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FAMILY MAN

He was an oddball, that one—old Eddie Elstein, multimillionaire, with fuzzy russet hair (what there was of it), and pink cheeked, with a stammer. He liked to play games. Hustlers were the only persons he liked. I'm not one and have never been one, but with him I had to be. That seemed to be the way he got his kicks—that, and having me steal things from him. Every time I went to see him, he left little gewgaws and trinkets around his expensive apartment for me to pilfer. It was all part of the «game». And he insisted that I dress a hustler, too, with tight light-colored levis, black leather jacket, boots, and motorcycle cap. I had to act tough and fill my pockets—and it sometimes tickled me so much I could hardly keep a straight face, because I kept thinking of Felix Krull and his adventures as a bell-boy with the woman who kept imploring him: «Rob me, sweet—rob me!» I even had to be known to Eddie by another name, so that in his alcoholic fantasies I'd be what he wanted. I picked the name «Duke Savage» and thought it tough enough for the image he had created of me.

Lord, what fools we mortals be!

Anyway, we were standing in the vestibule of his elegantly furnished apartment, and Eddie reached into the pocket of his moiré-silk dressing-gown and pulled out a twenty dollar bill and gave it to me, smiling toothily. I stuffed it in my pocket on top of a cheap Timex wrist-watch, a pair of cufflinks, a tie-tack of a skull's head, a small silver box (all the loot he had placed out for me that time), and waited for his final parting formula.

«Take the service elevator down, will you, kiddo?» he said boozily. «See you in two weeks.»

«Yeah, yeah,» I growled in character, adding under my breath, «Gr-r-r, there you go, my heart's abhorrence,» wishing I could make it sound as nasty as Browning did when he wrote about the monk in the Spanish cloister. I hated the wealthy old pink fruit with his russet-fuzz hair, but no man is an island, and if he got his jollies out of my pilfering and out of paying me—well, good luck to him.

He closed the door and I headed towards the service elevator. Even the well-constructed «glass house» he lived in, there on the Gold Coast in Chicago, was not designed to be sound-proof against the March wind outside. The gale howled and the windows gave with the wind, so that the glass seemed to be bending inwards, and the outside landscape curved and wavered in the storm.

I took the service elevator straight to the basement, where the cold had really come in. The tenants' garage was drafty. I had almost been tempted to wear long-johns under my levis, but Eddie hadn't read enough Genet to approve of that; the image would have been shattered. My legs had to freeze in the cold, for long underwear would have turned him off completely.

Someone in the garage was trying to start a car, and the battery was down. I looked over towards the feebly laboring motor, and saw that the car was a small steel-grey Corvette, a very expensive one. Behind the wheel was a woman with white hair. I gave her a glance and then zippered up my black leather jacket, and headed for the ramp that would take me out into the snow and wind.

Suddenly I heard her call, «Young man!»

Flattery of that sort may get you more than you can handle, I thought, but I turned and walked over to her.

«Yes, ma'am,» I said. «What seems to be the trouble?»

There was irritation on her face, and a frown. She looked up at me. It's wonderful what they can do to gals nowadays in beauty salons. She must have been in her middle fifties, wearing a chic little black hat, a half-veil over her eyes, and an expensive dark mink coat—but she looked to be somewhere in her late thirties, firm and well-stacked.

«I can't get this thing started,» she said. She smiled then, and it made her quite attractive—for a female. Her face lighted with a pale radiance. She was carefully coiffured, with her hair showing just the faintest touch of a blue rinse, a very light blue, and lying in wide waves. Her skin was smooth and a little pink from the cold. She had not only the tone of authority and wealth in her voice, but a kind of low husky timbre which may just have come from a sore throat. It was a voice which projected well, with all three resonators working. There was something queenlike about her—a sort of *air altier*, or grand air, as the French put it. But behind the façade all I could see was the gaping hole, the mizzenmast cut off and the edges tucked in.

«Your battery's down, ma'am,» I said.

«Oh . . .» She bit her lower lip in frustration. «And I'm due at the Arts Club in thirty minutes.» Then she turned and really opened up that brilliant smile on me. «Do you think there's anything you can do to help me?»

