

Carrot Top

by

Ann Head

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# Carrot Top

By Ann Head

**Mary Jane meant no harm—perhaps. But she was young and pretty and dynamite! And Johnny was over the ocean!**

Mary Jane sat opposite me at the table at the Officers' Club. Tonight, with Johnny's gardenias white against her red-gold hair, she looked beautiful. Frightened as I was, I could only hope that beauty would get her through what was going to happen to her tonight, as it had got her through so many things before.

Peter Spears sat on her right, his lean face bent toward hers, his somber eyes almost gay as they talked. Peter's wife Molly sat next to me, trying very hard to concentrate on me; trying very hard to concentrate on Lieutenant Sparks on her left; trying very hard not to look too often at the

two across the table, unable not to look. Her eyes resting on her husband's face acquired a sort of false twinkle that made you want to cry.

I was sick with indecision, tense with foreboding, completely torn between my lifelong friendship with Mary Jane and pity for Molly Spears and all women that Mary Jane had done this to before, and would again. It was far too late to prevent the emotional storm that was now brewing, unknown to everyone at this table but me; but at least it was still in my power to keep the storm from breaking in public. I couldn't save Mary Jane from Johnny's anger or the possible destruction of her marriage, but I could save her the humiliation of having everyone witness it.

Twice I started to tell her, to give her a chance to escape, but I didn't. Scrubby had been gone an hour and I'd smoked eight cigarettes and managed to drink only half my Scotch and soda. I sat with my eyes glued to the door, and every time it opened and wasn't Scrubby and Johnny, I was sorry and I was glad. Scrubby, Lieutenant Girard G. Ware of the United States Marines, and I were engaged. We hadn't been engaged long, and this was our first fight. I was still cold with anger; still thinking of all the things I should have said to him and didn't because I'd only just thought of them.

Johnny and Scrubby were best friends. They'd gone through high school together, they'd enlisted in the Marine Corps at the same time and gone through boot camp together, and been mad as the devil together when Johnny got sent out to the Pacific and Scrubby didn't. Johnny married Mary Jane about two months before he left, and they hadn't seen each other since. Tonight Johnny was coming back, and Mary Jane didn't know it. He was coming home tired and eager and God knows what else, expecting to find his bride sitting demurely in her mother's parlor.

Instead, and all because Scrubby had gone righteous and vengeful, Johnny was going to find Mary Jane here basking in the infatuated glances of Captain Spears. Scrubby thought Mary Jane had it coming to her. Scrubby thought Johnny should know. We had quarreled about it, and he was now at the airport meeting Johnny and telling him the worst, and what Johnny would do when he showed up here was anybody's guess. If he showed up at all.

You can say it all started when the boys stopped calling Mary Jane "Carrot Top" and started calling her "Gorgeous," or when she stopped walking with a hop, skip and jump and began to walk like a portrait by Brook, holding her head as though that hair of hers was a crown demanding homage, or when she stopped wearing any old thing and began dressing to

frame her hair, tailored and daring clothes, but never a buckle or a button to detract from the mass of smooth burnt copper that hung to her shoulders.

Tonight's episode started several months ago at the farewell party for Tony Hannegan.

Tony was going overseas, and Mary Jane gave an oyster roast at Berger's Beach. There was a moon that night, and the firelight made the khaki uniforms of the men rosy green, and the women's sunburned legs shone like amber. Scrubby and I sat on the roots of one of the live oaks. Scrubby had taken his cap off and was trying to put his head on my shoulder, and I kept shaking it off. He called me a horrid little spinster, and sat up.

I didn't defend that. I couldn't very well tell him that it had nothing to do with him. It was just that I still remembered too well, and that the man I remembered was his best friend and Mary Jane's husband. Besides, I knew Scrubby would tell me it was time I stopped remembering: Johnny had been Mary Jane's husband for almost two years now. Someone had brought a phonograph, and Mary Jane and Tony Hannegan were dancing in the firelight.

"I'm sure glad he's shipping out," Scrubby said, and I knew whom he meant and what he meant. But then Scrubby didn't know Mary Jane the way I knew her.

