

The Damsel and the Dragon

By

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I'd gone to the public library to check my email, and was surprised to find, on the sign-in sheet, the names of Sister Verhoff and Sister Edwards.

There was no one at the three computer stations, so to satisfy my curiosity I said to the librarian, Sheila Pennyforth, "I see a couple of nuns were in earlier."

Pennyforth, a woman with dyed black hair, rouged cheeks, and a frame running to fat, threw back her head and laughed. "They're not nuns, they're Mormon missionaries," she said. "You must have seen them. One quite tall – that's Sister Verhoff -- the other on the small side, always walking together. They live on Howe, where it intersects with Larkin. They've been in town several weeks now."

"Several weeks? They could have knocked on every door in town in a few days' time."

"Oh, I don't think they're here for that, or just for that. They seem to be doing some kind of research on the computers."

"They could do that in Salt Lake City, or anywhere else," I objected. A thought struck me. "They haven't tried to convert you, have they?"

She laughed again, her chins shaking. “No, but the taller one – Sister Verhoff – gave me a copy of The Book of Mormon as a Christmas gift.”

“Just what you always wanted, I’m sure.”

“Here,” she said, pulling it out from under the counter. “See? It’s inscribed, ‘To Our Favorite Librarian.’” She smiled and put it away. “They mean well.”

“That’s been said of a lot of people.” I signed in and sat down at the computer nearest the door.

Two days later I saw the sisters walking down the hill toward Main Street and, I presumed, the library. I was going in the other direction, but on the same side of the street, and so had ample time to observe them. Sister Verhoff – she was easily the taller of the two, as Sheila had said – was striding with long legs while Sister Edwards struggled to keep up; she reminded me of a mouse, her brown head bobbing and the upper half of her body thrust forward, as if in search of a hole to dive down. Both were dressed in black coats buttoned to the neck, for it was winter. I wished them good morning, but they didn’t acknowledge me: Sister Verhoff was talking nonstop while her companion nodded wearily.

The poor thing, I thought. I decided then and there that Sister Verhoff was a dragon and Sister Edwards a damsel in distress, whether she knew it or not. But there was no sign of a St. George who could slay the dragon, figuratively or otherwise.

After that I saw them frequently at the library, and while they were never especially friendly, they invariably returned my “Good mornings” with murmured hellos. My good manners may have been misinterpreted for curiosity about their faith, for one day Sister Verhoff, who was seated next to me, turned and said, with a smile, “I don’t suppose I could interest you in the saving words of Jesus Christ?”

I shook my head and replied, jokingly, “I’m more of a Greek gods kind of guy.”

The Dragon looked indignantly at me, though I thought I saw the trace of a smile on the Damsel’s lips. “The Greek gods!” scoffed Sister Verhoff, so loudly that Sheila Pennyforth looked up from her reading. “You can’t mean that – they never saved anybody.”

“I don’t believe that’s why they were –“ I felt I couldn’t use the word ‘created’ with reference to gods of any kind, so I finished the sentence by saying, “That wasn’t their function, anyway. To save people.”

“Hmmp!” said Sister Verhoff, returning to her research, if that was what it was. She was chillier to me after that, although I felt I had risen in Sister Edwards’ esteem.

Saturday nights I usually ate in Cavallo’s, a run-down, poorly-lit pub that perfectly suited my solitary fancy. I’d grown up with the owner, John Cavallo, and we were still friends; that and the all-you-can-eat spaghetti for five dollars was enough to keep me coming back. I always sat in the same place, in the back corner booth, which gave me the advantage of being able to see down the length of the bar while remaining concealed. I’d stayed a little longer than usual on the night in question – Cavallo had brought a classmate over, one he’d mistakenly thought I’d be delighted to see – and I was mopping up my plate with a piece of bread when I felt the rush of cold air that signaled a new arrival. New arrivals, to be more accurate: Rob Munson, a polite young man of 25 or so, and, incredibly, Sister Edwards.

I sat paralyzed, the check in my hand, but there could be no doubting the identity of my young friend from the library, though she was dressed a little more brightly; I glimpsed a blue dress beneath the black coat. I mentally congratulated her on her temporary escape from Sister Verhoff, whom I felt sure would not have approved, but was a little puzzled as to how Sister Edwards had become acquainted with a blue-collar character like Munson, who worked with his father in construction. I imagined religious differences would prevent a serious attachment, but they seemed to be getting along famously. I saw the bartender put a draft beer down in front of Munson, and then hand what looked like a soda to Sister Edwards. Munson lifted his beer, touched the rim gently to the rim of her glass, and swallowed. He offered some to her, but she

shook her head. He urged her to take a sip, and she finally did, frowning at the bitter taste. Still the floor – the floor of the bar, if not of heaven – had not opened up beneath her.

I paid my bill as quietly as I could, and squeezed past them while their backs were to me, and saw in the mirror that Sisters Edwards' nametag was missing from her coat. It was hardly the last hint I had of their courtship: a few nights later I saw her waiting outside a business on Main Street, where Munson and his father were working late. She was standing in near darkness in a corner formed by misaligned walls. As I passed I noticed a spurt of flame, and realized to my shock she was smoking a cigarette. She looked embarrassed when she saw me, but I tried to put her at her ease by saying, kindly but untruthfully, "I used to light them up myself." My reward was a shy smile.

I still saw Sister Edwards with Sister Verhoff, and although they continued to walk side by side, a distance seemed to have sprung up between them. Could the Dragon have smelled smoke on the Damsel's clothing, or beer on her breath? There was no way of knowing, but they progressed in near silence now, Sister Verhoff with a fixed frown, Sister Edwards no longer bent mouselike, but standing straight as her companion with an apparent spine of steel.

If Sister Verhoff was concerned about her young associate she had good reason to be, for a few nights later I saw the Damsel and Rob Munson on a bench at the lakefront, leaning together like melted candles, and later walking, hand in hand, where the lake spilled into the river.

Three weeks later came the blow. I opened the local weekly to find an engagement notice, topped by the words Edwards-Munson. Below the block of type was a photo of the Damsel smiling radiantly, her St. George –my fancy again – sitting on the grass besides her, his wisp of beard making him look a little like Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. The ceremony would take place in June in the local Methodist church; there was no mention of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

I encountered Sister Verhoff in the library the following Saturday. She nodded sharply when she saw me and would have gone on with her work without speaking, but I couldn't resist saying, mischievously, "I see Sister Edwards isn't with you today."

"Sister – Alice Edwards has decided to go her own way," she replied, tartly, and her words made me think of the biblical reference to Judas Iscariot. The Dragon stared sternly at the monitor and I heard her fingernails go clickety-clickety-click on the keyboard. I decided to try again.

"I've known the Munsons for years; they're nice people." Clickety-clickety-click. I made one final effort. "Who knows? It's possible she may be very happy." Brown eyes, shiny as marbles, met mine, and I realized I was being pitied as only a fool can be. She lowered her eyes and I heard the fingernails again, louder this time. I logged off and made my escape.

By summer another missionary, Sister Spooner, had come to replace Sister Edwards. The new arrival was taller than her wayward predecessor, and apparently much more reluctant to be dominated, in conversation or otherwise, by Sister Verhoff. When I saw them walking in tandem down the hill I saw that Sister Spooner was holding her own, and more, and that it was Sister Verhoff's turn to nod miserably. We came face to face by the town's single stoplight, and while Sister Spooner returned my greetings Sister Verhoff kept her eyes fixed firmly on the ground, as if salvation lay there.

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