more readily, even more than he had intended, and humoring Mother, and being very responsive to Father.

Up until yesterday. It seemed then that the simple matter of buttercups in Mother's hair had brought him to a turning point. And obviously Mark, too. So now this afternoon, they set out casually in the opposite direction of the one they intended to go. First of all they were in conspiracy against Martha. Next they were going to find Mother.

They set forth, silent with anticipation. They skirted the swamp, describing a wide arch around the Welch farm. "Whatever comes," he warned Mark, "we're not going to leave her be." He didn't even know exactly what he meant, but Mark echoed staunchly, "We won't let her be, will we, Fred?"

They spied her then exactly where they had expected to find her, there in the green cove with the buttercups. They pretended, however, that they didn't know she was there. She mustn't suspect that they knew her hiding place. "I hope she has buttercups in her hair," Mark said defiantly. "That ole Martha."

First they did a great deal of galloping around, pretending they were at some complicated game, so as to give her a fair warning of their presence. Then at the proper moment Fred allowed Mark to shout: "Why look, there's Mother. Hey, Ma, Ma. . . !"

They went cantering toward her, and plunked themselves down on either side of her. She smiled at them, and touched them with her hands. Fred tried to keep his heart from pounding, and even tried to act natural like Mark, so that she wouldn't suspect his anxiety. "Aw shucks," Mark shouted, "you haven't got any buttercups in your hair. Aw shucks."

"Why, Mark," she laughed, "if I'd put them in my hair now they'd wilt, wouldn't they?"

"Will you when you go home?" he asked eagerly.

"It could be arranged," she said quietly. "It will be arranged, in fact, if you boys want it."

"We do," they shouted. "We want to pick them, too."

"So you came to find me?" she asked them gravely, and suddenly they knew they couldn't go on dissembling. And Fred knew that he couldn't look at her now. There might be tears in her eyes as there seemed to be in her voice. "We just wanted to find you," he said.

"Good boys," she said softly, but her voice was firm enough, so that he dared to look at her. Still, it was a silly thing he went and did, for a boy as old as he: he started rubbing his cheek against her bare arm, as if he were an affectionate cat. Simultaneously Mark started butting her, as if he were a young goat. It was an old game of his, which he hadn't played for years. And then he shouted impetuously: "And we want to kill that ole Martha, don't we, Fred? We want to kill her, once and for all."

"Mark," she cried, cupping his round, red head in her hands and pivoting it, to make him face her. "Mark, what are you saying? Fred, what have you and Mark been talking about?"

"Well, it's so," Fred said stubbornly. "It's so, isn't it, Mark?"

"The old pickle-mouth," Mark shouted, but this time, neither of them got the laugh out of it they'd had yesterday.

When she remained silent, they looked at her uneasily, because this wasn't the reaction they had expected. It wasn't the scolding they had feared, nor the agreeing that they had desperately hoped for. Somehow they'd missed out, but only slightly, very slightly. Because she was smiling a reassuring smile. A smile which included them all; not one of those vague, cryptic ones, which had excluded everybody but herself, as she seemed to have done so many times these last several weeks.

"Yes," she started to say then, speaking to them as adult to adult, which made it so important, even though they wouldn't be able to understand all of it, "yes, I'm afraid I tried to run away from it. But then I learned that that didn't fix anything. So I guess I simply surrendered and gave up, as if I was already beaten. But I am not, of course. I almost knew that yesterday, when I was sitting here too. I have almost lost out, but not entirely. But yesterday I decided to keep playing in their hands, that there was nothing to do but that, even if it meant spiting myself. And just to see if I could reach the point where their consciences started. Ridiculous, isn't it? And of course, they are right in this respect; I did go under. I did for a while, but not too far. And



now. . ." she stopped and she stroked their hair, before she concluded calmly, "well, now we're going home together, aren't we?"

"Yes," they answered. Hurriedly Mark started picking buttercups, and both helped her put them in her hair. Only then did Fred ask, "It is Father, too, isn't it, Mother?"

She looked at him appraisingly and shook her head. "It's your father and me and Martha, all three," she said.

"But it is Father," he persisted, unable to put his fear and hurt into other words.

"Your father is just being clumsy," she said firmly. "But perhaps he's less foolish than I have been. We all are foolish and clumsy occasionally." She got to her feet.