"If it isn't Tony it'll be someone else," I said morosely, when a voice at my back like the voice of doom said, "I beg your pardon, but who is the redhead?"

"The redhead?" I said vacantly, as though Mary Jane weren't the only redhead within twenty miles of the post, and looked up into the lean, oldish face of the new Captain Spears.

"Yes, the redhead dancing with Tony," he said in a trancelike voice, and I wanted to say, "Listen, Bud, she's dynamite, stay away. Besides, you've got a damned attractive wife all your own."

Instead, I said, "That's Mary Jane Elyot. Shall I introduce you? Since Johnny's been gone she works at the Post Exchange."

"Don't interrupt her now," he said. "Besides, it's Tony's last fling; he should have priorities." Pete Spears smiled, and I noticed what a boyish disarming grin he had. I'd met his wife and liked her. Molly Spears was about twenty-eight, a little older than her husband, I'd say. She wasn't pretty, but you felt that she was, she looked so alive and happy.

“Scrubby”—I kicked his horizontal shin—“fix the man an oyster. Someone’s got to get these darned Yankees started.”

Scrubby got up, saluted. “Aye, aye, commander,” he said, and sauntered off in the direction of the fire.

“What’s your connection with the post Miss——?” Captain Spears fumbled, trying to remember my name.

“Just call me Marty,” I said. “The connection is remote, something like being tenth cousin once removed to royalty. I’m Mary Jane’s best friend. Mary Jane married Lieutenant Johnny Elyot of the Marines. Mary Jane and I have both lived in Sheerwater all our lives.”

“I see,” said Captain Spears. “Molly!” he called, and somewhere out of the shadows came Molly, an oyster in each hand. “I’ll have you know I’ve met a native,” Pete Spears said. “She’s lived in Sheerwater all her life, the lucky girl.”

“I know,” Molly said. “We’ve met before. Pete and I were city children and we are *enchanted* with Sheerwater.”

“Can you imagine an Army wife *liking* her husband’s post?” Pete said. The phonograph suddenly died, and Mary Jane and Tony Hannegan joined us. That was the beginning. The way Pete Spears looked at Mary Jane and the way she didn’t look at him, and then did, sent firecrackers off in my head.

There is red hair and red hair, but Mary Jane really has it. Hers is thick and soft and slightly curly. In the daylight, with the sun on it, it is dazzling; and tonight in the firelight it gleamed like very old and much-polished copper.

Mary Jane wasn’t wicked, really; she didn’t mean to be. And it wasn’t that she didn’t love Johnny. It was simply that she liked having a good time, and being married to Johnny hadn’t changed any of that. I told myself I wouldn’t have cared if it hadn’t been Johnny. Johnny is dark and square and stocky, with the kind of blue eyes that always make you feel that he’s seeing you for the first time. Alert is the word, I guess; alert and keen. Johnny believed in God, the Marine Corps, carrying your own weight and solving your own problems. I met him first. I went out with him four times. The third time he kissed me. But the fourth time we went to a dance and he met Mary Jane. He took me home and held my hand and said, “Gee, kid, it’s been nice knowing you and I wish I was going to have time to know you better, but you see, I’m in love with Mary Jane Smith.”

I said, "It has been fun, hasn't it?" and I said, "I wish you luck with Mary Jane; she's my best friend, you see, so perhaps you will get to know me better."

Watching Mary Jane's sweet, ever-so-gay-chin-up farewell with Tony as she kept one eye on Pete Spears, watching with that familiar ache in my chest for Johnny somewhere out beneath the Pacific stars, I wondered why Mary Jane was my best friend. No two people could be more different. I decided it was something they did to us in grammar school that we'd never been able to shake off. It was always Mary and Marty, Marty and Mary. There was something indestructible about the euphony of that.

Scrubby and I drove Mary Jane home from the oyster roast. I was all set to read her the riot act about the proper behavior of an officer's wife.

"Why don't you spend the night, Marty? We can talk about the party, gossip like old times," she said. It seemed like a good idea, particularly as I had something besides gossip on my mind, and I started to get out, but Scrubby put a detaining hand on my shoulder.

"Some other time, Mary Jane," he said. "We're going out to have a look at whether the tide is coming in or going out." He didn't wait for her to protest. He shut the door and started the engine.