I looked around. A battery-jumper hung on the garage-wall, part of the standard winter equipment everywhere in weather like this.

I pushed my motorcycle cap back on my forehead a little. Everything about her said «I've got dough,» in a tone loud enough for me to hear. I can't deny I'm a money-witch, or money-warlock if that makes the gender more exact. With my divining-rod I can sense it everywhere it exists.

«I think I can, ma'am,» I said respectfully. «If you'll just climb out we'll steal a jolt from that Cadillac over there, and nobody'll ever know the difference.» It would probably leave the owner with a dead battery, but what the hell.

She put one leg, very shapely, out the door. Underneath the mink coat I saw a very well-tailored and expensive black suit. I loosened the brake on her car, guiding it with one hand, and slowly managed to push it across the level floor towards the big Caddy, up alongside. Then I got the jumper-cord from the wall, raised the hoods of both cars, and attached the cord-clips to the Caddy's battery and to hers. There was a gratifying spark, and she jumped a little. I started her motor to pull the juice in.

«Heavens!» she said. Then she peered through her pince-nez at the motor. She turned to me and smiled again. «Oh,» she said. «I wish my batteries could be recharged as simply as that.»

It nearly broke me up. I laughed hard, and got out and leaned against the fender, for the inflection she gave the words indicated that she was not talking about a car's battery. She laughed too—a hearty deep-throated one. I decided she didn't have tonsillitis after all.

When I got my breath back I grinned down at her. She was a fairly tall woman, but I had about six inches on her. «It's not really recharging, using a jumper like that,» I said. «It's more just a jolt ma'am.»

«Well, whatever it is, I could use one too,» she said, and I laughed again. There is a kind of way the rich have of talking in double meanings that is funny without being coarse. It was all the more incongruous to hear this lady, so soi-

gnée, hinting at things you might expect a female tramp in a Clark Street bar to be saying.

« . . . and for pity's sake, quit calling me 'ma'am',» she said. «It reminds me of the days when I was teaching French. My name's Victoria Chase, and I'm a widow. And even though I have a grown son, I'm not *that* old. Besides, 'ma'am' reminds me of all those dirty little children in high school.»

«The state of being a widow,» I said, «is one of the happiest known to women. I, I call myself Duke Savage, and I am enchanted to make your acquaintance.»

Her mouth fell open. I guess I really rocked her, because I said the sentence in as flawless French as I could muster.

«Mon Dieu,» she said—and from then on we used French. «What in the name of heaven is a young man like you, in those clothes, doing down here in this garage?»

«I was visiting a friend above,» I said. I turned off the motor, disconnected the jumper, and closed the hoods. «And now if Madame Chase will be so kind as to try the car again, I am sure it will march.»

She pulled the mink around her and slid in, quite gracefully. She stepped on the starter and the motor turned over at once. I closed the door for her and she looked up at me.

Oh, the delicacy of the French language! «You are much too... accomplished,» she said, pausing a moment for the right word, «to be left in a garage. I am going towards the Loop. Could I give you a lift?» And then as an afterthought she reached into her purse. I caught a glimpse of greenery, and she handed me a five-dollar bill. I shook my head, wise old money-witch that Eddie had made me. To have taken it would have closed her door and stopped her interest in me.

«No, for the money,» I said, and grinned down at her, «but yes, for the ride.»

«Get in, please,» she said, and motioned to the other side. I went around the back, opened the door, and climbed in. She started up the ramp, and we drove out into the fury of the blizzard.

«I . . . am more astonished than I have been for years,» she said, looking sideways at me for a moment. I watched her eyes travel down the tight jeans, take in the boots and jacket, and flicker ever so briefly over the considerable bulge that made me a man.

«Why, Madame?» I said. «I have lived in Paris for a little while . . .»

«So, as I thought,» she said. «Your accent is Parisian. What do you think mine is?»

We turned on to Michigan Boulevard and headed south. «As nearly as I can tell,» I said, «I believe that you were educated in Switzerland, probably in Geneva.»

