Monkey Nuts

D. H. Lawrence

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At first Joe thought the job O.K. He was loading hay on the trucks, along with Albert, the corporal. The two men were pleasantly billeted in a cottage [Note: Soldiers on leave from the front during the First World War, and for some time afterwards, were sent to rural areas as farm−labourers, especially to assist with the harvest and with haymaking.] not far from the station; they were their own masters; for Joe never thought of Albert as a master. And the little sidings of the tiny village station was as pleasant a place as you could wish for. On one side, beyond the line, stretched the woods: on the other, the near side, across a green smooth field red houses were dotted among flowering apple trees. The weather being sunny, work easy, Albert a real good pal, what life could be better! After Flanders it was heaven itself.

Albert, the corporal, was a clean−shaven, shrewd−looking fellow of about forty. He seemed to think his one aim in life was to be full of fun and nonsense. In repose, his face looked a little withered, old. He was a very good pal to Joe, steady, decent, and grave under all his "mischief"; for his mischief was only his laborious way of skirting his own ennui.

Joe was much younger than Albert only twenty−three. He was a tallish, quiet youth, pleasant−looking. He was of slightly better class than his corporal, more personable. Careful about his appearance, he shaved every day. "I haven't got much of a face," said Albert. "If I was to shave every day like you, Joe, I should have none.

There was plenty of life in the little goods−yard; three porter youths, a continual come and go of farm wagons bringing hay, wagons with timber from the woods, coal carts loading at the trucks. The black coal seemed to make the place sleepier, hotter. Round the big white gate the station−master's children played and his white chickens walked, whilst the station−master himself, a young man getting too fat, helped his wife to peg out the washing on the clothes line in the meadow.

The great boat−shaped wagons came up from Playcross with the hay. At first the farm−men waggoned it. On the third day one of the land−girls [land−girls: During the War women worked as farm−hands to replace men serving in the forces.] appeared with the first load, drawing to a standstill easily at the head of her two great horses. She was a buxom girl, young, in linen overalls and gaiters. Her face was ruddy, she had large blue eyes.

"Now, that's the waggoner for us boys," said the corporal loudly.

"Whoa!" she said to her horses; and then to the corporal, "Which boys do you mean?"

"We are the pick of the bunch. That's Joe, my pal. "Don't you let on that my name is Albert," said the corporal to his private. "I'm the corporal."

"And I'm Miss Stokes," said the land−girl coolly, "if that's all the boys you are."

"You know you couldn't want more, Miss Stokes," said Albert politely. Joe, who was bare−headed, whose grey flannel sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, and whose shirt was open at the breast, looked modestly aside as if he had no part in the affair.

"Are you on this job regular, then?" said the corporal to Miss Stokes.

"I don't know for sure," she said, pushing a piece of hair under her hat, and attending to her splendid horses.

"Oh, make it a certainty!" said Albert.

She did not make a reply. She turned and looked over the two men coolly. She was pretty, moderately blonde, with crisp hair, a good skin, and large blue eyes. She was strong too, and the work went on leisurely and easily.

"Now," said the corporal, stopping as usual to look around, "pleasant company makes work a pleasure don't hurry it, boys." He stood on the truck surveying the world. That was one of his great and absorbing occupations: to stand and look out on things in general. Joe, also standing on the truck, also turned round to look what was to be seen. But he could not become blankly absorbed as Albert could.

Miss Stokes watched the two men from under her broad felt hat. She had seen hundreds of Alberts, khaki soldiers standing in loose attitudes absorbed in watching nothing in particular. She had seen also a good many Joes, quiet, good−looking young soldiers with half−averted faces. But there was something in the turn of Joe's head, and something in his quiet, tender−looking form, young and fresh which attracted her eye. As she watched him closely from below, he turned as if he felt her, and his dark−blue eye met her straight, light−blue gaze. He faltered and turned aside again and looked as if he were going to fall off the truck. A slight flush mounted under the girl's full, ruddy face. She liked him.

