



THEY were not the only people in the milk-bar. On a Sunday evening there is always quite a crowd, because it is the only such place open in that part of the town. They were seated about a corner table right away at the end, so that the people coming in, if they looked, could see no more than the backs of the two boys, and the girls' faces, dimly, for the light was low in that part of the milk-bar. They were speaking very softly, so that the only people who could hear what they were saying were those in the next seat, and they could only hear if they kept very quiet themselves.

There were four of them, seated at the corner table, two boys and two girls. They were not really Teddy Boys and Girls, but that is what most people would probably call them, not wishing to make fine distinctions. The boys were wearing stove-pipe pants and they had let their hair grow, while the girls were wearing tight, bright trousers called Matador pants, and their hair was short and curly, piled up on top of their heads. One of the girls had yellow hair, and the other was dark and very beautiful. The other girl was was not so beautiful, the one with the yellow hair, but she had a lovely smile which rarely left her face.

The boys were pale and thin-lipped, barely healthy-looking. One of them hardly smiled at all, the elder one, and he had a way of lowering his eyelids when he looked at anyone, and judging him, never liking what he saw, it seemed. The other boy was quite a bit younger—he was no more than fourteen—and spottier, but he smiled from time to time or laughed at a joke.

They had been there since about five o'clock, drinking milk-shakes and talking, smoking most of the time, except the girl with the yellow hair, the one who was not so beautiful.

Talking about people they knew, most of the time. The oldest of the two boys seemed to be speaking most of all, he and the beautiful girl with the dark hair. The younger boy would chip in now and then in a nervous, hardly-broken voice; he had very little

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by J. R. Sadleir

to say for himself, but he spoke from time to time so that the others would not forget that he was still there. When he did speak they usually took no notice at all, or replied briefly without looking at him. The girl with the yellow hair was quiet, too; she spoke only when she had something quite important to say, and when she spoke the others would turn to her and answer her. But for the most part the conversation was between the bigger of the two boys and the beautiful girl with the dark hair, who were on opposite sides of the table, and at opposite ends, so to speak; the girl with the yellow hair was one side of the conversation, the younger boy on the other.

THE young boy had been thinking of something to say, and when there was a lull in the conversation he seized the opportunity.

"Hey, Al, where's Johnny these days?"

Al was the name of the other boy, the elder one.

"Johnny's on the Southern Cross," he replied.

"Johnny's a nice boy," said the beautiful girl with the dark hair.

"You should know," said the young boy, and the girl with the dark hair looked at him without smiling or saying anything. But the girl with the yellow hair laughed at what he had said, so he smiled. She had a wonderful laugh that would make anybody smile. It was not a loud laugh, but the sort of happy laugh you would expect to hear from a fat, happy woman, sitting in the sun, though the girl was not fat at all. It was a chubby laugh that made you feel happy. When she laughed people quite some way away would turn their heads with a wondering smile to see who was happy enough to laugh like that, then turn back and talk about it with their friends. That wonderful laugh lasted only a few moments, then she said:

"He's always away, this Johnny. I must meet him one day, if he's ever here again, long enough for me to see him."

"He'll be back, all right," said the other girl.

The girl with the yellow hair laughed again, and the people in the near-by seats who had smiled before turned again and some of them laughed themselves, in bewilderment.

"How d'you know he'll be back?" she said.

"Well, he's on the Southern Cross, isn't he?"

"How d'you know he'll stay on the Southern Cross?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

"You've certainly got a lot of faith in him."

"I have got a lot of faith in Johnny." "Crikey!" said the young boy with a grin.

This beautiful girl with the dark hair was no more than eighteen, but she had the voice of a much older woman, very clear and quite deep. When she spoke, you realised it was the sort of voice you'd hoped she had all along, to match her beauty. Her voice was the first thing people noticed about her, after her hair and her beauty, and people always looked at her when she spoke.

"He's sure to be back sooner or later," she said.

"But how d'you know?"

"Of course he'll be back," said the oldest of the two boys. "There's no reason for him to leave the Southern Cross. And she's due here soon—in a week or two."

"I hope it's pretty soon," said the young boy.

"You, too?" said the girl with the yellow hair, smiling.

"I'm Johnny's best friend, probably." The other boy laughed.

"You're not Johnny's best friend!" "I was—I am!"

The other boy laughed again, and the girl with the dark hair smiled at the young boy without saying anything.

The other girl said, "He must be quite a boy."

"I know him a lot better than you do," said the older boy, "and so do a lot of other people round here."

"I know him pretty well," said the young boy. He took a puff at his cigarette, then looked away through half-closed eyes, hiding behind the smoke. Then he said to the beautiful girl with the dark hair—

"Anyway, you know Johnny better than anybody, I suppose."

"Johnny likes me better than anybody," she replied.

"And I suppose," said the girl with the yellow hair, smiling. "I suppose you'll be more pleased than anybody if he comes back?"

"What d'you mean by that?" said the dark girl.

"Nothing!" answered the other girl. Then she understood and laughed softly. "Nothing like that."

"Johnny is a really nice boy."

"Everybody likes Johnny."

"How about me? I don't even know him!"

"All right, then; everybody who knows Johnny likes him."

"If you did know him, you'd like him, all right."

The girl with the yellow hair laughed again.

"You still can't be sure he's going to come back to New Zealand, though."

"I told you, there's no reason why he shouldn't come back."

"I hope it's pretty soon," said the young boy. "This place isn't the same when he's away."

"I don't know how you can bear to live without him," said the girl with the yellow hair, smiling.

"Well, believe me, this place is pretty dull when he isn't here. He's about the only thing which makes life interesting around here."

"What would you do if you found he wasn't coming back?"

"I wish you'd stop harping on that," said the beautiful girl with the dark hair, frowning. She frowned when she wasn't pleased. It was a very beautiful frown, and it was there most of the time.

They were all getting impatient with this girl, the one with the yellow hair and the happy smile, who didn't know Johnny and didn't share their faith in him—didn't even want to share their faith, it seemed, in this sailor Johnny who was loved in every port in the world—loved and yearned for by everybody—everybody who knew him.

"You'll see how he livens the place up when he comes," said the young boy.

"Well, this place isn't all that bad," answered the girl with the yellow hair. "Surely you can enjoy yourself without Johnny being here?"

"You don't know him. Once you've met Johnny the place isn't the same when he's away."

"Well, seeing he's away most of the time, and mightn't even come back ever again, he seems to have made life pretty miserable for you!"

"Miserable only when he's away. When he's here, though, that makes up for it."

"Makes all the difference when Johnny's here."

"Well, I reckon I'd better not meet him at all, then, if it means I'm going to be unhappy all the time he's away."

"You're just being darn' stupid. You don't know him and you shouldn't talk about him," said the oldest of the two boys, angrily.

And the happy girl with the yellow hair burst once more into a peal of laughter, which annoyed her friends still further, but which made the people sitting near by turn round once more, wondering how a girl could be happy enough to laugh like that—like a fat, happy woman sitting in the sun.

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