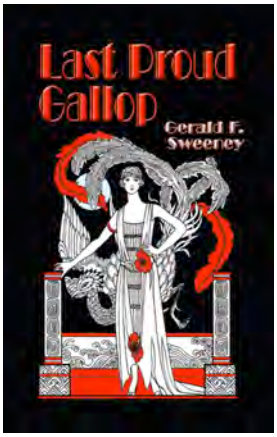
Last Proud Gallop

Gerald F. Sweeney



A novel about how men and women love differently, notably a war hero and a true American courtesan. The Jazz Age is about to erupt. Six vibrant, wealthy young youths seek fulfillment in Long Island's polo society, Manhattan and old Southampton.

LAST PROUD GALLOP

by Gerald F. Sweeney

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10-Digit ISBN 1-59113-887-6
13-Digit ISBN 978-1-59113-887-7

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Printed in the United States of America.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2006

LAST PROUD GALLOP

A Novel by

Gerald F. Sweeney

Dedicated to

THE DELEGATE FROM GREAT NECK

In joyful remembrance of all the green lights across all the bays

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerald F. Sweeney, a native of the Midwest, spent most of his time on earth living on Long Island. An army veteran and graduate of Michigan, his business life was consumed by commuting to Manhattan's madcap magazine world where he overworked in various capacities including Publisher. Energized by JFK, he made a seven-year detour into the political life of Huntington, NY and Washington, DC.

His sporadic attempts to publish have included pieces in the now defunct *LI* Sunday supplement of *Newsday*, the *Chattahoochee Review*, *True*, *Long Island*, *Madison Avenue*, the *East Hampton Star* and the *NY Times* Op Ed Page. He is blessed with three children and seven grandchildren. Among his interests are American classical music, sailing and ballet. Retired and divorced, he now resides in Easton, Maryland.

INTRODUCTION

I know there has to be a reason why I'm going to tell a story about something that happened fifty years ago—why it couldn't just decay out there in the woods beyond the pasture or haunt the salt fog in silence. One way or another, you've probably heard a tale like theirs, perhaps from some burned-out friend folded over a bar, still agonizing over the details, trying to unravel its clotted meaning. Certainly the camps of men have been fire-eyed by images of women like Pamela since the beginning of time. Especially when a passion like hers intersects with an authentic hero to create a collision of molten heat.

And what of Tad Hancock? Did you think you really knew him because he became a newspaper symbol and you saw the spirit of his image portrayed in a hundred movies and novels? Hancock with his sky-blue mind—so clean, gifting the world with its promise. And what of that style that can no longer be measured though you wept for its loss not so long ago? I think those of us who are old enough should say something of its essence.

We are all fascinated by our own youth—looking back on it as some splendid special moment when we were all vibrant and bursting. Like every man who was once young, I have a nostalgia and affection for past times. By now, I have read most of the histories and literature of those years and it seems to me that something has been left out of the chronicles. That omission might impair those who are beginning to search 1919 and the modern world for answers of their own.

And there is the final, simple truth. It was a story I had to tell. Probably because I loved them both.

Michael Jamison (1969).

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1919 and 1946 were years of pan-national joy, and if you missed them, it's possible you will never know the meaning of race happiness.

They were jubilee times yet bittersweet because of the half-lives and deaths claimed by the mudheaps of France and elsewhere. Aware of its loss, America in 1919 was in mourning, the honor-enrolled dead gouging out pockets of remembered air. Meanwhile the non-grieving, careless about the deaths of others, hoped the world would get on with the good times. This when the hearts of millions were pounding for reunion. Yearning became a primary emotion then—waiting for the time following the separation and loneliness, when the barely remembered face and form of the beloved person comes home from war, spared death and sometimes spared dishonor.