Always after this when she came into the sidings with her team it was Joe she looked for. She acknowledged to herself that she was sweet on him. But Albert did all the talking. He was so full of fun and nonsense. Miss Stokes was driven to indulge in repartee with Albert, but she fixed her magnetic attention on the younger fellow. Joe would talk to Albert, and laugh at his jokes but Miss Stokes could get little out of him. She had to depend on her silent forces. They were more effective than might be imagined.

Suddenly, on a Saturday afternoon at about two o'clock, Joe received a bolt from the blue a telegram:

"Meet me Belbury Station 6 p.m. to−day. M. S."

He knew at once who M. S. was. His heart melted, he felt weak as if he had had a blow.

"What's the trouble, boy?" asked Albert anxiously.

"No no trouble it's to meet somebody." Joe lifted his dark−blue eyes in confusion towards his corporal.

"Meet sombody!" repeated the corporal, watching his younger pal with keen blue eyes. "It's all right, then, nothing wrong?"

"No nothing wrong. I'm not going," said Joe.

Albert was old and shrewd enough to see that nothing more should be said before the housewife. He also saw that Joe did not want to take him into confidence. So he held his peace, though he was piqued.

The two soldiers went into town, smartened up. Albert knew a fair number of the boys round about; there would be plenty of gossip in the market−place, plenty of lounging in groups on the Bath Road, watching the Saturday evening shoppers. Then a modest drink or two, and the pictures. They passed an agreeable, casual, nothing−in−particular evening, with which Joe was quite satisfied. He thought of Belbury Station, and of M. S. waiting there. He had not the faintest intention of meeting her. And he had not the faintest intention of telling

Albert.

And yet, when the two men were in their bedroom, half undressed, Joe suddenly held out the telegram to his corporal, saying: "What do you think of that?"

Albert was just unbuttoning his braces. He desisted, took the telegram form, and turned towards the candle to read it.

"Meet me Belbury Station 6 p.m. to−day. M. S." he read, soto voce. His face took on its fun−and−nonsense look.

"Who's M. S.?" he asked, looking shrewdly at Joe.

"You know as well as I do," said Joe, non−commital.

"M. S.," repeated Albert. "Blamed if I know, boy. Is it a woman?"

The conversation was carried on in tiny voices, for fear of disturbing the householders.

"I don't know," said Joe, turning. He looked full at Albert, the two men looked straight into each other's eyes. There was a lurking grin in each of them.

"Well I'm blamed!" said Albert at last, throwing the telegram down emphatically on the bed.

"Wha−at?" said Joe, grinning rather sheepishly, his eyes clouded none the less.

Albert sat on the bed and proceeded to undress, nodding his head with mock gravity all the while. Joe watched him foolishly.

"What?" he repeated faintly.

Albert looked at him with a knowing look.

"If that isn't coming it quick [coming it quick: Being provocative (colloquial).], boy!" he said. "What the blazes what ha' you bin doing?"

"Nothing!" said Joe.

Albert slowly shook his head as he sat on the side of the bed.

"Don't happen to me when I've bin doin' nothing," he said. And he proceeded to pull off his stockings.

Joe turned away, looking at himself in the mirror as he unbuttoned his tunic.

"You didn't want to keep the appointment?" Albert asked, in a changed voice, from the bedside.

Joe did not answer for a moment. Then he said:

"I made no appointment."

"I'm not saying you did, boy. Don't be nasty about it. I mean you didn't want to answer the unknown person's summons shall I put it that way?"

"No," said Joe.

"What was the deterring motive?" asked Albert, who was now lying on his back in bed.

"Oh," said Joe, suddenly looking round rather haughtily, "I didn't want to." He had a well−balanced head, and could take on a sudden distant bearing.

"Didn't want to didn't cotton on, like. Well they be artful, the women " he mimicked his landlord. "Come on into bed, boy. Don't loiter about as if you'd lost something."

Albert turned over, to sleep.

On Monday Miss Stokes turned up as usual, striding beside her team. Her "whoa!" was resonant and challenging, she looked up at the truck as her steeds came to a standstill. Joe had turned aside, and had his face averted from her. She glanced him over save for his slender succulent tenderness she would have despised him. She sized him up in a steady look. Then she turned to Albert, who was looking down at her and smiling in his mischievous turn. She knew his aspects by now. She looked straight back at him, though her eyes were hot. He saluted her.