It was evidently a lucky guess, because the remark nearly sent her sliding through a red light. While we were stopped, she opened her purse and felt inside. She extracted a calling card and gave it to me.

«Astonishing,» she said. «You are exactly right. It was Geneva. Will you come to have dinner with me in my apartment on Thursday evening?»

That was the evening a friend and I had planned to go to a movie, but this was too good to miss. «But Madame Chase,» I began, looking down at myself, «I am only a simple working-man and do not have the clothes . . .» I could never have explained the 'game' to her.

The light changed and she started up again. We were approaching the Michigan Avenue bridge. In the middle of it she said, «If you had been wearing a Brooks' Brothers' suit, I would never have asked you.» She smiled at me. «This is as far as I go,» she said, drawing to the curb. «I would like to take you farther on your way, but I—»

«Madame has taken me to my destination,» I said, and smiled at her in return. I don't know whether she caught the meaning I put into the words. «I shall be happy to come to dinner . . . at what hour?»

«Will eight be all right?» she said, and I nodded.

«And thank you, Madame Chase,» I said, my cap off and the snowflakes, I knew, falling on my black hair. «It has been more than a pleasure.»

«How much you will not ever know, Mr. Savage,» she said. I shut the door and she turned right, out of the stream of traffic. Her small grey car was soon swallowed in the clouds of swirling white that blew around the corner.

I smiled a little to myself, put on my cap, and headed north into the teeth of the wind and snow.

*

These things I love, with a passion: an excellent meal, well-served; a log-fire licking at brass and irons; the proper wines properly chilled; warmth and good company and good talk; and the wind whistling around the floor-to-ceiling windows.

«Well,» she said, «it's the great wild leader . . . or the timid one,» she laughed, speaking English.

«How so?» I said, stomping a little. I had taken most of the snow off my boots on the way up in the service elevator from the garage.

She chuckled a little. «'Duke'—that means 'great leader'. And 'Savage'—that's from the French and means either wild or timid. You look Italian. Are you?»

«Yes, I am,» I said.

«I'll take your jacket,» she said. I hove it off and gave it to her, sprinkling diamonds of melted snow on the costly grey Aubusson carpet. That left me in a good uniform: a bulky black turtleneck sweater that I had bought in Paris, black levis, and boots. I had done a lot of thinking, and decided that that's what she wanted. I hadn't even cut my sideburns shorter for the occasion; they were as long and Edwardian and thick as ever. And it was interesting to hear her translate my name. Not many of my acquaintances had ever had brains enough to pull it apart like that.

It was a perfect meal, and a perfect evening. She had an excellent stereo, and we listened to some records and sat looking at the fire and talking. Of what? A thousand things: Japanese war-lords, Siegfried's lime-leaf, the meaning of the Greek word *olisbos*, the death of tattooing, of Druid curses and rites and Stonehenge, and the nature of the Eleusinian mysteries. Such surroundings and food and wine always induce a kind of lazy sensuality in me, and I sometimes wish that they might be mine forever.

The evening had one major surprise, one minor. The major one came about nine-thirty, as we were having a demi-tasse of thick black rich Turkish coffee in front of the fire. The door opened and a young man came in. I had just swallowed, which was lucky, else I might have choked, for he was in a black sailor's uniform.

«This is my son, Peter,» she said, introducing us. I stood up to shake hands with him. He had a firm dry grasp.

«This is the extraordinary young man in the garage,» Vicky said. «Duke Savage—he says.»

«Quite a find,» Peter murmured, looking at me.

«Ah, you're both outa your heads,» I muttered, staying in character. I realized that I was staring at him just as much as he was at me. He was extremely good-looking, with dark touseled hair, and one of those lithe rangy bodies that you associate with cowboys or swimmers. I guess he was about an inch shorter than I was. His uniform was well-tailored—no GI issue that one—and clung to him tight as a black skin in all the right places. His chin was square, and I figured him to be about twenty-five. Was I wrong, or did his eyes return twice to my crotch? Mine visited him at least three times, and I pulled them back to his face only with difficulty.

