

## BELLA

MARIANNE NORDFORS

FROM the day Bella first came to us we were struck by the irony of her name. Some Boer forefather had bequeathed to her her muscular, broadhipped frame, but everything else was exaggeratedly Hottentot: the full posterior, the heavy breasts bulging under the calico, the moonshaped face with its thick lips and nose all nostrils, the short, fuzzy hair. Her eyes turned on the world a liquid, vacant stare, and when she spoke it was in a piping treble that issued grotesquely from her great hulk. Most of the time she was pregnant, and we knew that she supported three illegitimate children, all by different fathers, who lived with her mother somewhere in Hottentot's Holland. Her fourth, a boy, was born one night in our backroom. For a few months he existed somewhere in the slums of Cape Town, a misshapen little creature with a huge, nodding head clothed in a dirty bonnet, and a weak, sickly whine. When to her relief he died of tubercular meningitis, it did not prevent her from straightaway being with child again. Sex was her only pleasure.

For a year she moved about our house, dusting, scrubbing, washing, cooking, her motherliness surrounding her like an aura with its smell of milk, its curves and bulges of comforting flesh. She served us with the same unquestioning faithfulness she reserved for her good-for-nothing boy friend and her children in the country. She spent all her wages on her dependents and never complained or asked for a rise.

Then one day her prospects altered. We took in a rich lodger from Johannesburg, an invalid lady, who moved into our front bedroom with all the fuss and ceremony becoming to her pampered state. She announced her arrival by telegram, then kept us waiting and finally descended on us with a battery of trunks, suitcases and bags, which we had great difficulty in storing in the attic. At our invitation she joined us in the parlour, where she sat taking small, reluctant sips of our best coffee and refusing the cake because of her diet. The whole family had gathered to see her, and I think we were all equally disappointed. She was a widow of about sixty-five with a large face but very little forehead. Her thick, rheumatic fingers sparkled with diamonds, but the rings a fond husband had given her in former

years had dug deep into the flesh and formed unwieldy creases there. Her whole body creaked with stays and it seemed as though the bulges had thus been painfully depressed into the legs, which were swollen as with dropsy, the feet being squeezed into black old ladies' shoes. She sat there and sipped and talked on and on in a voice that seemed to come through a pot of bubbling porridge and never changed its complaining pitch. As she had nothing else to do, it became her custom thus to bore us daily, discoursing about her health, the way she had been betrayed by her friends, her two dead daughters, paragons of beauty and virtue and very, very high up in society. Her name was Mrs. Norton.

Having so little to recommend her she had long ago picked up the trick of impressing people with her opulence and bribing them into friendship with promises of gifts and remembrances in her will.

"You're a likely young girl," she used to say when it was my turn to see to her. "If you'll be my companion you won't be sorry. I'm really quite easy to get on with," she added, "and I have no heirs."

And her crafty old eyes twinkled and appraised me.

Such blandishments she also used on my mother and my school-boy brothers, John and Harry. But her only victim was Bella.

The poor thing had of course been as excited as any of us at the prospect of having a millionaire in our midst and had with great, round eyes watched the arrival of the lady from the kitchen door. Once installed in her room, Mrs. Norton immediately pounced on her.

"And what is your name, my dear?"

"Bella," piped the giantess in her thin treble.

"Well, Bella, you just look after me nicely and you won't lose by me, you know. There's more for a good girl where that comes from."

And she pressed a pound note into the maid's bewildered hand.

This was only the beginning of a long series of presents and tips that flowed from Mrs. Norton's purse into the maid's room, and Bella, her simple human greed aroused, danced quick attendance. She did not neglect us, of course, but always kept an ear cocked for the slightest sound from Mrs. Norton. The old lady in her golden splendour was flattered by the dumb admiration, and Bella was in and out of her room, where she

kept her precious pound notes in stacks in an open cupboard and counted them and made them grow by clever manipulations on the stock market. It was strange that a woman so shrewd in financial matters should not believe in banks, but so it was.

"I like to keep my cash about me," she declared when we warned her. "It comforts me, you know."

But she did not know that Bella's eyes flew to the cupboard whenever she came in.