"Beautiful morning, Miss Stokes."

"Very!" she replied.

"Handsome is as handsome looks," said Albert.

Which produced no response.

"Now Joe, come on here," said the corporal. "Don't keep the ladies waiting it's the sign of a weak heart."

Joe turned, and the work began. Nothing more was said for the time being. As the week went on, all parties became more comfortable. Joe remained silent, averted, neutral, a little on his dignity. Miss Stokes was off−hand and masterfull. Albert was full of mischief."

The great theme was a circus, which was coming to the market town on the following Saturday.

"You'll go to the circus, Miss Stokes?" said Albert.

"I may do. Are you going?"

"Certainly. Give us the pleasure of escorting you."

"No thanks."

"That's what I call a flat refusal what, Joe? You don't mean that you have no liking for our company, Miss Stokes?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Miss Stokes. "How many are there of you?"

"Only me and Joe."

"Oh, is that all?" she said satirically.

Albert was a little nonplussed.

"Isn't that enough for you?" he asked.

"Too many by half," blurted out Joe, jeeringly, in a sudden fit of uncouth rudeness that made both of the others stare.

"Oh, I'll stand out of the way, boy, if that's it," said Albert to Joe. Then he turned mischievously to Miss Stokes. "He wants to know what M. stands for," he said confidentially.

"Monkeys," she replied, turning to her horses.

"What's M. S.?" said Albert.

"Monkey nuts," she retorted, leading off her team.

Albert looked after her a little discomfitted. Joe had flushed dark, and cursed Albert in his heart.

On the Saturday afternoon the two soldiers took the train into town. They would have to walk home. They had tea at six o'clock, and lounged about till half−past seven. The circus was in a meadow near the river a great red−and−white striped tent. Caravans stood at the side. A great crowd of people was gathered round the ticket caravan.

Inside the tent the lamps were lighted, shining on a ring of faces, a great circular bank of faces round the green grassy centre. Along with some comrades, the two soldiers packed themselves on a thin plank seat, rather high. They were delighted with the flaring lights, the wild effect. But the circus performance did not affect them deeply. They admired the lady in black velvet with rose−purple legs, who leapt so neatly on to the galloping horse, they watched the feats of stength and laughed at the clown. But they felt a little patronising, they missed the sensational drama of the cinema.

Half−way through the performance Joe was electrified to see the face of Miss Stokes not very far from him. There she was, in her khaki and her felt hat, as usual; he pretended not to see her. She was laughing at the clown; she also pretended not see him. It was a blow to him, and it made him angry. He would not even mention it to Albert. Least said, soonest mended. He liked to believe she had not seen him. But he knew, fatally, that she had.

When they came out it was nearly eleven o'clock; a lovely night, with a moon and tall, dark noble trees: a magnificent May night. Joe and Albert laughed and chaffed with the boys. Joe looked round frequently to see if he were safe from Miss Stokes. It seemed so.

But there were six miles to walk home. At last the two soldiers set off, swinging their canes. The road was white between tall hedges, other stragglers were passing out of the town towards the villages, the air was full of pleasant excitement.

They were drawing near to the village, when they saw a dark figure ahead. Joe's heart sank with pure fear. It was a figure wheeling a bicycle a land−girl Miss Stokes. Albert was ready with his nonsense. Miss Stokes had a puncture.

"Let me wheel the rattler," [rattler: Bicycle (slang).] said Albert.

"Thank you," said Miss Stokes. "You are so kind."

"Oh I'd be kinder than that, if you'd show me how," said Albert.

"Are you sure?" said Miss Stokes.

"Doubt my words?" said Albert. "That's what I call cruel, now, Miss Stokes."

Miss Stokes walked between them, close to Joe.

"Have you been to the circus?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied mildly.

"Have you been?" Albert asked her.

"Yes. I didn't see you," she replied.

