

## The Flower

Geoffrey Davies

The good thing about retirement is the opportunity to be able to devote plenty of time to those activities that you have always wanted to do but never had time due the pressure of work. Let's face it, for many of us our careers mean five full days a week plus the occasional weekend with any free time spent catching up on all those less desirable tasks like redecorating the house; but let's not paint too gloomy a picture. I enjoyed my career and spent the early part of my retirement in more energetic pursuits. Now in my eighties I consider myself fortunate to still be in good health. I lost my dear wife three years ago but took comfort in our two daughters and son, seven grandchildren and six great grandchildren. Many of them still live reasonably close, so my days are kept fairly busy. In memory of my wife I surround myself with things of colour and beauty – flowers. Hence my house has taken on the resemblance of a garden centre. Over the years I have spent many weekends browsing around car boot sales where I can pick up various plants, both common and exotic, at reasonable prices. It is really surprising what one can find on sale at these events, many items conjuring up distant memories: the soda stream pop maker, for example, complete with bottles and metal gas cylinder.

It all started about four years ago when I was meandering towards the last 'boot' in a particular row of cars. The family gathered behind the stall had the appearance of gypsies except that their 'caravan' was an old beaten up Vauxhall Estate. Most of the items on sale were obviously handmade and very attractive I must admit; but what caught my eye

was a very unusual looking plant - not on the table display but perched in the back of the estate wagon. The plant had a single stem with a single brilliant blue flower. It stood about six inches high with four deep green leaves evenly placed around and up the stem. An elderly 'gypsy' woman wearing a long black dress with large rings in her ears and long black hair tied back moved forward. Behind her stood a swarthy looking man and on a couple of stools sat two children - a boy and a girl, both about ten years old and both with long black but well groomed hair, munching on burgers.

"You buys an embroidered purse sir?" she said in a somewhat raspy voice. She held out the well-made colourful item.

My eyes flicked down momentarily at what she was holding and then back up to the plant. "Er, no thanks", I replied, "but is that plant in the back of the car for sale?"

The woman replaced the purse, dropped her head and muttered "Er, no sir."

But at that moment her husband, presuming it was her husband, stepped forward. He was dressed in grubby brown corduroys and an open necked check shirt, also a bit grubby. "Oew much wouldger offer me sir?" His voice was equally raspy; maybe the whole family had raspy voices.

I really had no idea but thought that it had to be a decent offer without getting ripped off. "Can I have a closer look please?" I didn't want to sound too eager.

The gypsy reached over to get the plant and placed it on the table in front of me. So close, the plant looked even better. The blue flower was so radiant and seemed to sparkle with life.

"Where does it come from?" I asked. "I have never seen such a plant as this before."

"Not many folks 'av", he replied without expression. "Oim told it comes from a single valley in the 'imalayas and that there are very few of 'em. A very rare species you might say. It was smuggled out under the noses of the Buddhist monks who watch over them. They eventually tracked down the one who stole it." He paused momentarily. "'e's dead now, but they never found the plant of course; 'cos it's 'ere."

I must have had a look of disbelief on my face because he quickly added.

"'tis true sir, cross me 'eart."

"Has it got a name?" I asked.

"Annunziator Mortis."

"Strange name" I responded, struggling to recollect some of my school Latin; then quickly added "Five pounds?"

He replied by taking the plant back to the car.

Impulsively I called out "Ten."

He placed the plant back on the floor of the wagon, turned around and leant against the side staring at me.

"Twenty pounds" I countered, thinking this would be my final offer.

He still stood staring at me such I had that feeling that I had actually insulted him. "Look, I'm sorry but I have no idea how much the plant might be worth. How much do you want for it?"

He glanced briefly at the woman who nodded in apparent agreement. "I can see you really wants this plant sir and oim sures you'll looks after it well; so oil lets you 'ave it for fifty pounds."

I nearly gawped in astonishment but held back so as not to offend him even more. I don't know why but I fumbled in my pocket and pulled out the wad of notes I had brought with me, which happened to total just about that much. "I'm er

not sure I have that much cash with me” I mumbled. “Will take a ....” His shaking head cut me off. ‘Fifty pounds’ I thought ‘for a single plant six inches high.’

“It’s a very special plant sir” he added. “Worth twice what oim willing to take.”

“Then why are you selling it ... so cheap?” I responded.

“Cos oi believe you will looks after it sir and value it for its properties.”

I looked up into his eyes. “Properties? What properties?”

