

HOLROYD'S LAST STAND

from *A Season with Eros* by Stan Barstow

Mrs Holroyd first gets wind of it when she finds a small lace-edged handkerchief in the pocket of her husband's best suit one morning when he is down the pit. She wonders, of course, as any wife would, and realises there could be, and no doubt is, a perfectly reasonable explanation for its presence there. He could have picked it up on the street or found it in a bus. After all, he has never given her cause to suspect him before. True, Holroyd was a ladies' man at one time, but that was years and years ago and marriage has long since cured him of the urge to wander. That and age. Or so she has always thought. For the brash cockiness of the well-built florid youth has long ago changed into the dour taciturnity of a middle-aged man who works hard in a man's world. He neglects her, of course; but how many women in the village could say otherwise? To a miner there is a man's world and a woman's, and the two make contact only at the table, in bed, and sometimes on weekend evenings in the pubs and clubs. But all the same, there is a code, and Holroyd has never carried on with other women, she is sure. At least, she always has been sure because she has never given the idea a moment's thought. But now? Who knows what he really does on his many nights out?

Mrs Holroyd leaves the handkerchief where she found it and says nothing. The morning after Holroyd has worn the suit again she looks for it and finds it gone, which makes her wonder still more and prompts her to begin examining his clothes regularly. What she hopes to find she is never quite sure but her watch is rewarded a week later when she finds in another pocket of the same suit a partly expended packet of an article she and Holroyd have never used in their married life. And then she wonders in silence no longer but calls her two married daughters to her side and divulges all.

The person concerned being their father, they are at first shocked and then, more naturally, angry.

'The old devil,' says Gladys, the elder daughter.

'After you've given him the best years of your life,' says Marjorie, who reads a great many romantic novelettes and held out for some time against the local lads, waiting for the coming of a tall, dark, pipe-smoking man with expensive tastes in fast sports cars, only to wind up married to a young collier from the next street, who smokes the cheapest fags and can afford nothing more dashing than a pedal cycle against the competition of a new baby in each of the first five years of their marriage.

'This is the thanks you get,' Marjorie goes on, 'for working your fingers to the bone for him.'

'Well, what are we going to do about it?' says Gladys, the practical one.

'Aye, you can't let him get away with it.'

Mrs Holroyd, after revealing the evidence of her husband's guilt, feels mildly inclined to his defence. 'I would like a bit more proof,' she says uncertainly.

'Proof!' Marjorie exclaims. 'What more proof do you want than them things? Ugh! Mucky things. I wouldn't have one in my house.'

'Where d'you think he meets her?' Gladys asks, and Mrs Holroyd shakes her head.

'Nay, you know as much as I do now. Sheffield, I suppose. I shouldn't think he'd do it too near home. He'd be too frightened o' being seen.'

'It'll be when he goes to t'Dogs,' Gladys says. 'Happen he doesn't go to t'Dogs at all, but meets her, whoever she is.'

'Happen he takes her to t'Dogs,' Mrs Holroyd says.

'The check of the old devil,' Marjorie says.

'We'll soon find out,' Gladys says with determination. 'Next time he goes I'll be on the bus before him an' waiting. I'll soon fathom his little game.'

'Suppose he sees you?' her mother says. 'An' what will you tell your Jim?'

'He won't see me,' Gladys says. 'An' I'll think of summat to tell Jim. An' not a word to Harry, Marjorie. We don't want *them* getting ideas.'

A fortnight later mother and daughters hold another conference.

'There's no doubt about it, then,' Mrs Holroyd says. 'He's carrying on.'

'The same one every time,' Gladys says.

'A fast-looking piece, I suppose?' her mother says.

'A bit simple-looking, if you ask me,' says Gladys. 'All milk an' water and a simpering smile. Just the sort to suck up to me dad an' make him think he's a big man.'

'Aye,' Mrs Holroyd says, 'he allus liked lasses sucking up to him as a lad. But I thought he'd grown out of that years ago.'

'They never grow out of it,' Gladys says.

'I wouldn't ha' classed all men alike before this,' her mother says. 'But now ...'

'Now we know,' Marjorie says.

'Aye,' Gladys echoes, 'now we know. And we've got to decide what to do about it ... Put the kettle on, Mother.'