Nineteen nineteen. It was the Janus-faced century year. It looked back on the broken past with its now disheveled traditions, at the same time alert to the prospect of new times. The mask facing back slept with closed eyes; but the look ahead was popeyed. It was a year of plans and speculations and seldom-sober sallies into the hoopla that followed. A year for young men to gather and consult, home from the corners of Europe and dreary military camps, eager to reschedule their fate.

Of all the many groups bidding for power after the First War, only Tad Hancock's group seemed born to the task. Their course opened before them like the wind-pulled sail of a championship crew. Few would ever guess that I would

eventually be invited to join that concentration of talent. Trying to grasp the group's essence, I recall that it was the calm assurance of each member that so awed Hancock's opposition the most. It was surely the awareness of their own strength both financially and socially that made the faction so daring. And if it hadn't been for the strange imposition of that same quality of easy control exercised upon them, their plans might have run a surer path.

Now that Hancock's public efforts have faded into the past, what matters are the lives of the people who shared that optimistic season. More naïve than innocent, suspended between the mores of the old century and the new, recognizing that they might be able to control their own lives if only they could win riches and power, the Hancock squadron, gleaming and lit with gold, paraded directly into the sun. Bound together.

Because we were so young, and always on the brink of love, those long ago days have a special significance. The days that spread after them have not held the same promise, or the same easy sense of accomplishment. I have been waiting patiently for such a season as that to open again, but I feel like a man anticipating the warmth of a spring that will never come.

* * *

My family is Old New York without being Dutch. People in other cities think we lack tradition, but that's only because most societies are hereditary, whereas each Manhattan generation forms its own cadre. The rich with their big families and larger extravagances were mainly the offspring of Union suppliers and reconstruction speculators, made wealthy either by the conflict

itself or by the industrial explosion that followed the Civil War. During and afterward, as many fortunes were lost as were made. The Eastern gentry that assembled against the wildmen ripping out empires in the West were sometimes able to recreate in their own children some of the raw strength they would need to survive in the economic jungle. The families that have retained their vitality from one generation to the next deserve to be called true New York.

It was at Princeton that I was first awed by an American aristocracy that rules without benefit of title. There I was introduced to a number of charming young men who mostly told stories about their eccentric relatives and unashamedly pined for summer. I was distantly familiar with the names of the truly rich, but I soon began to realize that my acquaintances were from second-line families. Later, I observed the casual deference that marked their attention to the real princes and powers. Somehow, I never met the right people first. I was always the last to know someone of consequence. Tad Hancock, for instance, was only a few classes behind me, but I barely knew him.

At school, and later when I was with the Expeditionary Forces, I enjoyed a certain independence. Because my family wasn't truly wealthy, my future never involved allegiance to the smart crowd, or to any of the new Western money barons that were collaborating to increase their fortunes. Some of my classmates had firmly established themselves with the sons of the brokerage and banking families before our freshman year was over. Others, especially in the Morgan orbit, had been trained to respect their financial superiors from birth. Unencumbered by such loyalties, I was free to go about unpledged. I soon

discovered the advantages of being a friend to all. Leaderless, I was my own man. Because I have a natural aversion to petty conflicts and detest whining, I became something of a mediator, and after I had rebuffed opportunities to become associated with one or another clique, I inadvertently became advisor to all and eventually a bridge between the first families and the bulk of the class. For these services my youthful egalitarians installed me as grand arbiter of the 1915 senior class.

It didn't end there. Having learned how to merge people's interests, I served in France as an intermediary between the new officers and the regulars, and this explained my presence on the regimental staff as a junior lieutenant. Many of my friends found themselves under a common command, but a minor whim of war kept me separated from my former classmates, and except for occasional visits to Paris, I saw little of them. It was surprising therefore that Major Del Hawes, when he discovered another tiger encamped with him, called for me. I had known Hawes, who was a bit my senior, as a spokesman for the Western crowd and there was something about his restive nature that bothered me. He was tall and rugged and walked like a hunter.

