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# Sweet as Muscatel

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# Sweet as Muscatel

by Gwennyth E. Hood

Although my grandfather had made his fortune in trade, I had been educated as a gentleman and at first I expected Flora society to accept me as such. After a youth spent in Paris and Vienna, I was anyone's equal in deportment. My attire, always elegant without flashiness, had elsewhere disarmed the stuffiest arbiters. So when with a lover's shyness I followed the Lady Celia into the *Contessa di Filipini's salon* at Flora, I was not expecting difficulties from the threadbare remnants of aristocracy which infested that small city. I took no special notice of Prospero until the night he shattered my life.

That night I noticed him. He was five years my elder and a finger or so taller than I, but he paid for that advantage in loss of substance. His thin face with jutting cheekbones was perched too precariously on his spidery shoulders. His eyes were a watery blue, and despite trying every imaginable style of hat from the foppish to the frumpish, he never hit on one that gave life to his face or compensated for his moth-eaten wig. Yet that evening I noticed his weak eyes assessing me carefully. It added an edge which I did not need to my nervousness, for I was "screwing my courage to the sticking point," to ask

that great question. My eyes were already creeping past him and feasting on Celia in her demure pink gown with the innocent pearls at her throat. She smiled in my direction, not a bold or wanton smile, but winsome, tentative, almost embarrassed. So rapt was I that at first I did not hear Prospero speak. I only heard his words when he repeated himself.

"Sweet," he said. "Sweet as Muscatel."

Celia cast down her eyes, a rosy blush creeping over her cheeks. Through the salon a delicate ripple of laughter spread and then I understood. The words of the whole disastrous octave floated back to me:

All dainty as a wild gazelle,  
Is Celia with the sea-blue eyes,  
Whose fragrant curls in swells arise,  
On cheeks as pure as asphodel,  
T'would convert the stubborn Infidel,  
But seeing that ruby mouth to smile,  
Cupid himself is all beguiled,  
By lips as sweet as Muscatel.

Ah yes indeed, I wrote that, callow youth that

I was. It is one of the ceremonies of love to use one's talents, poor though they be, to praise one's love. Another ceremony is to keep such praises secret. I had duly performed the first; Celia had failed at the second. What words can convey the depth of my mortification? She had shown my love-gift to Prospero, and he doubtless had shown it to others. When I considered how many pairs of mocking eyes had looked on it, suddenly the words themselves changed in my mind from gold to lead. When I had written them, I had thought them delicately sentimental with just a touch of irony. But suddenly they seemed impossibly mawkish and clumsy, a lover's naked feelings seen by eyes for which they were not meant. My elegant suit might as well have turned to a groom's stained overalls. I might as well have been a yokel with a straw hat who had wandered by chance into the Contessa's salon. My grandfather was a trademan, and nothing I said, did, or wore would ever change that.

The aristocrats tittered like nervous children. Then they fell silent, all waiting for me to do something, perhaps weep like a child, perhaps to challenge Prospero to a duel. My lady herself, having somehow mislaid her smile, suddenly murmured an excuse and ran out of the room. Before anyone else moved, I too turned and strode in the opposite direction. A wisp of irrepressible laughter pursued me through the door and in the streets I was alone with my own thoughts.

"O Spirits of Darkness!" I whispered passionately. "Imps and devils and wreakers of vengeance! Why have I always feared Hell? What existence could be more wretched than the one I live already? If you truly barter in human souls, come to me here! Let me get Prospero in my power, and I will sell my soul without regret!"

All that night I paced in my gardens, vainly seeking forgetfulness. When I finally lay down, exhausted, on my bed, sleep also eluded me. In the small hours of the morning I rose unrefreshed and found the waning moon casting its attenuated light through the window in the east. I drew back the curtains and looked out, but nothing was there except the summer-green apple branches stirring in a light breeze.

However, when I turned away I saw a shadowy figure towering between me and my bed. His sweeping wings grazed the ceiling, and below his waist his thighs and legs dissolved into a pitchy fog. His face was black as ebony, yet beneath the forehead came the white-cold gleam of eyes which mirrored my own passionate anger. I thrilled with momentary terror, then mastered it. "So! Hell listens then, when Heaven is deaf!" I exclaimed.

The black lips of the specter curled slightly. His voice growled with menace, or was it amusement? "You want to sell your soul? To me?"



"Can you meet the price?" I replied evenly.

"Prospero could not escape me," replied the specter.

"I want Prospero for myself. You understand me?" I said.

"If he were to die of consumption, with all his cousins weeping by his bedside," the specter growled ironically, "the Lady Celia would doubtless turn to you for comfort."

"The Lady Celia does not come into this; what was between us is beyond vengeance or forgiveness," I said with an assurance which I myself found admirable. "As for Prospero, death is not the point. If I only wanted him to die, I could manage that myself; I am no coward! I want to send him in disgrace and humiliation from society. As he has sent me. Only for that do I need your help."

"Inward agony." The specter showed very white teeth, sneering. "To despise and hate oneself, to be ashamed. You are right, Antonio Bartolomei, it is the worst agony. But it depends on spiritual insight, on self-knowledge. Do you truly believe that is the province of Hell?"