'Is that a new tie you've got on?' Mrs Holroyd is asking her husband one evening a few days later.

'This? Oh, aye, aye. I saw it in a shop winder in Calderford t'other Saturday afternoon an' took a fancy to it.'

'Very smart,' Mrs Holroyd says. 'Your shoes are over here when you want 'em. I've given 'em a rub over.'

'Eh? What? Have you?' Holroyd glances at her in the mirror where he is combing his thinning black hair.

'Aye. You don't want mucky shoes when you've got a new tie on, do you?'

'No, that's right. Thanks very much.'

'I don't like to see a man become careless with his appearance as he gets older,' Mrs Holroyd says, stirring the fire with the poker. 'When a man's smart it shows he's got an interest in life.'

'Aye. I suppose you're right.'

'Dogs tonight, eh?'

'Aye, that's right—t'Dogs.'

'Does your lady friend like t'Dogs?' Mrs Holroyd asks, and Holroyd, suddenly very still, shoots her a startled look in the mirror.

'Eh?' he says. 'What's that?'

'Your lady friend,' Mrs Holroyd says. 'That young woman friend of yours in Sheffield.'

'Well, I, er ...'

'Now don't tell me you didn't think I knew,' Mrs Holroyd says. 'Though you have kept pretty quiet about her, I must say.'

Holroyd turns from the glass and bends for his shoes, saying nothing.

'You're not ashamed of her, are you?' Mrs Holroyd asks. 'She's not deformed, is she?'

'Oh, no, no,' says Holroyd, darting perplexed looks at her now, which is easy enough to do since she doesn't once meet his eyes.

Only when he is on the point of leaving, and showing signs of wanting to get away without further conversation, does she transfix him at the door by looking him straight in the face and saying:

'Well, why don't you bring her and let's have a look at her?'

He gapes, flabbergasted. 'Bring her here?'

'Aye, why not? Bring her to tea sometime.'

He looks at her for several moments during which the frown on his face gives way to a glint in his eyes.

'All right,' he says finally, a half-embarrassed but defiant note in his voice, 'I will. I'll bring her o' Sunday.'

'Aye,' Mrs Holroyd agrees, turning away. 'Sunday. That'll be nice.'

'Come in, then,' Holroyd says. 'C'mon, don't be shy.' He takes the young woman by the arm and pulls her off the dark step and into the kitchen.

'What d'you want potterin' about at back door for?' Mrs Holroyd says. 'T'front door's for visitors. Anyway, come in, don't hang about in t'doorway.'

'Dyed hair,' is Mrs Holroyd's first thought as the young woman steps into the light.

'Well, er ...' Holroyd says, 'this is Ella, er, Miss Fairchild. And this is my, er, Alice.'

'How d'ye do, Miss Fairchild,' says Mrs Holroyd.

'Pleased to meet you, I'm sure,' says Miss Fairchild, blinking in the strong light of the kitchen bulb. Her eyes are very blue in a doll-like face and though her features give her an appearance of youth she won't, Mrs Holroyd is sure, ever see thirty-five again.

'I've heard quite a lot about you from William,' Miss Fairchild says.

'Oh, have you now? You've told her a lot about me, have you?'

'Well, I, er ...' Holroyd says.

'Oh, yes, he's often spoken of you. And always with the most gentlemanly respect.'

'Well, that's nice to know,' Mrs Holroyd gives a sidelong glance at Holroyd, who avoids her eyes.

'Yes, I said to him once, I said, "Now see here, William, you must tell me about your wife. What sort of woman is she? I want to know all about her."''

'Oh, did you now?'

Holroyd clears his throat noisily.

'Of course, I never thought I'd meet you.'

'No, I don't suppose you did.'

'No. Not all wives would understand a relationship like mine and William's.'

'You don't think so?'

'No, you see—'

'Er, let's go into t'other room, shall we?' Holroyd says. 'Out of Alice's way.'

'Aye, you go on,' Mrs Holroyd says. 'I really can't do with you standing on top of me when I'm trying to make the tea.'

They go through into the living-room and Mrs Holroyd gets on with preparing the tea while their conversation mumbles through to her. Miss Fairchild seems to be doing most of the talking.

'Asked him all about me, did she?' Mrs Holroyd thinks. 'Wouldn't understand their relationship. Mmm. Well, well!'