Although Hawes campaigned rather than matriculated at school, he nevertheless became something of a celebrity because of his frightful manners, or if you took his side, his genius for democratic sociability. To some he was a fresh wind airing out the parlors of conceit; to others he was a frightening, untutored force. Born on the Illinois River, he exhibited the pioneer extravagances of backslapping wit, vengeful politics, and a celebration of the sixteenth president. Even before Hawes's father had shaken the silver-speckled soot from his Nevada

mines, the son had discovered well-tailored New York. It was there Del urged his newly rich father to settle. Then at the age of 28 Hawes sought entrance to Princeton. The family's success since establishing themselves in the east was astounding. They had tripled their fortune.

When we met in France, Hawes dwelt at length on the coming armistice and the adventures he would initiate once he returned home. I remember the dreary day the two of us sat in a shell hole with some confiscated wine, and he revealed his secret hopes while the black rain of France fell around us. He was going to open a brokerage house and a bank simultaneously by manipulation of some family stock that he had recently fallen heir to, and thereby catapult himself to immense financial heights. He recounted the support his plan already enjoyed and recited the names of other powerful families that would be associated with him. It was an impressive and ruthless roll. When he asked me to join him as an advisor, I tentatively refused. It wasn't that I didn't believe him, for I had indirectly felt the power of his money at school, nor did I feel that he was incapable of mustering his financial forces. My instincts simply warned me that some roads to success were strewn with garbage. Besides, I am a man who lives day by day and who rarely makes decisions sitting in the rain.

It was a minor incident in a cruel war, that meeting, yet it was germane to my own conflict regarding decisions that I would face soon after the armistice. Some people make quick judgments and are on to sixty other matters before slower souls, loaded with information, collapse under dead-weight solutions. I'm different, however. I get jumpier and jumpier, my head pounding, my heart quivering until my blood explodes with the

soundness of my instincts and the rightness of my ways. I presume that if I could have gotten my blood to boiling more often, I would now be one of the richest bankers on Long Island. I'm sure I saw Hawes again across the bunkers or in the canteens behind the lines, but I don't think we ever spoke at length in France again.

It was about that same time, toward the end of the war, that we began to hear about the amazing air feats of Tad Hancock, and when his name came up, I was proud in the usual alumni way. "Yes, he and I were in school together," I'd say smugly. You're clubby like that for a few years after graduation but part of it had to do with the attention we were all getting in the press. We used to laugh grimly at some of the publicity. The fact that casualties among Ivy League officers were listed separately in a special *New York Times* column encouraged black humor at the front.

I finally came home, still unattached, and was welcomed by an orchestra of rattlings that had begun to fill the American house. An unabashed rejoicing and the release of millions of men upon New York created a feverish rustling of ambition within the framework of the old colonial saltbox. New York became the creaking front porch of America where Miss Columbia greeted us with bobbed hair. Still vivid in my memory is the splendor of the victory cotillions and the impetuous excitement that attended all the parties. After the first rush, I secluded myself in our family brownstone and tried patching my own roof.

I can recall the spring days of 1919 as I sat near the upstairs window silently fashioning the coming campaigns of my career. I would watch the rain stream along the paint-buckled sash or

glide down the black boughs of our neighborhood trees and observe the washing that life had worked on the wood and on the faces of the old people passing by. But as the mornings grew warmer and on a day when I began to doubt that my long inactivity would produce the sound formula for success that I anticipated, my attention was directed towards Fifth Avenue. The buildings were selectively, then profusely, decked with bunting. My druggist, covering his window with a broad-striped flag, was the one who told me about the celebration being planned.

That day the whole of Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to Central Park was a long ribbon of jubilation. It may have been the biggest party ever held in the history of New York. A million people came out to dance in the streets following a military parade that welcomed home one of the New York regiments. There were miles of music and blocks of dancers and more available girls than lived in a number of western states. Banners and boxed placards swinging overhead announced the victory dance, while bandstands erected along the way set the tempo of the new times. The dark buildings looked down grimly upon this strange ballet, but the men who had fought in the iron war saw only the shining upturned faces of their waiting women.

