

## Gordon C - Continuation

For the rest of the evening, Fred sat in simmering silence while Connie positively glowed. Every few minutes someone would wander over to their table and say something infuriatingly cheerful like, “Well done, Connie!” or “Lucky girl!” or, worst of all, “I bet Fred’s worried now!”

Fred laughed the tight little laugh of a man whose blood pressure was entering a medically interesting zone. On the drive home, Connie hummed happily while Fred gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles looked polished.

“It’s degrading,” he muttered eventually.

“What is?”

“That... that oiled-up bloke.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. It’s just a bit of fun.”

“He was wearing a leather nappy.”

“It was a loin cloth.”

“It was a leather nappy,” repeated Fred stubbornly. “And anyway, what’s a ‘slave for a day’ supposed to mean?”

Connie smiled out of the car window. “I imagine he does whatever I want. Fred nearly mounted a roundabout. For the next two weeks Marcus became the unspoken third person in the marriage.

Connie made matters worse. She would casually leave the leaflet about the prize lying around the house. Fred would find it on the kitchen table, on the arm of his chair, once even tucked inside the gardening magazine he was reading. Across the top, in bold gold lettering, it read:

**“MANPOWER EVENTS PRESENTS:  
MARCUS – YOUR PERSONAL SLAVE FOR THE DAY!”**

Below was a photograph of Marcus posing beside a Roman pillar while staring moodily into the middle distance. Fred hated him on sight.

Connie, meanwhile, appeared to be rejuvenated by the entire thing. She booked a hair appointment. She even joined a gym, though after one yoga class she announced she had “pulled something internal” and retired permanently.

Finally, the day arrived. Fred had spent the previous evening trying to persuade Connie to exchange the prize for “something sensible.”

“Maybe they’d give you a hamper instead,” he suggested hopefully. “I don’t want a hamper,” retorted Connie.

“Everyone likes hampers.”

“I’ve won Marcus!”

At precisely nine o’clock the doorbell rang. Connie opened the door and there stood Marcus. In daylight he somehow looked even more absurdly handsome. He wore tight black jeans, boots polished to a mirror shine and a fitted white T-shirt stretched across a chest that appeared to have been carved from expensive marble.

“Good morning,” he said, flashing perfect teeth. “I’m Marcus.”

Connie actually fluttered. Fred, standing behind her in his dressing gown and slippers, looked like a hostage.

Marcus handed over a printed sheet.

“These are the services included in the package,” he explained professionally. “Household chores, gardening, light decorating, massage therapy, chauffeuring, personal fitness coaching and companion activities.”

Fred’s eyebrows shot up. “Massage therapy?”

“It’s very popular,” said Marcus.

“Well, not in this house.” Connie ignored him. “Wonderful! Come in.”

Marcus stepped inside and immediately had to duck as Fred’s hanging basket crashed from its hook in the porch and narrowly missed his head.

“Bloody thing,” said Fred, though privately he considered it an encouraging start.

Connie had planned the day meticulously. First, Marcus was to help in the garden. Fred watched from the kitchen window while Marcus effortlessly lifted enormous bags of compost and trimmed hedges with infuriating competence. Connie followed him around offering lemonade and laughing far too much.

Meanwhile Fred sat at the table peeling labels off a beer bottle and imagining several tragic accidents involving lawn strimmers.

Things worsened around lunchtime. “I thought perhaps Marcus could help me paint the spare room,” said Connie brightly. Fred snorted. “That’ll ruin his manicure.”

Marcus smiled pleasantly. “Actually, sir, I used to work in construction.”

“Of course you did,” muttered Fred.

Upstairs, sounds of laughter drifted down through the ceiling while Fred sulked over a cheese sandwich. Eventually curiosity got the better of him and he crept upstairs. The spare room door was ajar.

Inside, Marcus stood balanced easily on a stepladder, rolling paint onto the wall with smooth efficiency. Connie, standing below in old jeans and one of Fred's shirts, had a streak of magnolia paint across her cheek.

She looked... happy.

Fred suddenly felt ancient. Then the stepladder wobbled. Marcus windmilled alarmingly. Connie shrieked.

Without thinking, Fred charged into the room and grabbed the ladder just before Marcus toppled sideways into the wardrobe.

There was a brief silence. "Nice catch, sir," said Marcus.

