

## REMIND ME NOT TO FIND YOU SO ATTRACTIVE

One does not, in America today, have the country-house experience every weekend. Firstly, who can provide it? Typically robber barons and Hollywood types have essayed it, from Newport to Santa Fe. But with all the glorious landscape that American Provvy provides, these types still don't build the genuine article. Nor do yoga and para-sailing seem as authentic as hunting the fox or murdering Lord Bletchley. West Lake Road, however, was a revelation...

"If you came up to do some shooting," Shemp Hahn said from the head of the table, "you can go on down to the lake tomorrow, maybe shoot a fish, I guess."

Down the table Larry Berkowitz, who of course had brought no dinner clothes, gaped like a bass looking down the barrel. In sly anticipation, I had packed extra for my pal a never-worn gift from my late Granny Victoria. It was a herringbone tweed shooting jacket whose Size 42 shoulders over-topped the smaller man like a tent, and whose leather rifle pad 'twixt breast and shoulder was the exclamation point on a glaring *faux pas*.

I chuckled innocently at my host's gibe. "One thinks, sir, of Hemingway, his sharks, and his submachine gun. Getting for his bad sportsmanship, and God anyway loving the sharks more, a bullet through his own leg."

Larry, in snatching up his water glass, dinged it dissonantly against the wine glass. After taking a gulp, he looked accusingly at me.

“Well,” said Barbara Hahn, the mother, “I think Larry is quite devastatingly debonair in it, and I won’t hear a thing against him.” With her left hand she patted Larry’s right.

As a gentleman I would not put a pal in play like this if Larry had anything much at stake here. True, I needed a bit of cover for a really quite delicate passage, and this gave me some. The test would come, and need to be faced out, but punting it now into the second day seemed quite right. Now I owed Larry some relief.

“Well, madame, we can chaff him a bit, because our Larry’s quite the hot ticket just now. Saved a classroom from a vicious miscreant and got rewarded with tenure.”

This felt jolly coming out, but as I looked across the table I saw Carrie’s eyes welling moistly as of betrayal. Oh bloody hell!

She dropped her napkin, backed her chair out, and fled the room.

I was on my feet too. What a blunder to commit, after one mere glass of wine!

To follow her myself, married as I still was and in her father’s house, was a bit pushing it. But follow I did, and up the stairs. I did not stop before I entered the room into which the girl ducked, filled with pictures of Carrie and horses, Carrie and classmates, Carrie and parents.

She had dived onto the bed, face down upon the pillow.

I did not dive after. There at least, decorum reasserted itself. I parked half a posterior onto the bed’s edge and took Carrie’s hand.

She turned her bleary face to me. “I haven’t *told* them I didn’t get tenure! Now you’ve messed things up.”

I pressed her hand between both of mine and held the knuckles to my lips.

“I should have known it. People who talk all the time don’t know anything. People like us, who don’t talk, are supposed to just know. What a drunken swine I am.”

She turned onto her back. Our eyes registered that we had never “been here” before.

“Are you drunk really?” She seemed to want me so. But did she want me to lie about it?

I only gave a gentle, ambiguous grunt. By remembering how not to talk, perhaps I’d start to “know” things again.

“Oh,” she said, putting her hands round my neck, “let’s just do what we want.”

There was a creak from the stairs. With a hand under Carrie’s lower back, I lifted her gently from the bed...

Well, we had kissed before. We had held hands, and snuggled on couches. But we had not kissed as we did now, standing, in the girl’s oldest lair and sanctuary. It was better than talk, of course, and better even than knowing.

Barbara Hahn appeared in the doorway. My arms round Carrie, my chin in her hair, I stood facing the mother. It is to be inferred that from tip to toe I was presently “knowing” a thing or two.

“Why, children, what’s wrong?”

Carrie’s arms dropped from me but she did not turn. “Nothing, Mother.”

All must do their duty now, above all the elders. The mother must needs return downstairs and withhold disapproval till alone with the daughter. The married, no doubt confused gentleman must withdraw, and the gentle maiden must modestly let arms and eyes drop floorward.

It is sad to report that only the youngest did her duty. Barbara Hahn in her emerald green dress walked brazenly forward. I, with nothing tending floorward, watched her approach as I stood clutching Carrie.

“You darlings,” the mother said, covering my hand as it rested on Carrie’s back. Then she kissed Carrie softly on the temple. “Come back to dinner. Nothing could ever be wrong.” She was looking now at me.

Feeling Carrie’s perfect little body in my hands, looking into the mother’s china eyes and brilliant gapped smile, the blazing aureole of her lioness’ mane, I experienced an Event...

“Oh, I say.”

No decent narrative treats of such, but the better reader will gain sense by recalling the medical jargon phrase Cardiac Event, then imagining something further south that is the opposite of painful.

“Better said than done,” said young Carrie in a frozen whisper.

“Really, do come,” Barbara Hahn said. “Father and Larry will be missing us.”

I still held to Carrie as if stuck, which embarrassed pose would by and by produce its own foreshadowed reality.

Carrie spoke more sharply. “We’ll be right there, Mother. Please.”

Barbara Hahn, still smiling at me, took a step back.

“Of course, dear. If Mr. Chesterfield can tear himself away.” And then she was gone.

We lovers gingerly broke.

“Sorry, love. Have you... taken friendly fire?”

Carrie’s eyes were drilling into mine. I’m for it now, I thought with chagrin.

“I dearly love you,” she said instead.

“Forever!” I said, and reached for her again, to be met with a lovely stiff-arm to the chest.

“Down the back staircase!” she said, and took me by the hand. “We’ll get you out back and changed in a jiffy!”

Well, we’d dashed pell-mell through kitchens before, it was our first romantic notion, and the housekeeper and cook Juanita whirled and clucked “Ah mi!” as we flew by and Carrie shoved me out the back door to the stables.

Minutes later I re-entered the dining room. My fresh sail-cloth chinos were the violent negative to the dark dress slacks I’d last been seen in.

Larry goggled at me in the old bassy way. Carrie and Barbara dipped demurely into their soup, the mother with a slight smile curling at her lovely mouth’s corners.

Shemp Hahn only glanced up from his stuffed lamb chop.

“You guys are like broads already with the wardrobe changes.”