"I want to go home, Lieutenant Ware," I said, making my voice very firm. "I want to go home right now."

But Scrubby didn't take me home, not then. He took me down to the river's edge and pushed my shoulders back against the seat of the car and kissed me on the mouth. It was the most surprising thing that ever happened to me. I told him so, and he just laughed and said maybe if he kissed me again it wouldn't be so surprising, and it wasn't.

I was much too preoccupied during the next few weeks with the discovery that Scrubby's square hands on my shoulders could make the damnedest music in my head to pay much attention to what went on at the post. Like two people who've discovered an unexplored land, we steered clear of all the old haunts as though the sight of them might detract from this new and wonderful place we had found together.

Mary Jane brought me out of my little cocoon with a telephone call on Friday morning. "Where have you been keeping yourself?" she asked.

"In Scrubby's lap," I said.

"That's not like you," Mary Jane said. "You must be in love."

“I am,” I said, “and it’s wonderful.”

“Are you going to the Officers’ Club dance Saturday night?”

“We hadn’t thought about it,” I said.

“Well, when *we* think about it, let me know. I’d like to tag along.”

“I’m sure we’ll go,” I said, suddenly repentant. In my self-absorption I’d forgotten completely that it was an unwritten law that now Johnny was away Scrubby and I took Mary Jane to the Saturday-night dance. “We’ll pick you up about nine.”

“How about making it eight-thirty?” Mary Jane said. “The Spearses are having some people in for highballs. They told me to ask you. Molly said she’d tried to get you, but you’re always out.”

“Fine. I’ll see you then.”

Scrubby wasn’t enthusiastic. He said he’d much rather go for a walk. “Besides,” he said, “don’t you think Mary Jane is overdoing this queen of the war widows a bit?”

“Don’t be stuffy,” I said. “Let her have her fun. She’s bored and lonely without Johnny, and she’s not used to being bored or lonely.”

“Come to think of it, you were carrying the torch for Johnny for a while, weren’t you, my frustrated one?”

“A very small torch,” I said. “Besides, the beautiful men never love me. You have nothing to fear.”

So we picked up Mary Jane at eight-thirty and we went to the Spearses’ for highballs. There were only about six couples there.

I sat in a corner and waited for Scrubby to bring me a drink. Watching Molly Spears moving among her guests in a yellow evening dress, like some small energetic daffodil, I found myself wanting to know her better. Pete was standing by the phonograph with Mary Jane. She was smiling up into his face as though he’d just told her the most delightful story she’d ever heard.

There was a momentary lull in the buzz of talk and Mary Jane’s voice talking to Peter said, “But Stravinsky *is* one of the primitives. That’s what I love about him.” And the buzz began again and drowned out his answer. But my fear of the other night was gone. Peter Spears was not a man to be upset by gleaming hair and soulful talk about music. Or maybe I just didn’t care

any more. Maybe with Scrubby at my elbow, I didn't give a hang about Johnny and his lonely island in the Pacific.

"Hi, darling," I said, feeling very smug and possessive. "You certainly took a long time a-fetching this."

"I stopped in the pantry to kiss a blonde," he said, and sat down on the floor. "Your gal friend seems to be doing very well with the captain."

"They're talking music," I said.

"Now, don't get all hurt and loyal on me. I just made a chatty comment."

"I know. I suppose I sound cross because I hope Mary Jane hasn't got anything up her sleeve here. Molly and Peter Spears are nice people."

"I also like Johnny," Scrubby said. "He's too swell a guy to be made a fool of."

"We're getting morbid. Let's see if anybody is going to this dance, after all."

At the club the dance floor was crowded and Scrubby got separated from me by a second looey from Iowa. Scrubby waltzed by with Molly Spears and winked at me happily, and I saw Mary Jane's white dress going out the side door. I looked around for Pete, but he wasn't in sight.

It was finally time to go home. Scrubby grabbed my arm in a not-too-tender grip. "Never again," he said. "How are we ever going to learn how to dance together in a mob like this?"

"We must say good-by to Molly and Peter." I headed us away from the door.