"What! you say so! Didn't see us! Didn't think us worth looking at," began Albert. "Aren't I as handsome as the clown, now?" And you didn't as much as glance in our direction? I call it downright oversight."

"I never saw you," reiterated Miss Stokes. "I didn't know you saw me."

"That makes it worse," said Albert.

The road passed through a belt of dark pine wood. The village, and the branch road, was very near. Miss Stokes put out her fingers and felt for Joe's hand, as it swung at his side. To say he was staggered is to put it mildly. Yet he allowed her softly to clasp his fingers for a few moments. But he was a mortified youth.

At the cross−roads they stopped Miss Stokes should turn off. She had another mile to go.

"You'll let us see you home," said Albert.

"Do me a kindness," she said. "Put my bike in your shed, and take it to Baker's on Monday, will you?"

"I'll sit up all night and mend it for you, if you like."

"No thanks. And Joe and I'll walk on."

"Oh ho! Oh ho!" sang Albert. "Joe! Joe! What do you say to that, now, boy? Aren't you in luck's way? And I get the bloomin' old bike for my pal! Consider it again, Miss Stokes."

Joe turned aside his face, and did not speak.

"Oh, well! I wheel the grid [grid: Bicycle (slang).], do I? I leave you, boy "

"I ain't keen on going any further," barked out Joe in an uncouth voice. "She bain't my choice."

The girl stood silent, and watched the two men.

"There now!" said Albert. "Think o' that. If it was me now " But he was uncomfortable. "Well, Miss Stokes, have me," he added.

Miss Stokes stood quite still, neither moved nor spoke. And so the three remained for some time at the lane end. At last Joe began kicking the ground then he suddenly lifted his face. At that moment Miss Stokes was at his side. She put her arm delicately round his waist.

"Seems I'm the one extra, don't you think?" Albert inquired of the high bland moon.

Joe had dropped his head and did not answer. Miss Stokes stood with her arm lightly round his waist. Albert bowed, saluted, and bade good−night. He walked away, leaving the two standing.

Miss Stokes put a light pressure on Joe's waist, and drew him down the road. They walked in silence. The night was full of scent wild cherry, the first bluebells. Still they walked in silence. A nightingale was singing. They approached nearer, and nearer, till they stood close by his dark bush. The powerful notes sounded from the cover, almost like flashes of light then the interval of silence then the moaning notes, almost like a dog faintly howling, followed by the long, rich trill and flashing notes. Then a short silence again.

Miss Stokes turned at last to Joe. She looked up at him, and in the moonlight he saw her faintly smiling. He felt maddened, but helpless. Her arm was round his waist, she drew him closely to her with a soft pressure that made his bones rotten.

Meanwhile Albert was waiting at home. He put on his overcoat, for the fire was out, and he had had malarial fever. He looked fitfully at the Daily Mirror and the Daily Sketch, but saw nothing. It seemed a long time. He began to yawn widely, even to nod. At last Joe came in.

Albert looked at him keenly. The young man's brow was black, his face sullen.

"All right, boy?" asked Albert.

Joe merely grunted for a reply. There was nothing more to be got out of him. So they went to bed.

Next day Joe was silent, sullen. Albert could make nothing of him. He proposed a walk after tea.

"I'm going somewhere," said Joe.

"Where monkey−nuts?" asked the corporal.

But Joe's brow only became darker.

So the days went by. Almost every evening Joe went off alone, returning late. He was sullen, taciturn, and had a hang−dog look, a curious way of dropping his head and looking dangerously from under his brow. And he and Albert did not get on so well any more with one another. For all his fun and nonsense, Albert was really irritable, soon made angry. And Joe's stand−offish sulkiness and complete lack of confidence riled him, got on his nerves. His fun and nonsense took a biting, sarcastic turn, at which Joe's eyes glittered occasionally, though the young man turned unheeding aside. Then again Joe would be full of odd, whimsical fun, outshining Albert himself.