This story properly begins the night I went downstairs to watch the avenue dance. I had been watching the dancers swinging open their dreams to the rhythms of the music for an hour. Many still in uniform, the men seemed stiff beside the lithe grace of the shopgirls. The world was at peace and the air was friendly with the sounds of people who had just met. I was almost to the point when the hum in my throat was about to

speak up to a tall handsome girl beside me when the noisy laughter of a northbound group of revelers attracted my attention. They came arm in arm, four abreast, light marauders chasing down the ecstatic. In the middle of the entourage was one of the most stunning girls I had ever seen. It turned out she was Del Hawes's sister. The ex-major, part of the quartet, broke away from the group when he spotted me and with that force that he possessed of drawing people within his circle, he led me over to his friends.

"Mike Jamison, people. In France together," Hawes said.

"Mostly confiscating wine," I added.

"You all have a lingering taste for war," his sister chided. "Come, Mister Jamison. It isn't every day you can dance in the bus lane."

"And the fare?"

"Oh, don't worry. You'll pay."

She invited me to dance by opening her arms as if she were describing a promise.

Her feet sailed over the bricks.

She confided. "We're going to dance in every square from here to the library, and then we're going to steal those lions and ride them right up the front stairs of the Plaza."

I asked, "Did you miss me during the war?"

"You were gone so long I can't even remember if I knew you."

"Was it that long?"

"Actually," she said, "1917 was the longest year. Posing for the war posters. Goddess like, I became Columbia the Gem. Not so muscled, mind you. The sketchers kept telling me that if I moved, I'd imperil the war effort. I had to get through without twitching a nerve. Not easy for me."

I said that I barely recognized her without her shield and sword, her grimness and standard.

"Oh, those. I think I turned them in for an ostrich fan."

"So what will you do now the war's over?" I asked.

"I think I'll move out ahead of the crowd," she said.

"You've always been there," I answered.

"Does that appeal to you? In a woman, I mean?"

"As long as I can keep up. Of course, I'd want to win any battle between the sexes."

"I'll have to remember to mind my defenses."

"I almost volunteered to go to France," she added. "I would have kept a cozy canteen."

"On the contrary. You'd have kept a busy one."

"Sir," she said, "you give a girl ideas."

"And you a lovely air."

A thank you for the dance, a show of waving hands, and they went skipping along. I envied them their evening. Asked to join them, I begged off. Even the wide blue eyes of Hazie Hawes couldn't promise they would be open to the same possibilities tomorrow, but for me tomorrow had to be conditioned on rules made before yesterday. Not for the rich of course. The thread of money runs through their lives as if paid out from a golden spool, and they can afford to be careless about relationships. Though proper to flirt with their women, it was good form to be short about it.

That was a lesson I learned early. I was fifteen and for that particular Christmas vacation under the spell of a young man a year or two ahead of me whose level of sophistication was an education to me. During that holiday I arrived at an age when I could be tentatively admitted to the mysterious world of adults. I was about as thin as the cigarettes I tried to smoke and a size too small for my elegant friend's old tuxedo. Out for the evening and having narrowly threaded our way into Delmonico's, we came upon some of his friends, who invited us over to meet one of the softest, most petulantly pretty girls I had ever seen. She danced a great deal, and my friend insisted that I cut in. Dumb but ever courageous, I did and fell in love between the verse and the refrain. That was one of the white nights of my youth, and the dark February day that brought her letter saying that I wasn't ready for her also carried a line that mentioned how unfortunate it was we didn't go to the same

beaches or attend the same parties. It was a lesson I had to learn only once.

My bruised ego insisted that I remember that the middle class was the conscience of the upper class in those years. As understood by my father and myself, the middle class represented a buffer between the avariciousness of the wealthy and the yearnings of the poor. There was little cheer in the prospect at times, but there was a balance for the person who followed the rules. We tolerated the insolence of the poor, who jeered at the protection we gave the rich, and the arrogance of the wealthy that sometimes pierced our self-esteem and isolated us. But one thing we could prove beyond doubt was that we maintained our independence. Man alone is pitiable, but a man without pride is weak. And pride is the strength of the middle class.