Twenty minutes later Mrs Holroyd is asking their visitor how she takes her tea when the front door opens without ceremony and Gladys walks in.

'Oh,' she says, 'I didn't know you had company.'

'Come in, come in,' her mother says. 'This is your father's lady friend, Miss Fairchild ... My elder daughter, Gladys.'

Miss Fairchild says she is pleased to see Gladys, and blushes. 'I'm sure I didn't think I was going to meet all the family.'

'Oh, don't mind me,' Gladys says. 'I'm allus popping in like this. I live just up the street, y'sec.'

'I do think it's nice when families don't split up and drift apart,' Miss Fairchild says.

'Oh, we're big family people round here, y'know,' Gladys says. 'We stick together. Have you got no family, then?'

Miss Fairchild says with momentarily downcast eyes that she is all alone in the world, which is why she values friendship so much.

'Aye, well,' Gladys says with a laugh, 'you know what they say: you can pick your friends but you're stuck with your family. Happen you're luckier than you think.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that,' Miss Fairchild says. 'But life has its compensations.' This with a quick fluttering glance at Holroyd, who is gazing rigidly at his plate and does not respond.

'Have a cup o' tea, love?' Mrs Holroyd asks.

Gladys says she ought to be going and making Jim's tea, but she won't refuse. She takes off her coat and settles into a chair by the fire.

'You're quiet, Dad,' she says then, and Holroyd starts and says, 'Oh, aye, well ...'

'Too many women about the place for you, is that it? Me dad was glad when me an' our Marjorie got married, y'know, Miss Fairchild. Can't stand a crowd o' women jabberin' round him.'

'Oh, I know he's a man's man,' Miss Fairchild says, casting another glance at Holroyd, who hunches a little farther down into his collar, as though to hide his head.

'You think so, do you? We've allus thought of him as a ladies' man, haven't we, mother?'

'Nay, look here ...' Holroyd begins.

'Now you can't deny you had all the lasses on a string when you were a young feller,' Gladys says. 'I've heard 'em talk about it.'

'But that's thirty year ago.'

'There's no need to deny it for my benefit, William,' Miss Fairchild says, and Gladys suppresses a giggle into something that sounds like a sneeze.

'Have you caught a cold, Gladys?' her mother enquires.

'No, just a bit o' dust up me nose.'

'Nay, there's no dust in here. I had a right good clean down when I knew your father's friend was coming.'

'You know,' Miss Fairchild says, 'you shouldn't have gone to all that—'

'Oh, I have me pride, Miss Fairchild, even if I have been married thirty years come next Easter. I like things to be clean and tidy. Particularly on special occasions like this.'

'Eeh, you know, I wish our Marjorie 'ud pop in,' Gladys says. 'She'll be wild if she knows she's missed you. She doesn't get out all that much, y'know, with five bairns to see to. Did you know me dad was a grandfather seven times over, Miss Fairchild?'

'So many,' Miss Fairchild murmurs. 'And I daresay he's proud of them all.'

'Oh, aye, aye. My eldest's a bit too big to bounce on his knee now, but he's proud of 'em. An' they're proud of him. There isn't one of 'em 'at doesn't come running the minute they see him.'

The fire is burning low and Mrs Holroyd piles more coal on to it. Then, tea finished, they move away from the table and sit round the hearth while Gladys keeps up a cheerful monologue punctuated by remarks that she really will have to go, she only called in for a minute, and isn't it a pity that Marjorie hasn't popped in to see her father's friend. She is just saying that she'll call on her way home and tell Marjorie to come round when her sister comes into the house through the back door.

Like Gladys, Marjorie expresses surprise at the presence of 'company' and says she is only staying a minute. Like Gladys also she takes a cup of tea from the replenished pot and joins the group round the fire. Gladys changes her mind about leaving and she and Marjorie carry on a conversation occasionally added to by Mrs Holroyd, while Miss Fairchild sits with a bemused little smile on her face and looks now and again at Holroyd who is keeping quiet and still, like a man who has walked into a patch of attractive forest and suddenly wonders about the presence of wild animals.

He has not spoken for half an hour, nor even drawn attention to himself by lighting a cigarette, when Marjorie says suddenly, 'What a lovely frock you've got on, Miss Fairchild. I've been admiring it ever since I came in.'