Fred straightened up. "Well. Yes. Safety first." Connie looked impressed. "That was quick thinking, Fred."

For the first time that day, Fred felt slightly better. Then came the massage.

"Absolutely not," declared Fred. "Oh don't be ridiculous," said Connie. "It's included."

"I don't care!" brooded Fred.

"It's only shoulders and neck." Fred folded his arms. "No."

Marcus, to his credit, looked deeply uncomfortable. "I assure you, sir, it's entirely professional." "That's what worries me." In the end, Connie won, as she always did.

Fred sat in the kitchen fuming while Marcus gave Connie a massage in the sitting room. At least, that's what Fred assumed was happening until, after ten minutes, he heard Connie yell, "OW!"

He burst into the room. Connie was folded awkwardly over the armchair while Marcus looked alarmed.

"My shoulder's cramping!" she gasped. "I think the muscle seized," said Marcus anxiously. Connie attempted to stand and immediately yelped again.

"Oh marvellous," said Fred. "Paralysed by Fabio." In the end, it was Fred who fetched the hot water bottle, found the paracetamol, and helped Connie shuffle upstairs to lie down.

Marcus hovered apologetically nearby. "I'm terribly sorry." "It's not your fault," Connie groaned. Fred tried, and failed, to suppress a smile.

The afternoon descended rapidly into chaos. The paint tin got knocked over onto the landing carpet. The dog from next door escaped into their garden and chased Marcus through Connie's flowerbeds. Marcus attempted to repair the broken washing line but somehow snapped the entire post off at ground level. Then, while trying to cook a "light Mediterranean lunch," he set fire to a tea towel.

By four o'clock, Fred was feeling vastly more cheerful. Marcus, however, looked exhausted and slightly traumatised. "I don't understand," he admitted quietly while scrubbing smoke marks off the hob. "Usually, these days are very relaxing."

Fred gave a philosophical nod. "Houses know," he said. "They sense weakness." To Fred's astonishment, Marcus laughed. And rather unexpectedly, Fred found himself warming to him. By early evening the three of them were sitting in the kitchen drinking tea amidst the wreckage of the day.

Connie's shoulder was bandaged with a heat wrap. The spare room smelled strongly of wet paint. The washing line leaned drunkenly across the garden like a defeated telegraph pole. Marcus sighed. "I think this has been my worst booking ever." "Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Fred cheerfully.

Connie shot him a look. Marcus rubbed his forehead. "Last month I worked for a retired headmistress in Surrey. She made me alphabetise her spice rack while dressed as a gladiator." Fred blinked. "You're joking." "I wish I was," sighed Marcus.

Connie began laughing. Then Fred laughed too. Soon all three of them were helpless with it. The absurdity of the whole thing suddenly burst like a balloon. When they finally calmed down, Marcus glanced at his watch. "Well, my time's nearly up."

Connie smiled. "Thank you. Despite everything, it's been... memorable." "Yes," agreed Fred. "I haven't enjoyed myself this much in years." Connie stared at him in surprise.

Marcus gathered his bag and headed for the door. Then he paused. "Oh, I nearly forgot. Every raffle winner also gets a complimentary photo package." Before anyone could object, he pulled a small remote from his pocket. A bright flash exploded from the hallway.

"What the devil was that?" shouted Fred. Marcus grinned sheepishly. "Hidden promotional camera. The company likes candid souvenir shots." "A hidden camera?" barked Fred.

"It activates automatically during the day." Connie looked horrified. "You mean it's been taking photographs all day?" "I'm afraid so," admitted Marcus.

Three days later an envelope arrived. Inside were twelve glossy photographs. There was Marcus posing heroically with hedge clippers, Marcus running from the neighbour's dog, Marcus extinguishing the burning tea towel, Connie grimacing in agony during the massage, and, most unfortunately of all, one perfectly timed picture of

Fred peering through the sitting room door with such naked jealousy and suspicion that he resembled an elderly meerkat.

Connie laughed so hard she nearly injured her shoulder again. But the final photograph was the masterpiece. Taken during the stepladder incident, it showed Marcus wobbling dramatically, Connie screaming in panic and Fred lunging forward in his dressing gown, one slipper flying through the air behind him.

Across the bottom, in elegant gold lettering, the company had added their slogan:

“MARCUS, ENHANCING MARRIAGES ONE HOUSEHOLD AT A TIME.”

1449 words.