Because they had come and gone so quickly, I was surprised two weeks later by Del Hawes's invitation for a weekend in Westbury. If he wanted me to join his clique, perhaps he thought exposure to his scheme might stimulate some interest on my part. My first inclination was to refuse. The real reason I accepted was because I was bored. I had been staring out of that upstairs window of our townhouse for a month and still hadn't resolved a thing. As the Friday neared, I took special care to alter my formalwear in case Del's sister intended to dance again. This time, I'd be ready for her.

The train to Westbury that ferried Long Island bankers to and from their vaults had an excursionary air about it the Saturday morning that I bolted out of the city into the country. I made myself as neat as possible in the narrow bench and leaned back

on the matted straw cushion to read the paper. It carried a story about the automobile that had raced an airplane around Belmont racetrack. Also, every detail about the banker's wife over in New Jersey who had married her chauffeur. Plus the prediction that Prohibition would bring with it a return to Puritanism, a wish devoutly to be dreaded.

I put down the paper and was soon enjoying the sights. It takes war or some depression like winter to make me appreciate the green business of spring. Although I couldn't quite rekindle my youthful enthusiasm for house parties, I felt better about seeing Del Hawes in his horse ring than in a hole in France. He was sure to have a stable, for if Westbury meant anything to the civilized world, it meant horses. The people there take pride in animals and trace their horses' genealogies and do other queer things that frighten urban people. With the Long Island crowd, it was either horses or yachts, seldom both. With Hawes, I soon learned, it was both. In this way, the family kept up its business prospects by land and by sea.

When Del Hawes drove up to the station, he was riding his car like a horse, bouncing all over it. He looked different, still rough but comfortable in leather boots. "We'll go to the club first for lunch," he said. "I'd like you to meet some of the worst poker players in the country."

The informality of his greeting was nicely complemented by the thorough provisions made by the staff of the Meadow Brook Club. We circled the drive close to the door; there the motion of a half-dozen men handled the car and the luggage. One of them led me through several comfortable paces and I was again able to acknowledge that the wealthy have a splendid fetish for

convenience. I was taken to a room in the club where I was able to change. There I had an opportunity to admire the comfortable arrangements made for a member's guest. The wide green acres surrounding the clubhouse exuded a quiet calm and the sweet-sour fragrance of cut lawn blew gently through the starched white curtains. My man advised me that my gear would be transported to the Hawes's estate and almost without my notice, he unhinged a price tag that glared from my new sports get-up. A half-hour later, I was sitting on the veranda with a tall whiskey in my hand, and was able to remind myself that being rich had its advantages.

"I hoped you'd come out later in the season when things heat up," Hawes said, "but Hazie kept insisting that we invite you out immediately. I thought you'd prefer a boat trip in August because it's all horses now. Do you ride?"

I made some excuses about the tenderness of my long neglect. After he assured me that I wouldn't have to prance around on a beast larger than myself, I began to take a kindlier view to everything he said.

He continued, "But while you're here, I'm going to explain our deal again. Not to press you, mind you. Just to introduce you to some of the others involved."

We had lunch in a cool, wood-darkened room that bristled sporadically with the bombast attending a poker game in the corner. Hawes pointed out the players.

"That's Simpkins on the right. He'll be with us. He'll control the foreign end of things and keep up our credit with the British outlets."

He named a half-dozen, all powers in the financial world. They were the types that one deferred to and vaguely feared, names that were registered through an exchange of money in most of the right places and some of the wrong ones. Men who make things happen, but who have a knack for destruction. The usual batch of powerful people. One was well advised to observe them with both eyes wide open. Their plan was to collect the necessary assets during the summer, and late in the year, with everyone focused on the new decade, they would quietly announce their venture in the financial papers, marshal their strength and open two doors, one a brokerage house and the other a banking firm, to a bright future utilizing the funds from one house to hold up the other. It was a kind of legal larceny.