Miss Stokes still came to the station with the wain Monkey−nuts, Albert called her, though not to her face. For she was very clear and good−looking; almost she seemed to gleam. And Albert was a tiny bit afraid of her. She very rarely addressed Joe whilst the hay−loading was going on, and that young man always turned his back to her. He seemed thinner, and his limber figure looked more slouching. But still it had the tender attractive appearance, especially from behind. His tanned face, a little thinned and darkened, took a handsome, slightly sinister look.

"Come on, Joe" the corporal urged sharply one day. "What're you doing, boy? Looking for beetles on the bank?"

Joe turned round swiftly, almost menacing, to work.

"He's a different fellow these days, Miss Stokes," said Albert to the young woman. "What's got him? Is it monkey−nuts that don't suit him, do you think?"

"Choked with chaff, more like!" she retorted. "It's as bad as feeding a threshing machine, to have to listen to some folks."

"As bad as what?" said Albert. "You don't mean me, do you, Miss Stokes?"

"No," she cried. "I don't mean you."

Joe's face became dark−red during these sallies, but he said nothing. He would eye the young woman curiously, as she swung so easily at the work, and he had some of the look of a dog which is going to bite.

Albert, with his nerves on edge, began to find the strain rather severe. The next Saturday evening, when Joe came in more black−browed than ever, he watched him, determined to have it out with him.

When the boy went upstairs to bed, the corporal followed him. He closed the door behind him carefully, sat on the bed and watched the younger man undressing. And for once he spoke in a natural voice, neither chaffing nor commanding.

"What's gone wrong, boy?"

Joe stopped a moment as if he had been shot. Then he went on unwinding his puttees and did not answer or look up.

"You can hear, can't you?" said Albert, nettled.

"Yes I can hear," said Joe, stooping over his puttees till his face was purple.

"Then why don't you answer?"

Joe sat up. He gave a long, sideways look at the corporal. Then he lifted his eyes and stared at a crack in the ceiling.

The corporal watched these movements shrewdly.

"And then what?" he asked ironically.

Again Joe stared him in the face. The corporal smiled very slightly, but kindly.

"There'll be murder done one of these days," said Joe, in a quiet, unimpassioned voice.

"So long as it's by daylight " replied Albert. Then he went over, sat down by Joe, put his hand on his shoulder affectionately, and continued: "What is it, boy? You can trust me, can't you?"

Joe turned and looked curiously at the face so near to his.

"It's nothing, that's all," he said laconically.

Albert frowned.

"Then who's going to be murdered? and who's going to do the murdering? me or you which is it, boy?" He smiled gently at the stupid youth, looking straight at him all the while into his eyes. Gradually the stupid, hunted, glowering look died out of Joe's eyes. He turned his head aside, gently, as one rousing from a spell.

"I don't want her," he said, with fierce resentment.

"Then you needn't have her," said Albert. "What do you go for, boy?"

But it wasn't as simple as all that. Joe made no remark.

"She's a smart−looking girl. What's wrong with her, my boy? I should have thought you were a lucky chap, myself."

"I don't want 'er," Joe barked, with ferocity and resentment.

"Then tell her so and have done," said Albert. He waited a while. There was no response. "Why don't you?" he added.

"Because I don't," confessed Joe, sulkily.

Albert pondered rubbed his head.

"You're too soft−hearted, that's where it is, boy. You want your mettle dipping in cold water to temper it. You're too soft−hearted "

He laid his arm affectionately across the shoulders of the younger man. Joe seemed to yield a little towards him.

"When are you going to see her again?" Albert asked. For a long time there was no answer.

"When is it, boy?" persisted the softened voice of the corporal.

"To−morrow," confessed Joe.

"Then let me go," said Albert. "Let me go, will you?"

The morrow was Sunday, a sunny day, but a cold evening. The sky was grey, the new foliage very green, but the air was chill and depressing. Albert walked briskly down the white road towards Beeley. He crossed a larch plantation, and followed a narrow by−road, where blue speedwell flowers fell from the banks into the dust. He walked, swinging his cane, with mixed sensations. Then having gone a certain length, he turned and began to walk in the opposite direction.