"Also I suppose we must collect the glamour girl. Next time a friend of mine gets married I'm going to pick the girl. No more of this playing nursemaid to an animated cobra."

We found Molly Spears standing by the fireplace as though it were the information booth in a station where she'd been told to meet someone who would be wearing a red carnation. Her eyes had a wistful searching look. Just as we got to her, Peter and Mary Jane appeared from somewhere and walked up to her. "Hello, darling." Peter put his arm around her. "You look all lost. Mary Jane and I have been walking. She says there's a spot about half a block from here where you can dig for arrowheads."

"So it's arrowheads this time!" Scrubby said, the minute we were in the jalopy. "Listen, glamour puss," he said, and I put a silencing, hand on his

arm.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mary Jane said. “And if I did, I’d tell you to mind your own business.”

“Sweet dreams, Johnny Elyot; kiss the Japs good night while your wife is excavating for arrowheads with another woman’s husband,” murmured Scrubby. I expected Mary Jane to burst into tears or lose her temper, but she just sat very still and said nothing.

“Not to change the subject,” I said, “Scrubby has had the poor judgment to ask me to marry him, and I’ve had the good judgment to accept with alacrity, poor lad.”

“Oh, Marty, I’m so glad.” She squeezed my hand, and her voice sounded really glad. For a minute it was as though she were the hoydenish friend of my childhood. “I hope you’ll be as happy as Johnny and I were,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘were’?” Scrubby said.

“I mean *are*.” Mary Jane sounded bewildered, like a child being chastised for an obscure mistake in grammar.

The next time Scrubby and I ran into Mary Jane at the Officers’ Club she was sitting at a table between Pete Spears and a new lieutenant I hadn’t met before. Molly Spears beckoned to us to join them with what looked to me like a desperate wave of the hand. I didn’t really need to watch Mary Jane and Peter to see what had been happening. Molly’s face told the tale. Her eyes had tight lines at the corners, and her mouth looked drawn and tired.

Mary Jane had on a demure white piqué; her hair was drawn back behind her ears and cascaded to her shoulders in a smooth ribbonlike mass. When we sat down she made some comment about the lovebird and went on reading bits of a letter she’d just received from Johnny. She would read a line or two aloud and then silently to herself for a while, a wistful smile playing around her mouth. If it weren’t for the lost intensity of the man beside her every time his eyes rested on her, I could have enjoyed the picture.

“Mary Jane tells us that you and Scrubby are officially in love.” Molly smiled at me, and Peter dragged his eyes away from Mary Jane to grin at us.

“Yeah,” Scrubby said. “The trap is sprung. Marty wants us to get married right away, but I may be sent overseas any day now. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“Maybe not fair,” I said, “but safer.”

“Don’t be sissies, you two,” Mary Jane said. “Half a loaf is better than none.”

“Is it?” I said, and her eyes shifted from mine.

“Don’t be silly. Of course it is,” she said, folding the letter from Johnny.

When we left they were still sitting there, Molly Spears and the odd lieutenant and Mary Jane and Peter.

We’d no sooner got in the car than Scrubby stepped on the starter and said, “Dammit, I’m going to write to Johnny and tell him his wife should be tarred and feathered.”

“Mary Jane’s harmless,” I said, “and you know it. Foolish, maybe, and self-centered, but she loves Johnny. Why upset him when there’s nothing he can do about it?”

“There’s plenty he can do about it, and besides, harmless as you say she is, she’s breaking up a good marriage. She’s hurting another woman and she’s going to hurt a couple of swell guys.”

“You’re dramatizing things,” I said. “She’s flirting with Peter and Peter’s liking it—who wouldn’t?—but it isn’t going to break up *that* marriage.”

“Listen, little girl,” Scrubby said. “I don’t know what you think about marriage, but right now I think it’s a very special business. And from the first time I met the couple Spears I thought: Now, there is a marriage. It looked strong.”

“It *is* strong,” I protested.

“It looked strong,” Scrubby went on. “And that didn’t have anything to do with holding hands in public or cozy looks across a dinner table. It looked like years of co-operation, hard work and liking each other a hell of a lot.”

“No redhead with glamour in her eyes is going to break that up,” I said.