I felt a stab of anger and disappointment. "If you cannot give me what I want, why are you wasting my time? Begone!" I told him.

The specter's sneer turned to a grin and became permanently fixed. "Not so hasty, Antonio Bartolomei. I can help you, if your heart is set on this.

But it will take much effort from you. It will take the investment of all your worldly property, all the resources of your lively mind, and all the years of your youth, as much as fifteen years. With that, it can be done. Does it mean so much to you?"

"It means so much," I said.

He winked.

After that, we drew up the contract.

## 2.

The next day I slipped quietly away from Flora in the garments of a clerk and took over personal management of my grandfather's fortunes. For the next fifteen years, I traveled the world, became fluent in several languages, doubled my fortune, gained strange knowledge and strange treasures, and incidentally learned the names of all Prospero's servants and the extent of his fortunes. As it happened, I returned to Flora almost upon the very anniversary of my humiliation. I came on the urgent invitation of the *Conte Federigo*, who needed me nearby to pay his gambling debts in emergencies. I entered his ballroom in a once opulent but rather weathered black cape and instantly became the center of a knot of ladies who wished to hear my tales of far away. That was when I knew I would be popular. Popular, when all I wanted was vengeance.

Prospero had married Celia only a few weeks after my departure. I had learned that years before. The two of them still giddily attended all the local rounds of entertainment as if to remind themselves of better days, but the years had not been kind to them. Prospero's management had not enhanced the modest fortune of either. They had four children, not at all certain to be educated even in tolerable schools. If either thought I had reason to bear them any grudge, neither showed any sign. Nor did I. I continued my plans against them, but my interest did flag every now and then. Sometimes, when I had to tear myself from the company of a bright-eyed lady listening raptly to my account of the crimson sunset in Jamaica, so that I could lose at cards to Prospero and build up his trust, or listen to a spy report further gossip on the threadbare state of Celia's apartments, I wondered whether it was worth it. Sometimes I entertained the idea of abandoning my long sought revenge and striking out after my happiness at long last. But clearly it was folly. My first attempts to find happiness had indeed been unfortunate enough, and bargains with dark spirits are not so easily disposed of. I would go to my doom alone, and drag no loved one after me. Grimly I set about reminding me of that fatal evening when Prospero had sent me off and how he had robbed me of all chance of love. My hatred and my desire for vengeance would flare again.

In the twentieth year of my dark bargain, the plot came to its climax. I was standing in the drawing room of my own mansion, listening with half-closed eyes to the delicate plucking of the harp. Matilda was playing, Matilda Corelli, a girl who was nearly a woman, with raven hair and a radiant blush meant just for me. As I listened, my mind was filled with poetry. "Why not dance with her?" I asked myself. But then, my resting eyes caught a movement, and I opened them to see a haggard shadow dividing the torchlight as he entered the room. It was Prospero. With difficulty, I turned my attention to him. He looked, indeed, more like a ghost than a living man. His eyes were sunken. His shoulders sagged. He almost shuffled his feet. At last I accepted that the game was over and that I would not be able to dance with Matilda or any woman that night or ever.

"You must foreclose on the property in the Abruzzi," my steward had told me the day before.

I had sighed with familiar reluctance. "Is there a hurry?" I asked.

"It's almost too late now. Prospero is trying to mortgage his estate again, and he's had to sell off nearly everything else to pay his creditors. If you do not collect what is yours now, you will lose your whole investment."

"Very well. Foreclose," I said. And so now I knew well enough what was on Prospero's mind, and what he had come to me for. After all, he did not know I was a mortgage holder, since I worked through middlemen. He had often come to me for other things, for "loans" which he never repaid, to educate his children, and for his gambling debts. Based on careful information from my spies, his servants, I had several times, as if by accident, sent him precisely the thing he most needed--a cask of Burgundy, a bolt of green velvet, a side of beef, and so forth. Then he had just gotten into the habit of asking me for things.

I took care to ignore Prospero during the early festivities, but it did not surprise me that he came to join me when I casually stepped out to smoke in the gardens. He wore a haunted expression.

"Antonio. May I see you alone?" he asked.

I let out another puff of smoke. I could, of course, have made excuses, but you cannot mock the devil forever. "Why not?" I said. "Would you like to accompany me to the wine cellar? I received a cask of Muscatel yesterday which I intended to serve in the course of this evening." What I actually had was quite different, but I always told my guests that whatever I served them was Muscatel. They were used to my eccentricities, and I had found that when I ceased apologizing for myself, others began apologizing for me. "Perhaps you will taste it with me and tell me whether it will do," I said.

"You are the most thoughtful of hosts, my dear Antonio. I will go with you." He was, or seemed, entirely unsuspecting of any plot against us. And so we descended side by side, down the stairs into the cellars. With each step we took it struck me that we were alone together, each the only witness of the other's fate. My grudge raged in me with a fury which I had almost forgotten, but newer, stranger feelings which I could not define stirred up and raged against it. What a relief it would be to end my confusion!