The poker table, like all the other facilities at the club, was designed to fulfill its purpose perfectly. Immensely round, and covered with a cloth of green, it held eight men comfortably, all within easy reach of the winnings. The walnut moat that edged the fringe was filled with money. As we approached and introductions were made. I noticed that Hawes's presence was barely acknowledged.

"Mike here was in the same unit with me in France," he said.

Only one of the men seemed to have shared that experience. The rest were sick of war. It raised hell with the distribution of their products, though a few had profited nicely on war goods. Most were men of fifty or so, portly with commanding voices.

"Sit down, Jamison. And play a couple hands," one of them said, fishing in his pile of money for a bill.

"Better not. Cochrane's been having some morning," added another, indicating the man who had invited me to play.

"Go ahead," Hawes said, turning to a steward.

Suddenly there was a place for me and a fresh pack of money appeared in my section of the moat. As the cards were dealt, the conversation mounted and then ebbed away as we scrutinized our cards. In the rhythm of the game, there was time for chatter and a time for serious play. I lost a couple of hands and then had some luck. Trying to fill an inside straight always tempted me and surprisingly enough, I drew the right card. I timidly bet ten dollars. Cochrane raised me until the rest threw in their cards. He either had a higher straight or was bluffing. His hard eyes burned into the back of my cards as I hesitated, then raised him another ten.

"Listen, Jamison, no sense in penny ante."

Little did he know that my June expenses were already on the table. I wasn't expecting another raise.

"Why don't I up you a hundred and one of us will make a little windfall?"

I had never spent a hundred dollars at one time in my life, but I had already spent forty dollars recklessly to stay with the hand. All eyes were on me. Finally, I dropped out.

"Have a higher straight?" I asked, showing my cards.

"That's my business," Cochrane laughed as he pulled in his winnings with his forearm.

It was then, as their eyes turned to me with a certain critical evaluation, that I realized I was being tested. For twenty minutes, I lost one hand after another, until Hawes, standing behind me, began to shuffle his feet. On the next deal, I pulled another straight, queen high, and drew nothing. I couldn't believe my luck. Cochrane took two cards and started raising every bid I made. This time I had him, I thought, and it cost me another hundred dollars to find out I was wrong. He had four of a kind.

"At least you stayed with it," Cochrane said. "Rode it all the way."

That was the quality they were looking for. I had redeemed myself by gambling recklessly until the end.

"I think he'll do, Del," said Cochrane and all eyes lit on me, blessing my tentative entrance into the North Central Holding Company.

From the club, it was a pleasant drive along a narrow dirt road bordered by white rail fences, where horses with shining coats and aristocratic lifts to their arched necks seemed to sense their own importance. Wooden jumps and thick hedges raced along the road with us. Hawes assured me that I'd win back the money playing club-car bridge within a month. But he was

wrong about that just as he had been about my ability to afford the stakes of his poker game in the first place.

At one curve in the road Hawes had to pull the car up short and give way to an elderly couple on horseback exiting a stone gateway. Across the road, the fence parted and the riders cantered down a wide swath of grass that passed into another field. When Hawes stopped, the entire flavor of the country gathered around us. The rolling hills hid stout mansions and there was a whisper of elegance at every turn, an entire neighborhood luxuriating in the comfort of money. Yet the calm was purposeful, a contrivance overgrown with green, a preserve for rich people complete with manicured meadows.

It had all started about 1870 when the North Shore opened its harbors to the first pleasure boat sailors, the sons of clipper owners—now wealthy beyond counting—who began beating into the fishing villages along Long Island Sound. Their once salted blood, thinned by the immense port comforts of Manhattan, thickened again each summer with the sailing races that soon became all the rage. Eventually, these skippers returned to buy the uplands above the anchorages and construct their splendid summer mansions.