The sequel was, of course, inevitable. A change came over Bella, who began to look quite bold in a furtive sort of way. The boy friend gave up all pretence of looking for work and lounged all day in her room, smoking one cigarette after another. The children in the country came up to see their mother, decked out in all the pale pink finery her vulgar taste could invent. And Bella herself spent her afternoons off in town on all sorts of errands, revealed in the cloud of cheap perfume that hung around her and in the new silk undies and nylon stockings that decorated the washing line. She began to go to the pictures, and sang garbled versions of the latest hits shrilly and tunelessly as she moved about the house.

Mother had taken the children to the country for their holidays when the storm broke. Mrs. Norton discovered that ten pounds were missing from her hoard. Red and trembling she burst into my room.

"It's that girl!" she exclaimed, hoarse with unleashed hatred. "That's what you get from being kind to these people. Think of all the presents I gave her. Why, only the other day she got those woollen knickers that had shrunk in the wash! You know, the black ones. But they're all the same. No sense of gratitude. They bite the hand that feeds them. They ought to be kept short. Bread and water is too good for them."

She was so beside herself that I thought she might have a stroke, but actually she enjoyed the sense of injury that promised to give content to at least a few of her empty days. Naturally she went to the police at once and came back most disappointed when she was told that she had to provide evidence for her accusations.

"She's spent it all, of course," she complained, "but I'll get the better of her yet."

I advised her to put her money in a safer place, but with a sniff the irate lady sailed out of the room, pausing just long enough to say "Wait and see!" in a dark and foreboding tone

of voice.

For a long time nothing happened except that Mrs. Norton suddenly made friends with Mrs. Smith next door. This harmless, garrulous little woman was the widow of a post office clerk, who had left her with a pension, a tiny house and many children in various simple walks of life. She went about in slippers, brewed tea six times a day and knitted pullovers for her grandchildren. Her family, illness and a little gossip was the whole extent of her conversation, and she had formerly been quite below Mrs. Norton's notice. Now there were endless visits to and fro. Confidences were exchanged, knitting-needles clacked and on Mrs. Smith's black bosom there appeared a big jade brooch. I never bothered much about their chatter, and it neither surprised nor disturbed me that Bella's name so often figured in it. I could only not quite understand what drew the old ladies to each other. It was quite simple: Mrs. Smith had a telephone.

For in her sleepless, rheumatic nights Mrs. Norton had worked out the campaign that was to lead to Bella's downfall and give her the revenge her vanity so dearly craved. It was really quite straightforward, the stratagem of the baited trap, but it required an accomplice who could provide a lookout at a neighbouring window and instant access to the police.

Most of her money she now carried to the bank, but a substantial wad remained in the cupboard, all harmless and open to the view. No one could know that she kept a list of the numbers and checked it carefully whenever the maid had been alone in the room. Every morning when it was time to tidy up she would call out to Mrs. Smith in a voice that was intended to carry all over the house.

"Are you free, dear? Do you mind if I come over for a cup of tea?"

Then the two old women would take up their posts at the corner window just opposite her own and watch every movement behind the curtain with the twitching excitement of stalking cats.

After a few weeks of this pleasurable occupation their patience was rewarded. Bella was seen to open and close the cupboard door and to slip quietly out to the back. A check showed that a pound note was missing, the telephone rang and within a few minutes the police were there.

Following the first incredulous shock at this almost magic

appearance of retribution, the maid wept and gesticulated, shrilly protesting her innocence to God and an interested knot of gaping bystanders, her cries mingling with the furious accusations of Mrs. Norton, who, with arms akimbo, egged on the constables with all the fervour of a fan at a football match. Silence fell only when the servant's room was searched. The boy friend emerged, pale and slightly drunk on dagga, which dangerous and forbidden drug was found inside in considerable quantities. A close inspection of the bed brought to light the pound note, a yellow family snap and a tattered, rather garish print of Jesus blessing the poor. These were hidden under the mattress.

Bella realized that the game was up. She lifted her eyes and studied Mrs. Norton, standing on the doorstep like an overblown idol of justice.

"You dirty white bitch!" she said.

Then without another word she followed the policemen to the Black Maria, accompanied by a stream of triumphant vituperation from her conqueror, for whom this incident provided a subject for conversation for many weeks to come.

The last news we had of Bella was a few days later, when Mrs. Norton returned from the Magistrate's Court, where she had witnessed against her. She entered the parlour, her face flushed from the excitement of the day, and sat down without taking off her big, black hat with the ostrich feathers.

"She got three months," she pronounced with satisfaction. "Jail will take the kick out of her.—They shave their heads there, I'm told."