



BLOW YOU JIM MATTHEWS

by Thomas Hindmarsh

YOU were never certain whether the doorbell at the Girls' Hostel rang. You touched a little porcelain button marked "Press" but you didn't hear a sound. So you pressed it a second time, hard and long. Then just to make sure you gave it a third one, harder and longer. No wonder you were greeted with such a scowl when the door was opened.

Jim Matthews got one, too. It came from a woman who must have left the sink, because she was still wiping her hands in her pinny. And she wasn't exactly the thing he expected would answer the door of a girls' hostel. She was about fifty.

"Miss Potter in?"

The woman stayed wiping her hands. They were quite dry now. He could see she was just playing for time while she summed him up.

"I'll see," she said cautiously. She knew darned well Miss Potter was in, but the matron of a girls' hostel has a clear duty to protect the girls.

She still made no effort to move.

"What is the name, please?"

Matthews hesitated. He thought, "What's that got to do with you, noney?" When he did mention it his hesitancy sounded as though he had made the name up.

"You can step in, Mr Matthews," she said, while her eyes showed him exactly how far he might step in . . . as far as the edge of the porch, beyond which, said the Rules and Regulations, no male flesh might penetrate.

He watched her sparrow legs beat up the stairs to the silence and the mystery of the girls' bedrooms. Waiting there he had an odd feeling he had been in the

place before. He knew he hadn't, of course, but what was it? Those four brown pictures. The names of them came back to him in the voice of his own childhood. . . . Monarch of the Glen, Highland Cattle, Cupid Asleep, Cupid Awake.

That's right, in his grandmother's place. The last time he saw them they were in his mother's washhouse.

Right above his head the matron had leaned into Miss Potter's room.

"A gent to see you, dear. He said his name was Matthews."

Kay Potter was down on her knees in a praise-be-to-Allah posture cutting out some dress material from a newspaper pattern on the floor. She was determined to finish the job by seven o'clock because she was going out with a man. She was going to wear this frock. She didn't want any interruptions.

But this was different.

"Matthews?" she said, coming up on one knee. "Oh, no."

Her first womanly impulse was to feel her face and hair. Her features were glittering with lotion and her hair was pegged down tight with tinware. As she pulled her dress up over her head she gasped through the stomach of it, "Oh, blow him, but tell him I'll be down."

Matthews was willing to swear he waited half an hour for her. Actually it wasn't much longer than ten minutes. He spent some of the time trying to think up some devastating piece of wit to throw at the girl he hadn't seen for 10 months. He might need it. He was

pretty doubtful about the temperature of the reception he was going to get. When the moment came all the wit in the world was superfluous: she got in first. She crept to the top of the stairs and called out, "Well, fancy old stinker!"

He caught her halfway down the stairs, but she turned from his effort to kiss her.

"Jim, please, it's a sin for you to be on these stairs. This is no-man's land. You'll have me thrown out. Stop it."

When they were down as far as the porch she said, "And what brings you to the big city all by yourself?"

"You," he said, "and I'm here for just one night."

"No, Jim."

His face dropped. "Another feller?"

She nodded with taunting gaiety. But she saw the taunt matched by the old impudence coming back into his eyes.

"Any future in him?" he inquired.

She thought to herself, "Is there any damn future in any of you?" And she added aloud, "One never knows."

Matthews came closer. "Ditch him just for tonight."

"Does that sound like the Jim Matthews I once knew?"

"Kay, this splendid free offer remains open for one night only. Who

knows, it might be the turning point of your life."

"Oh, don't kid yourself."

"That's not answering my question."

"The answer's No."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because," he echoed wearily. He leaned an elbow on the porch poststand and said, "Do you remember when we were kids in Taipuku and every time I said 'Why?' you said 'Because,' and when I said 'Because why?' you said 'Because,' and I'd say 'But because why?' and you'd say 'Because.' Remember how mad you used to make me?"

"I remember," she said, and there was hardness in her voice now. "I remember a lot of things. A fine correspondent, weren't you? And you promised."

"I did write."

"Once."

Was there any answer to that? No, Mr Matthews, they've been trying to think up a good one ever since the invention of paper.

"And you ran beside the train as it left and the last thing I heard you say was, 'Kay, your birthday—when is it?' In a moment of weakness I called out when. And everybody in the carriage looked at me and smiled. The humiliation. My birthday! When is my birthday?"

He wasn't expecting this. Not with both barrels, like this. He might have squashed her by telling her he could remember when her birthday was, but he was past telling her now. It was his turn to show some aggressiveness.

"Who's this clot tonight, anyway?"

"You wouldn't know him."

"Where's he taking you?"

She took a while to answer. She had progressed a little socially since Jim's day.

"The Moth and Candle," she admitted.

"A yokel like me wouldn't know what that is. A road-house?"

"Oh, you needn't worry about me. You haven't been."

In the gap of silence she glanced significantly at her watch.

"You're busy," he said.

"Jim, I'm terribly busy." She told him about the dress. "And I do want to wear it tonight."

He managed to say, and he meant it, "I'll bet you'll look beautiful."

"I'll feel good," she said. "Turquoise is my colour."

"Then you'd better go," he told her.

She watched him crunch down the gravel drive. He turned at the gate with a last grin and waved his hat in a big, gay crescent just as he used to at home when he spotted her from the farm fence, and when he used to begin talking to her chains before she was within earshot, and when he got up to her he had to begin all over again. He always did it. He never remembered. He never remembered anything. "I'll write, Kay, I'll write every week, you wait." She waited, all right. He was dispensable: there was another man now. But the turquoise dress. She ran inside.

As he walked away he was muttering to himself, "Jim Matthews, my boy, something tells me you've had it. Yes, but she needn't've handed it out smack like that. They can be hard, women. Hard, pitiless, and never a second chance. Still, you didn't do the right thing by her, now honestly, did you, Jim Matthews? I know I didn't—but was there any need to hand it out smack like that? But they're all the same. You should have known that, Jim Matthews. As long as you're loving them they're pie, but don't stop to take a breath. Maybe nine or ten months was a bit long, but she needn't've handed it out like that. That's what makes you wild. The less a feller has to do with them the better. That's the only way to look at it: They stink, the lot of them."

He stopped outside a florist's shop. He must have been subconsciously looking for the shop because he was still smouldering and flowers were the last thing in the front of his mind. He went inside with the critical air of a woman going into a butcher's shop, ready to find fault. A girl in a wet smock, without dropping what she was doing, asked him if she could help him.

"I wish you could," he said, and he continued saying it partly with his hands and partly with his tongue. "What's the thing a girl wears here?"

"A corsage."

"Yes, please."

The girl in the wet smock blinked. "I hope you know the colour of her frock."

"Good grief," he said, "she did tell me. Would it be turquoise?"

The girl waited. It was not easy to be helpful with people like these.

"I gather she might be fair?"

"She's beautiful," he said, and when he noticed her looking at him like a schoolteacher waiting for the right answer, he added quickly, "As you say, she's fair."

Her eye ranged over the flowers speculatively, and settled on something that had been flown over from Queensland. It was expensive. He didn't look the type but he was worth probing.

"Is it a special occasion?" she asked.

"Well, yes," he said, "it's her birthday today."