When we were in gear again, I asked Hawes what he would do once he had established his fortune, because there was no doubt he would succeed. His answer stung my middle-class morality.

“We’ll be in the money game. That’s it and no more. Everybody’s in it no matter what their product. Some use soap to get in. Somebody else’s in steel. Some just trade currency. The important thing is to get in it and stay in it.”

It was then that Del Hawes lost my allegiance forever. Money for money's sake was not the formula for those of us who felt responsible for the commonwealth of the old republic.

We turned up his drive. A Georgian brick pile swept across the wide lawn like a monument of repose. The breadth of the family's wealth was spelled out across sparkling white dormers and recessed walls that separated the wide facade from its gabled wings. This is what Hawes had to protect. For him it was the reward for being in finance.

I was swiftly installed in one of the guest suites. From the garden, fragments of laughter lifted to my window. I unlatched the shutters, and they creaked open on the warm spring air, showing comfortable terraces below, and over beyond the trees, an unfilled swimming pool that color-clashed with the green surrounding it. I could hear the murmur of voices but couldn't see anyone. I dawdled in my room thinking of Hawes's hard defense of finance and soon I heard his voice below, too. I was back at a window again, not mine this time, but facing the same uncertain prospects. I abruptly rose to join them. If I couldn't enroll in their money games, perhaps I could become known as a great wit. I entertained the thought of becoming a social lion, spending as many nights dining out each year as Henry James, and with this in mind, I buoyantly descended the steps past the upstairs maid.

At the far end of the garden, marble steps opened like a fan upon a redstone terrace. There with her brother and another young woman was Hazie Hawes. Her blonde hair shone under a white picture hat. She had about her the openness and inviting way that good manners and an easy childhood provide. She was

fresh blooming and a lot of her attractiveness had to do with her rose-white complexion. There was no resistance about her—not in her eyes or around her mouth. Not at first anyway. I thought that if a man were up to it, she need never encounter a dark moment.

"Walk over here. You came down the stairs beautifully just then," she said. "Stairs are such a chore for some people. I want to see if you look as gorgeous in the country as you did in town. I danced with so many men that night."

The other woman said, laughing, "Hazie, you're shameless."

"That and more," Hazie replied.

She extended her arm, suspending it until I admired its whiteness.

"I'm afraid you'll be disappointed," I said. "I've a red nose from bumping around in your brother's jitney."

She laughed, leaning forward to touch my hand. "You should have red ears from what I hear about your card playing."

"I'd hate to pay the dues if this morning's game meant anything," I returned.

"Dues? Most people just assume they belong."

I told her that I had tried to wear my new price tag but the steward wouldn't hear of it. She laughed automatically in the usual social way, her tossed blonde hair springing in the light. I

had been able to see her blue eyes sparkling at fifty feet. Then, nodding opposite, as if it were a wand, her arm indicated that the woman sitting next to her brother was Ashley Melrose.

"I've heard so much about you, Mister Jamison. It's a pleasure to meet you finally."

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss Melrose. I consider my life's dance card complete."

She laughed in a quiet way, but there was a stray sadness in it. Women in those days had to wait patiently for their men, and it caused a certain languidness among them. The pursuit of perfection among females of her position followed the example set by the stylish upper-class women in the English counties—the English Roses—whose talents were in competition with our wealthy American Beauties. Both hybrids were displayed like prizes by their parents in search of riches, royalty and property. This quest for feminine perfection often produced rare specimens down near the bottom of the garden. Exotic flowers tinged with moonlight, whose true selves were often hidden from masculine sight and feeling.

Chiffon fluttered about Ashley's long slender body. A wide hat strayed from her fingers, its streamers floating gently. She was quiet, but her clothes whispered in the mild breeze and years of training polished her greeting. Her words had a high glisten to them as if she had spent her youth shining vowels.