Miss Fairchild's soft mouth purses with pleasure. 'Oh, do you really like it?'

'It shows off your figure lovely,' Gladys says. 'I reckon *he*'ll like it for that, eh?'

Miss Fairchild turns a delicate pink. 'As a matter of fact,' she says, 'he chose it.'

'O-hoh!' Gladys says, while Holroyd gives a startled glance from his eye corners. 'And paid for it, I'll bet!'

'Well'—Miss Fairchild stifles a little giggle—'he's very generous, you know.'

'Oh, aye, he always was free with his money,' Mrs Holroyd says, adding as though in casual afterthought, 'outside the house.'

Again Holroyd seems to shrink in his chair, as though wishing to hide inside his clothes. Still he says nothing.

'Course, I couldn't wear a frock like that,' Marjorie says frankly. 'I'm too fat. But I bet our Gladys 'ud look well in it.'

'D'you think so?' Gladys says.

'Aye, I do.'

'I wonder, Miss Fairchild,' Gladys says eagerly, 'would you let me try it on? Such a lovely frock.'

'Well, I ...'

'We can pop into the bedroom. It'll only take a minute.'

Miss Fairchild looks at Holroyd as though for guidance, but he is gazing fixedly into the fire and will not meet her glance.

She stands up, her hands fluttering uncertainly at the waist of the frock, and Gladys and Marjorie take her out of the room and up the stairs. Now Holroyd lights a cigarette and draws on it deeply. Mrs Holroyd pours herself another cup of tea. They sit without looking at each other.

Upstairs in the front bedroom Gladys is pulling the dress down over her head and shoulders while Miss Fairchild shivers in her slip.

'Mmm,' Gladys says, turning one way then the other in front of the wardrobe mirror and smoothing the frock over her hips. 'Not bad.'

'A bit on the long side, though, isn't it?' Marjorie says, standing back and examining her sister.

'Ye-es. It'd need a couple of inches off the hem for me.'

'Well, that's easy.' Marjorie opens a drawer of the dressing-table and takes out a pair of scissors. Before the horrified eyes of its owner she bends and sticks the blades through the hem of the dress.

'Stop it!' Miss Fairchild shrieks.

She starts towards them but is abruptly stopped short when Marjorie turns and straightens up, giving her in the same movement a slap that sends her backwards on to the bed.

Marjorie sprawls across her with her full weight, turning a corner of the eiderdown over Miss Fairchild's head to muffle her cries.

'All right. I can hold her.'

Gladys takes off the dress, slips into her own jumper and skirt, and picks up the scissors.

Holroyd turns his eyes to the ceiling. 'What's going on up there?'

'They're havin' a woman to woman talk,' his wife says. She reaches for the poker and balances it in her hand as though deciding whether or not to stir the fire.

It is the sight of Miss Fairchild as she bursts into the room uttering little shrieks of near-hysterical anger, the remnants of her dress clutched in her hands, that brings Holroyd to his feet, his mouth agape.

'What's up?' Mrs Holroyd says. 'Don't tell me you've never seen her in her underwear afore.'

'My dress,' Miss Fairchild cries. 'Oh, look what they've done to my lovely dress!'

'What you done?' Holroyd demands as his daughters come into the room. 'What you been up to?'

Miss Fairchild is sobbing noisily now as she looks at the frock. 'It's ruined,' she says, 'completely ruined.' She turns a distorted face on Holroyd. 'This would never have happened if you hadn't brought me here.'

'Get him to buy you another,' Gladys says, 'if he's gormless enough.' She has Miss Fairchild's coat now and she thrusts it into the woman's arms. 'Now hoppit!'

She and Marjorie push her through the kitchen, open the door and propel her into the darkness of the yard, and at the same time Mrs Holroyd places her hand squarely in the middle of her husband's chest and pushes him back into his chair. The girls return to the room and Holroyd cowers away as he sees the expression in the three pairs of eyes levelled at him.

'Now for you,' Marjorie says.

Five minutes later, kicked, scratched and bruised, he is on his hands and knees in the backyard. The door slams behind him and the bolt shoots home.

There is no sign of Miss Fairchild. Holroyd himself does not come home for three days. But Mrs Holroyd does not mind. She spends a very interesting time discussing with her daughters new ways of making his life miserable when he does return.