"Are we going to kill Martha now?" Mark asked eagerly.

"Well no, Mark," she laughed, "we are too nice for that sort of thing, aren't we? Poor Martha, she'd be so surprised."

"But," Fred persisted, "if Father. . ."

She interrupted him. "That, son, is a matter which you are too young to understand."

"But I want to," he said angrily.

"We'll see," she said gently.

There was something triumphant in their return home, each holding one of her hands. It seemed exactly right that Martha came to the door, stared, and then cried smiling: "Oh, don't you all look happy! Don't you look as if you've had barrels of fun!"

"We did," Mark pronounced.

But their mother said to Martha, "Yes, we did. It does one so much good, going out. You should try it yourself, Martha. Just take yourself into the fields, for hours."

"That's very sweet of you, Mom," Martha said with smiling forbearance, "but who would take care of the house, and the boys?"

"I would, naturally," their mother said.

Martha looked at her sharply. "But you shouldn't, dear. You know, dear, don't you. . ."

"That's enough, Martha. I'll take over now. You know, where I left off, before you came. And I'll simply do what I did every summer we were here in the country. I really managed fairly well. Of course, you're with us now, but that won't matter."

"I will speak to Father about this," Martha said bitterly, hurrying back into the house. They heard her feet tapping sharply up the stairs,

and they remained quiet until they heard the door of her room slam shut.

They looked at their mother's face expectantly. She had to say something now; she had to reassure them. She smiled at them, but she was going into the house without saying anything. Then she stopped, just as she had put her hand on the screen door, and she said gravely: "Now don't forsake me when your father comes home. Don't boys. Don't then, especially." She touched their shoulders. "But don't hate him. Don't blame him, even. You see how wise you have to be. And you are, you know." Then she walked into the house.

For a while they sat silently swinging on the swing. Then they sat down beneath the catalpas, but their words remained locked in their throats. It might be a long time before Father came home, but they didn't want to go into the house now to see what time it was. They felt they shouldn't. From here they could watch the road to the city. Then Mark said a little desperately: "And I thought she oughta kill that Martha. But she didn't even have to, did she, Fred?"

"No," Fred answered.

A long time later, when they had both spied the gray car nosing over the hill, Mark said: "We've got to be wise, don't we, Fred?"

"Yes, Mark," he said.

They walked into the house several paces behind their father, silently and tensely. They followed him as he walked through the house toward the kitchen from which there came a clattering of dishes. They knew that he was expecting to find Martha there, and that whatever speech there was in his mouth was attuned to Martha. But then their mother faced him, and she said gently to him: "Hello, Robert. Are you tired, dear?"

He stared, and at last he said uncertainly, "Why, hello, Dorothy," and then he stopped. The boys waited.

"Where is Martha?" he asked then, but almost apologetically, as if he didn't quite dare to ask the question.

It seemed to them at that point that their mother was going to fail. The faded, limp buttercups in her hair trembled a little, and she lowered her eyes. Hurriedly Fred said: "She's upstairs in her room, Dad."

Their father whirled around and faced them. But they looked at him unwaveringly, standing close together.

"What is this?" he demanded of them. "What is all this? What

are you up to now? You haven't hurt her, have you?"

"We wanted to," Mark said simply. "Me and Fred, we wanted to, but Mother didn't have to. Not at all."

"Mark," their mother cried despairingly, "Mark, you shouldn't have, Mark."

"Oh yes he should," Fred shouted defiantly. "Oh yes," he repeated more stridently, when he saw his father look puzzled and completely uncertain of himself. Against all his intentions he wanted to do something violent, something he knew would turn out to be wrong. This coming to Mother's defense, but against Father — not against any stranger — was a disturbing role. There were no rules for it; it seemed entirely wrong and out of place.

He and Mark continued standing there mutely staring at their father, not quite daring to look at their mother now, who had turned her back and was retreating to the door leading to the back porch. The situation was out of their control they felt, and more than anything they wanted to run away. But they remained standing there, much more defiantly than they felt. Then the screen door fell shut behind Mother, but they saw their father turn sharply and hurry after her. "Dorothy, Dorothy," they heard him cry, "Dorothy, what have I done . . . ?"

They waited until the door had clattered shut upon him, too. Then Fred said: "I think we'd better go away. I guess we'd better go to the swing maybe. I guess we can't do anything more, Mark."