He didn’t answer. I looked at the plant again. It was certainly intoxicating to look at and, after all, I could always brag about it until, no doubt, I would eventually find out that hundreds of other people had bought one at a fraction of the price. ‘Oh what the hell’ I thought. ‘His tale certainly sounded authentic.’ I pulled out the wad of notes and proceeded to count out fifty pounds, which didn’t leave much to buy anything else. The gypsy didn’t smile or show any sort of emotion as he watched me. He just wrapped the flower carefully in tissue paper and bubble-wrap and handed it over.

“Look after it well and don’t lets it gets too warm. On very hot days you should put it in the fridge.

“The fridge!” I exclaimed.

“It likes the cold. The cold of the dead ...”

The gypsy woman’s head snapped round as a faint hiss issued from her lips.

“Sorry sir” he quickly interjected “ Just a pun.”

I handed over the bank notes and walked off with my prize purchase.

Shortly after, I bumped into an old friend: Eric. “Hello John, what have you got there?” Eric was one of those people who will buy anything that’s looks old and store it in his loft in

anticipation that its value would increase over time. More than likely, anything of real value will only be worth something when he is dead and buried! I very carefully unwrapped the purchase.

"Wow, that's an exotic looking plant. So vibrant" he continued. "Never seen anything like it."

That pleased me. "Yes, unusual isn't it."

"Where did you get it?"

"Oh, at that stall just down the end with the gypsy looking people" I said, flicking my head back in the direction from which I had come.

He glanced over my shoulder. "Where?"

"Over there" I replied, turning and indicating with my extended arm. I couldn't see the stall so started walking back with Eric in tow. When we reached the end of the row there was no sign of the family or their car. "They must have packed up and gone" I said, puzzled and wondering how they managed to pack up all their wares and leave so quickly.

Gradually the incident passed from my mind once I had arrived home to proudly show my wife the flower and place it carefully on the mantelpiece. I had to lie about what I paid as she would have gone berserk if she knew what I had actually handed over. Even so, she nagged for days after about wasting twenty pounds on such a small silly plant but did admit that it had a very hypnotic effect on the eyes. She even began to accept finding it in the fridge during hot summer days. It now sits on the sideboard with its reflection in the mirror behind.

Then the tragedy hit me – when my wife died. The loss of my beloved left me devastated. As my elder daughter commented at the time "Even your beautiful flower has

closed up in sympathy” she said, staring at the sideboard. It remained that way for several days before once again displaying its dazzling beauty. Strangely, that made me feel better and helped me to cope over the weeks and months following. Less than a year later a second tragedy hit the family when our younger daughter’s son was killed in an air crash whilst on a business trip. Again, our elder daughter commented on the flower which behaved the same way as when my wife died.

“I knew someone had died” I said solemnly.

“What do you mean dad?” she asked, with a slight frown.

“The flower closed up before I heard the news, in fact about two hours before you called me.”

“That is strange” she replied “because I gave you the news within two hours of hearing about the plane crash.”

“Annunziatore Mortis” I muttered.

“What did you say dad?”

I repeated it louder. “Annunziatore Mortis. That’s what the plant is called.”

“Foreteller of death” she said. “Such a beautiful flower that brings such sorrowful news ...”

“But also projects a feeling of rest and comfort after the event” I finished. I then told her all about how I came in possession of the flower and its history as related to me by the gypsy. She vowed then that it would always remain in the family.

It happened twice more: when our son fell to his death during a mountain climbing expedition and when one of our grandchildren drowned during a holiday on the Red Sea. Each time the flower closed up I sat staring at the telephone waiting for the ring and the sobbing voice bringing me more heartache. The tragedies brought us all closer and on each

occasion many members of the family came to sit with me in the presence of that beautiful flower to ride the wave of grief and emotion. One of my sons-in-law did suggest that with so much tragedy in the family maybe the flower was a curse and perhaps I should dispose of it; but inwardly I felt that it bared no malice but acted purely as a messenger.

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It's my ninetieth birthday today and I am now alone after a hectic fun day out with all my family; well, at least those who could make it. I slump in my favourite armchair and think about the great day I have had: the visit to the country park where we played ball games and the birthday party in the restaurant that evening. I haven't felt so happy for ages. I love my family. I start to reminisce, the past flitting in front of my eyes like a film. But I am tired; so tired. I wake with a start from a doze. Something is wrong. I glance at the sideboard and see the flower. It's closed. I get up slowly and walk over to the plant. "Oh no" I say, with a feeling of dread. "Not again." I cradle the plant holder in my hands. "Who is it this time my beautiful flower?" I ask aloud. I turn to go back to sit down and stare at the telephone once again but there is an old man in my chair. His head is slumped onto his chest. He looks familiar. Instinctively I turn to look into the mirror at the back of the sideboard. There is no reflection other than that of the flower in its pot where it always stands. I smile and Annunziator Mortis opens for me for the last time.

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