It takes one to know one, they always say. I think Pete knew it at once, as I did.

«Pete's home on a thirty-day leave,» Victoria said. «Then he's headed for HongKong . . . Are you going out tonight, darling?» she asked him.

«Yes, I am,» he said, smiling and looking directly at me. «I'm going over to the Shore Line 7, and Sam's, and some other bars in the neighborhood.»

I was right. I smiled faintly at him. He'd named them deliberately, just for my benefit, I knew—the gay bars that were well-known on the near North Side.

«May I take the Thunderbird, mother?» he said.

«Certainly, darling,» she said, and he left.

She turned to me. «Poor Peter never knew his father,» she said. «He was killed in World War II. Pete's been in the Navy about seven years now, and I guess he loves it.»

She stirred a little restlessly and crossed her trim ankles the other direction. «He could have got a commission,» she said, «but he wouldn't even try. Do you know the reason?» She laughed a bit nervously. «Said he liked the enlisted man's uniform better. Said it was a lot sexier. Sometimes . . .» and she bit her lip a trifle, «I think maybe he's gay. Do you?»

«Really, I can't tell from just seeing him,» I said. I felt a little warm.

«Would you do me a favor sometime while he's home?» she asked. «Will you try to find out for me? Maybe you could go out together some evening.»

«Sure,» I said.

The little French maid came in then, in her pert white apron and black uniform, and took away the cups. She was back soon with big round brandy snifters and a bottle of Courvoisier. Vicky spoke to her.

«You may leave any time, Suzanne,» she said in French. «Will you be here in the morning?»

«Oui, Madame,» said Suzanne, «at the usual hour.» She disappeared into the servants' quarters at the back of the eight-room apartment.

«It's her night to play,» Vicky said, a smile moving over her face. Somehow the firelight made her look older, but she was still a handsome woman.

We kept on drinking brandy and talking for another hour. And then, of course, there came the minor surprise—although it was hardly a surprise at all by then. We were both feeling a little high, warmed by the dinner-wines and firelight and the brandy. She kicked off her shoes and moved over to the sofa where I was sitting.

And somehow it was not long until I had picked her up in my arms and

carried her into one of the dark bedrooms. I undressed her, and she helped.

It had been a long time since I had been with a woman, and I wondered if I could perform well enough to satisfy her. I thought I could. But how long had it been for her since she had had a man? She was like a demon unleashed—a sexual gymnast, all over me, under me, on top—and although there was little light, it was enough to show me that she was not any longer the carefully coiffed woman who had been sitting across the brandy bowls from me a little earlier. My hands at the back of her head, pushing her down towards my groin, had played hell with her as she had with mine.

But when finally she was pinned underneath and the play at two-backed beast had really started, I almost panicked. I felt myself beginning to fail, right at the worst possible moment. The wave began to falter, to recede . . .

So what did I do? I changed her to him. I held myself high enough above that moving body so that I was not touching it, except at one point. And I told myself that it was his muscled young back that was beneath me, that it was the tight hard buttocks of the sailor there below me, threshing wildly with the desire that only sailors can feel when they have been at sea for weeks or months. And it was his hand on me, guiding me to port . . .

Allegro, crescendo, decrescendo, finale. Liebestod. The captains and the kings depart, and there is the lonely recessional of the shower, the washing of the hands, and the sortie into the storm-ridden night.

She had insisted—it salved her conscience, I guess—so in my hip pocket nestled the two twenties and a ten, warmed by the heat of my body; in front, withered and shrunken in the blast from the lake, the shrivelled flower that had earned them. But why was it that I kept drawing my hand from my jacket pocket and wiping the back of it across my mouth? Why, indeed, if not to erase the tactile memory of what my lips had found at her aureole, like a tangle of underbrush at the base of the little brown peak that rose from it? The shock and dismay of a half-dozen inch-long black hairs catching in my teeth, and frightening my tongue back in my throat like a terrified rabbit to the rear of its burrow . . .