So he saw a young woman approaching him. She was wearing a wide hat of grey straw, and a loose, swinging dress of nigger−grey velvet. She walked with slow inevitability. Albert faltered a little as he approached her. Then he saluted her, and his roguish, slightly withered skin flushed. She was staring straight into his face.

He fell in by her side, saying impudently:

"Not so nice for a walk as it was, is it?"

She only stared at him. He looked back at her.

"You've seen me before, you know," he said, grinning slightly. "Perhaps you never noticed me. Oh, I'm quite nice looking, in a quiet way, you know. What ?"

But Miss Stokes did not speak: she only stared with large, icy blue eyes at him. He became self−conscious, lifted his chin, walked with his nose in the air, and whistled at random. So they went down the quiet, deserted lane. he was whistling the air:

"I'm Gilbert, the filbert, the colonel of the nuts."

At last she found her voice:

"Where's Joe?"

"He thought you'd like a change; they say variety's the salt of life that's why I'm mostly pickle."

"Where is he?"

"Am I my brother's keeper? He's gone his own ways."

"Where?"

"Nay, how am I to know! Not so far but he'll be back for supper."

She stopped in the middle of the lane. He stopped, facing her.

"Where's Joe?" she asked.

He struck a careless attitude, looked down the road, this way and that, lifted his eyebrows, pushed his khaki cap on one side and answered:

"He is not conducting the service to−night: he asked me if I'd officiate."

"Why hasn't he come?"

"Didn't want to, I expect. I wanted to."

She stared him up and down, and he felt uncomfortable in his spine, but maintained his air of nonchalance. Then she turned slowly on her heel, and started to walk back. The corporal went at her side.

"You're not going back, are you?" he pleaded. "Why, me and you, we should get on like a house on fire."

She took no heed, but walked on. He went uncomfortably at her side, making his funny remarks from time to time. But she was as if stone deaf. He glanced at her, and to his dismay saw the tears running down her cheeks. He stopped suddenly, and pushed back his cap.

"I say, you know " he began.

But she was walking on like an automaton, and he had to hurry after her.

She never spoke to him. At the gate of her farm she walked straight in, as if he were not there. He watched her disappear. Then he turned on his heel, cursing silently, puzzled, lifting off his cap to scratch his head.

That night, when they were in bed, he remarked:

"Say, Joe, boy, strikes me you're well−off without Monkey−nuts. Gord love us, beans ain't in it."

So they slept in amity. But they waited with some anxiety for the morrow.

It was a cold morning, a grey sky shifting in a cold wind, and threatening rain. They watched the wagon come up the road and through the gates. Miss Stokes was with her team as usual: her "Whoa!" rang out like a war−whoop.

She faced up at the truck where the two men stood.

"Joe?" she called, to the averted figure which stood up in the wind.

"What?" He turned unwillingly.

She made a queer movement, lifting her head slightly in a sipping, half−inviting, half−commanding gesture. And Joe was crouching already to jump off the truck to obey her, when Albert put his hand on his shoulder.

"Half a minute, boy! Where are you off? Work's work, and nuts is nuts. You stop here."

Joe slowly straightened himself.

"Joe?" came the woman's clear call from below.

"Again Joe looked at her. But Albert's hand was on his shoulder, detaining him. He stood half−averted, with his tail between his legs.

"Take your hand off him, you" said Miss Stokes.

"Yes, Major," retorted Albert satirically.

She stood and watched.

"Joe!" Her voice rang out for the third time.

Joe turned and looked at her, and a slow, jeering smile gathered on his face.

"Monkey−nuts!" he replied, in a tone mocking her call.

She turned white dead white. The men thought she would fall. Albert began yelling to the porters up the line to come and help with the load. He could yell like any non−commisioned officer upon occasion.

Some way or other the wagon was unloaded, the girl was gone. Joe and his corporal looked at one another and smiled slowly. But they had a weight on their minds, they were afraid.

They were reassured, however, when they found that Miss Stokes came no more with the hay. As far as they were concerned, she had vanished into oblivion. And Joe felt more relieved even than he had felt when he heard the firing cease, after the news that the armistice was signed.