“Not break it up but change it. She’s already done something to Molly, and she’s doing plenty to Peter. He’s not used to feeling disloyal or wanting another woman so much he’s willing to hurt Molly. It won’t be the same ever again for Molly or Peter, and it isn’t right.”

“Telling Johnny about it certainly isn’t going to help that.”

“It won’t help what’s done,” Scrubby said, “but it would keep it from ever happening again if I know Johnny.” And I suddenly saw Johnny getting

this letter from Scrubby, and the blue eyes clouding with hurt, and I couldn't stand it.

"No," I said, "you mustn't! It would be too cruel!" I must have shouted it.

Scrubby said, "Okay, baby, have it your way. But for God's sake, stop screaming." We drove home in silence. He didn't even kiss me good night.

I lay awake a long time that night thinking and remembering. I remembered Mary Jane at our first dance, and how scared she'd been, and then the sparkle in her tawny eyes when she'd discovered she was a success. I thought of many dances after that, Mary Jane always the center of everything.

I remembered one night when I'd been spending the night with Mary Jane and we went out with two boys from Duke—men, we called them. We started home at eleven, the correct hour for sixteen-year-olds, and halfway home Mary Jane decided it would be fun to go for a sail. The boys responded like trained and bewitched seals, and we unmoored someone's boat and went for a sail. We got home at four A.M. Mary Jane's mother was waiting for us with all the lights blazing. She said some harsh things, and I wanted to crawl into a corner and hide, but Mary Jane listened without moving a muscle and when her mother was through said quite calmly, "Is that all, Mother?" Mrs. Smith said weakly that that was all, and Mary Jane left the room.

Mrs. Smith detained me. "Those things I said were not for you, Marty. I know only too well whose fault it was tonight." And then she sighed. "Mary Jane doesn't mean any harm, she's really a sweet child, just too excitable and exciting. She needs a very firm hand."

That was it, I told myself; Mary Jane did need a strong hand and where was she going to get it? I finally went to sleep thinking not of Mary Jane, but of Scrubby and how cross he'd been.

I awoke the next morning to the alarm-clock jangle of the telephone. That would be Scrubby, I thought, all apologetic and bubbling over with love and nonsense again. It was Scrubby, all right, but he sounded angrier than ever. "How are you this bright and dazzling morning?" he said. "I've been up all night holding Molly Spears' hand while that bat-brained friend of yours drove to Charleston with Pete Spears just because Pete said it couldn't be done in an hour and a half, and Mary Jane said it could."

"Was it done in an hour and a half?"

“Good Lord, you don’t mean to tell me you believe that yarn? Even Molly couldn’t quite swallow that.”

“Oddly enough, I do believe it,” I said, remembering Mary Jane’s weakness for little adventures. “But,” I added weakly, “I don’t suppose that makes much difference. It was a silly thing for her to do, and I’m surprised Peter would let her.”

“Let her! The poor guy doesn’t know whether he’s going or coming when she’s around. She waves that red hair in his face and he’s off to Charleston. Something’s got to be done and right away.”

“What, for instance?” If Mary Jane really were a scheming woman with designs on another woman’s husband, it would have been almost easy; but Mary Jane was a smug and self-assured child with a new toy. What she needed was to grow up enough not to want toys any more, and how were you going to make her do that overnight?

“I don’t know what,” Scrubby said. “That’s for you to figure out. But something!” He plunged down the receiver. I was shaking with anger. Maybe Johnny was his best friend, and maybe he was feeling poetical about marriage and Peter and Molly Spears, but I hadn’t done anything. Not one damned thing.

I was still in this state of impotent fury and trying to get dressed when the telegraph boy arrived. It was a long wire for me from Washington. It was signed “Johnny.” I didn’t wait to read it more than once before dashing to the phone.

“Everything’s going to be all right,” I told the bewildered Scrubby. “Johnny’s got a leave. He’s coming in tonight, he’s in Washington now, and he wired me because he didn’t want Mary Jane to know. He wanted to just walk in and——”

“Whoa!” Scrubby yelled. “What’s all this? Johnny’s got a leave, you say?”