*

Cold as it was, I headed for the bars in the neighborhood of Clark and Division, where the action was. I felt that I needed a drink, or maybe several. I was a fool, a gahdamned one, my better self kept telling me, sitting on my shoulder near my left ear. But the other side of me kept fumbling around its usual circular track of rationalization: you need the money, she enjoyed it, this is the way we make our bread, make our bread, make our bread, so early in the morning . . .

Call it my subconscious if you will, but the Shore Line 7 was really the first bar in my path. I went in, feeling the heads swivel towards the blast that blew me in the door in front of it, sensing the eyes appraising, accepting, rejecting—even feeling an occasional tangible evidence of interest against my thighs, my buttocks, as I pressed into the standing crowd and edged towards the bar to get a bourbon.

And then I saw him, sitting there handsome, aloof, somewhat disdainful. An old auntie was trying to talk to him, but he kept twirling his glass in his cupped hands and not looking up, or at the most answering with a nod or shake of his head. I pushed towards him, and squeezed close against the old fruit who was yakking at him.

«Pete,» I said, just loud enough for him to hear. «How goes it?»

He turned around and rose up from the barstool. «Duke!» he said, grabbing for my hand as if I were a long-lost shipmate. His hand was wet from the glass or from sweat, I couldn't tell which. He turned to the old man. «Excuse me,» he said, «my buddy here—I gotta talk to him.»

The ravaged landscape of the old man's face disappeared into the murky gloom of the bar, and we were standing there almost as alone as if we had been shipwrecked on an island. Pete eased himself back on the stool. The crush of the surrounding customers pushed me close to him. His heel rested on the rung of the stool, and his knee was pressing hard against my thigh. I felt him move it up and down nervously, as if his foot were jiggling on the rung.

He looked at me, a kind of male Mona Lisa smile fluttering around the corner of his lips. «Well,» he said, «I hoped you'd come. How'd the evening go?»

«Fine!» I said. «I don't know when I've enjoyed an evening more. She's a great gal.»

I had no way of knowing what he knew or suspected, or whether Vicky was in the habit of picking up men in the garage—or elsewhere.

He did not help me any. He shrugged and said «Yeah» in a neutral tone.

«I tell you though, Pete—she's sorta worried about you.»

He looked at me. His eyes were violet in that light. He was sure as hell goodlooking. «So?» he said. He drained his glass. «What's the matter—she think I'm gay?»

«To be frank, yes,» I said. «She asked me what I thought. I said I didn't know. Then she asked me if I'd try to find out, if we'd go out together sometime while you're still here.»

He gave a short laugh. «I suppose she didn't think it'd be so soon,» he said. There was a little bitterness in his voice. «What the hell, man, she knows—or she would if she'd just let herself admit it. Vicky's not stupid by any means.»

«Not by a long shot,» I said.

Pete signalled the bartender. «What're you drinkin'?» he said.

«Bourbon. Double,» I said. My fingers touched the ten in my pocket. «I'm buyin'.»

Pete shrugged. «With the money she gave you?»

I felt the flame rising in my face and was glad the pink gloom neutralised it. «She didn't give me any money,» I said.

«Come off it,» Pete said. «She gives all of 'em money. Makes her feel better. Cleaner.»

I was beginning to flounder, but I grabbed at a passing log. «I never took any money for having a good dinner and a good talk. She was just repayin' a favor. And certainly, never any money from women like your mother.»

Pete took a drink out of the new glass. «Dinner and talk,» he said. «And what else?»

I took a drink, too, and picked up the change from the ten. «Nothing,» I said.

«Trouble is,» said Pete, «she keeps talking about what a man my father was. A real brute. Her eyes light up. He was a construction worker, and finally owned his own firm. I guess back in those days she liked the treatment she got from him.» Then he turned and it was almost as if he were seeing me for the first time. «From his pictures he looked a lot like you. I guess that's what got her. Maybe me too,» he added in a low voice.

«I wouldn't worry about a thing,» I said. «You're man enough. You don't

act gay. You couldn't, and stay in the Navy seven years. She doesn't ever need to know.»

«Thanks for making me a man,» he said. Then he straightened his shoulders a little. I felt a definite pressure from his knee. «It's funny,» he said. «Like I told you, I never knew my father. And now—kinda odd . . . I guess I'd sorta like to make the scene with you.»