As we proceeded farther and farther from the sight and sound of other human beings, Prospero, far from being intimidated, became bolder. As we turned a corridor, he gripped my arm. "Antonio," he said, "You've been a true friend."

"You flatter me," I said.

"I do not. You are my *only* true friend!" Genuine tears glistened in his weak eyes. "The others still invite the Lady Celia and me because they are ashamed to notice our misfortune. You are the only one of them all who actually takes thought for our comfort. You are the only one who is not too proud to look past a title and see what a man - and a lady --and children-- really need."

It appalled me that he could be so perceptive and so thoroughly hoodwinked at the same time. "Friendship is a noble thing, much praised by the ancients," I murmured at last while blood pounded wildly in my ears.

"Antonio, I have no right to ask this. But I am in -- difficulties. I need five hundred British pounds or I'll go to debtor's prison," he said.

We had reached the bare vault where the casks stood and I placed the torch I was carrying in a bracket on the wall before I turned and faced him. "Five hundred?" I asked abstractedly. It was a lot of money but there was little point in protesting poverty. It was money I had.

"Yes, Antonio. I need to raise money to pay one set of creditors, but another set is foreclosing on my property. Will you--" he stopped speaking and looked at me earnestly.

"You have many debts, Prospero," I said. A tightening in my throat choked back the harsher speech which I had rehearsed. All the same, he looked blankly at me, as though a nobleman's having debts worth nearly twice his property did not need an explanation. Meanwhile, I took a goblet from the cabinet nearby, filled it from the cask, and handed it to him. "Taste it, Prospero. Is it not sweet? Sweet as Muscatel?"

Prospero took the cup from my hand, but he kept his eyes fixed on me as he sipped. All these years he had missed the meaning of Muscatel in all my conversation, and it almost looked as though he would miss this one too. But perhaps the trembling

in my voice warned him that I meant something particular this time. "Sweet as Muscatel," he repeated, evidently to humor me, and then suddenly his face froze as the scene came back to him. "Sweet as Muscatel?" he asked in an altered voice, desolate eyes now begging for a hint that he was wrong.

"I would convert the stubborn Infidel," I added.

An inkling of my meaning seemed to dawn on him. His eyes filled with disbelief. "All these years," he said.

"All these years," I agreed.

"How it amazes me!" he said. "You really loved her!" His tone and expression were utterly sincere.

"I used all the cliches, Prospero. I meant every one."

Prospero took another sip of the wine (it was Aemelian, and a good year too). I realized then that he still had no idea that I had ever contemplated revenge; he was lost in bewilderment at the thought that anyone really meant the things you say in love poetry. He had married Celia for her modest fortune and most of his energies since then had been directed at keeping up appearances. My fury ebbed away. How can you envy a man who marries without love and whose truest friend has labored unceasingly for twenty years to ruin him? At last I took a sip from the cup I had filled for myself. "I will lend you the money, Prospero. I will write the note now and my steward will hand it over in the morning. But you will have to sack your present steward. He's cheating you."

After I had sent the much relieved Prospero away, I returned to my own chamber. There the dark spirit waited, his great wings sweeping the ceiling, his feet disappearing in a thick mist. His eyes gleamed cold- white upon me.

"I have come to fulfill my side of the bargain," I said. His lips curled only slightly. I admitted, "You have kept yours. I have had my will. It is true, Spirit, that I do not want to die now. But even there I am better off than when I met you; I used to think I would welcome death any time it came. The truth is, I never had any pleasure in life until I met you. So how can I regret our bargain?"

The spirit's fixed expression did not change. "Do you wish to be with me now?" he growled.

"What does it matter? Your right is unquestionable."

"Antonio, Antonio. It is not such an easy thing, after all." The dark mist of his form expanded and the wings stretched out to fill the whole chamber. "As you say, you are obliged to give your soul to me, but I am not obliged to take it." I stood speechless and after a silence as deep as a century, his words came again. "When they educated you, Antonio, they taught you the wrong things. They taught

you that the devil is the enemy of God, but they did not tell you that God becomes his own enemy in the service of man. They taught you that love often grows overripe and sours into hatred, but they did not tell you that budding hatred can also bloom into love. They taught you that Satan can make himself as an angel of light, but you did not learn that God chooses to dwell in thick darkness. Vengeance belongs to God, but it is not His greatest gift." His wings swept out wide, to encompass the city, and as they opened, colors unfolded in the spaces between the feathers, iridescent rainbows of blue and green and yellow and red, some dusky as smoke, some as bright as the phoenix. As the vision smote me, I threw myself down on the floor and convulsive-

ly drew my hands to my eyes. His words now whispered almost inaudibly in my head, though I felt the room vibrate with their rhythm. *How arduously you have served for hatred, Antonio! Would you serve half so well for love? If only you would serve for love!*

Then I lost consciousness.

When I came to myself, the vision was gone. His words remained behind, sounding and resounding and echoing in my ears. I crouched on the floor for some time, trembling and weeping. Then I rose and washed my face and went to find the Lady Matilda.