“Yes, and he’ll be here tonight. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“That’s swell,” Scrubby said. “Gosh, it’ll be good to see the old son of a gun again. But why did he wire you?”

“Because he wants to surprise Mary Jane,” I repeated patiently.

“I suppose he has a vision of Mary Jane sitting in the Smith parlor with her hands folded in her lap.”

“Something like that,” I murmured.

“Well, it so happens he’ll find Mary Jane at the Officers’ Club cozily seated between Captain Spears and one Lieutenant Sparks imbibing a rum Collins while Molly Spears drinks orange juice.”

“Oh,” I said. “In that case we’ll have to tell her. She must be at home when he comes.”

“Not on your life!” Scrubby said. “She’s going to be just where she planned to be, and Lieutenant Ware is going to appoint himself a committee of one to meet Johnny at the airport and escort him to said rendezvous!”

“No! You couldn’t be so cruel. You might at least consider Johnny.”

“Listen, little girl, I *am* thinking of Johnny. This business of what you don’t know won’t hurt you is rubbish.”

“You’re going to break Mary Jane’s heart and ruin a perfectly good marriage, and I hate you!” I sputtered.

“Okay, baby, hate away. I’m going to meet Johnny and I’m going to tell him, and from there on in it’s up to him. You’re always babbling that all Mary Jane needs is to grow up; well, I’m going to give her the chance. I’ll pick you up tonight at seven. Good-by.”

And so here we sat around the small square table at the Officers’ Club, Molly and Peter Spears, Mary Jane and one Lieutenant Sparks. They were having fun, all of them except Molly Spears and me. My eyes were becoming blurred and bloodshot from gazing at the door.

And as it turned out, I didn’t see them when they did come. I was lighting a cigarette and the Sparks man was holding a match for me. I lifted my head. I saw Mary Jane’s face, and I knew. Her eyes had gone suddenly round and unbelieving and radiant. It was obvious that the moment that door opened everyone else in that room, as far as Mary Jane was concerned, ceased to exist. In that moment I wanted to scream across the room to Scrubby; I wanted to say, “Now, see what you’ve done. Just see!” But it was already done, so I just sat and watched the two men coming toward us.

As they neared the table Mary Jane half rose in her chair and held out her hands. She said, “Johnny,” but her voice was a whisper and I don’t think he heard. Johnny didn’t look at her. Scrubby introduced him to Molly and Peter Spears and Lieutenant Sparks. Mary Jane sank back into her chair, her face pale, her eyes searching Johnny’s face for some clue to what was happening.

Johnny bowed low over Molly Spears' hand. "I have an apology to make you," he said, smiling into Molly's troubled face. "I hear my wife has caused you some inconvenience and embarrassment. I wish to apologize for her. She's very young; she hasn't been married long, and she doesn't know yet what happens to the wives of Johnny Elyot when they don't behave like ladies." He turned to Scrubby. "The shears, please," he said, and Scrubby, like the best man with the ring, produced a pair of barber's scissors. And while we all watched, Johnny swept Mary Jane's beautiful gleaming hair back from her face and chopped it off.

Mary Jane did not move or make a sound. I have to hand it to her, any other woman would have squirmed or cried out, but she didn't even flinch as a large lock fell on her shoulder and dropped to her lap; she looked at it, kept her eyes fixed on it. When Johnny had finished we tried out of decency not to look at her, but we couldn't help it. He'd done a beautiful job. He had cut it short and uneven, and it hung in little short wisps across her forehead. She looked like Raggedy Ann. No one said anything, and still Mary Jane didn't move. Johnny gave the scissors back to Scrubby, held out his hand and drew her to her feet. His eyes were neither angry nor resentful.

"I think, darling, that you are beautiful," he said, and you knew he meant it. "And now, tell all these nice people good-by, because we're going home."

She looked up at him then and their eyes met and they smiled, the tall, scrawny girl with the limp wisps of carrot hair and the dark blue-eyed youth. Johnny put his arm around her shoulders and she leaned her head back against his arm as they walked. When the door closed behind them no one said a word, but Scrubby squeezed my hand under the table and I knew exactly what he meant.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Carrot Top* by Anne Christensen Morse (as Ann Head)]