I put my hand on his knee and squeezed a little. «Okay, Mac,» I said. «I'd like to make it with you, too.»

Pete looked me square in the eyes. «How much?» he said.

I pretended to be irritated. «Like I told you, man, I don't take money.»

«You got a place?» he said. «Yeah, about three blocks away,» I said. «Let's go.»

«We can drive,» Pete said. «Naw,» I said. «Too close.»

But I wish that we had, because we damned near froze our tails on the way to La Salle street. I hardly noticed it, however. Inside I was so taken up with the screwy situation that I didn't feel the wind. Here I was—had been with his mother, into the very dark he had come from; and here was he, wanting me because I reminded him of a father he'd never known, wanting—perhaps—to replace his mother in some way. And I seemed to be the central symbol. It was one of the oddest things that had ever happened to me. Around the whole scene, like the dark whirl-winds of snow from the rooftops, there swirled an aura of evil, of incest, of the sort of thing that would have made Baudelaire lick his lips, and Rimbaud and Verlaine fall into ecstasy. And me—what of me? I couldn't very well tell Pete that I'd already had him once this evening while I'd been with her . . .

The radiator was still hot in my small apartment, still dancing its late evening jig and hissing at us like a wounded snake. It didn't take us long to undress.

This time it was the real thing, and I didn't have to hold myself high above that sweating body so that the upturned breasts would puncture me. He went at me with some of the same tigerish abandon that his mother had shown, but his was stronger and more violent and more exciting. Where his mother's lips had been, his were now, at work with an equal vehemence and a greater invention. And I went at him, too, catching his flame . . . And when we least expected, the crack in the ceiling widened, expanded, broke open, and showered us both at the same time with meteorites and hot coals . . .

Afterwards we lay resting. The room cooled off. The wind howled harder than ever. I reached down for the blanket and pulled it up over us. Pete nestled in the crook of my arm, his nose against the hair of my armpit.

«Duke,» he said. His voice was muffled. «Make it easy for me, will you? Tell her I'm gay.»

«You sure want her to know?» I said. I felt him nod, and wondered what would happen if I married her.

«Okay,» I said, «but I'll have to tell her I am too, at the same time.»

He raised up quickly on his elbow. «Why the—?»

«No more than fair,» I said. «Can't go on livin' under false pretenses.»

«No, I 'spose not,» he said. He returned his nose to my armpit.

And then for a long time we lay and listened to the storm outside, while I counted the days he had left, and weighed his talents against the imponderable bulk of the surprising gift of the three pieces of greenery, and the memory of the long black hairs, the long grey hairs, around her nipples . . .

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CONTI-CLUB ZÜRICH

Köchlistrasse 15, II. Etage, 8004 Zürich
Das Clublokal der KREIS-Abonnenten

Geöffnet: Mittwoch von 20.00—23.30 Uhr Samstag von 19.30—23.30 Uhr

Eintrittspreise: Abonnenten Fr. 4.40 Gäste Fr. 6.40

Gäste müssen sich durch gültige Ausweispapiere legitimieren und können nur durch Abonnenten eingeführt werden.

Konsumation: nur Automat mit Coca-Cola, Orangina und Süssmost.

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29. Januar 1967: Thé-Dansant 15.30—21.00 Uhr

Die auf den 29. Januar angesagte Clubversammlung muss aus organisatorischen Gründen auf den 26. Februar 1967 verschoben werden.

4. Februar 1967 Fröhliches Maskentreiben ab 20.00 Uhr bis ??

11. Februar 1967 Fröhliches Maskentreiben ab 20.00 Uhr bis ??

Eintrittspreise: Abonnenten Fr. 6.60 Gäste Fr. 8.60

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Gerbergässlein 14 (im Stadtzentrum)

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jeden Samstag von 20.00—01.00

Thé-Dansants; 16.00—22.00 Uhr: 15. Januar und 5. Februar
Vom 12. bis und mit 19. Februar bleibt die Isola geschlossen.

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