I knew something of her family. Somewhere in the Confederacy textile looms wove the Melrose fortune. If memory serves me, her grandfather had been wounded, or was it killed, during

some family trouble. In any case, the family thought the fortune could be better protected in New York, and they had settled here in Westbury late in the last century. And although her family had acclimated to Long Island and her name was always among those who attended the Monday Morning Musicales at the Waldorf, there was about her a fragrant reminder of lilac trails and hunt balls.

"Ashley and I are doing a benefit," Hazie said, "and we can't decide on the décor. She wants something in peach, and I've been legislating for something crimson and wicked."

"If it's a costume thing," I said, "you're probably playing the devil."

"Good idea," she said, "and you may carry my horns."

"Hazie, give Ashley an answer," her brother said. "You're wearing out her patience."

"Ashley has more patience than a pine," Hazie said, and blushed as she hurried on. "Peach it will be. But not orange blossoms. I put my foot down when it comes to orange blossoms."

Having sealed the Plaza ballroom in peach for the forthcoming benefit, Ashley excused herself and we all walked with her to the house. Ashley and Del went ahead, and Hazie took my arm as we mounted the stairs.

Hazie whispered, "Isn't she stiff? Her family's been here longer than ours, and even though she never says it, we know she's thinking about it all the time."

"Your brother seems to like her," I noticed.

She turned and looked at me. "Him? He's too busy with a wench in town to care about her."

I couldn't tell whether she was gossiping or making a point of being indifferent.

I had been home long enough to realize it was the current fashion for women to be outspoken and because I wasn't accustomed to it, I tightened up. Hazie's eyes beamed around to focus on my reaction, sensing a flick of disapproval.

"You'll have to learn to like my frankness, Mister Jamison, if you're going to play in my pagoda. The twentieth century's first big war just built a mad maze for us to scramble through, and you need a good tongue as well as good legs to get around."

"A speedy tongue to cover your mistakes? You must be British after all."

"Unforked in either case."

We stood on the front steps to wave Ashley off.

"Do you know about the flower show?" Ashley asked from her car. It was one of those black open cars where the passenger seat behind is perched higher than the driver in front. It was an

automobile whose genealogy went back to the Newport carriages, a car to be seen in.

"It's at Tad's place," Ashley said. "Why don't you come around? And be sure to bring Mister Jamison. It's tomorrow."

"We'll try to make it," Del said as she drove off.

"See you then," Hazie said laconically.

Del waved until the car was well out of the driveway, and then turning on his heel, said, "Hazie, you entertain Mike. I have some things to do."

"He's mad as hops," she said when he departed. "He's been wooing the Melrose money all spring. He's operating a cartel or something and he's trying to get her in on some new scheme. But he doesn't know she's just an old spool and all that cotton money is going to stick to her forever. I can't be nice to her anyway," she said, brushing away her hair. "She invites criticism."

"Let's forget her. Why don't we play tennis or some other damn thing as long as I'm rigged up in this outfit?"

We played tennis, not to mention croquet, ten-pins, and much to my amusement, billiards. There were red courts and greenskeeper-clipped lawns and playrooms with leather chairs. There was a shooting range in the cellar and an indoor pool on top of the house glassed all around with high French windows and a dome of light somewhere above. It was humid and warm

there and seemed to be the place where most of the rubber plants in the world had come to gather.

The two of us roamed and splashed and displayed our prowess and powers—some of her attractions all clung cotton with rounds and mounds and delicious deep crevices.

We were getting along well and our voices echoed through the moist chamber. And the sun fell all around us.

"This is the kind of day I'd like to save," she said.

She was standing near the long arched windows, golden in the glossy light.

"If I only knew it wasn't meant to go away, things wouldn't bother me so," she added.

"Who can capture afternoons? Said I, I can capture afternoons."

"To meet someone you like, and share the quivers and newness. I've never known you sad or angry and you've never disappointed me."

I said, "I don't know. First of all I smashed you on the knee with a tennis ball. Then I shot the lights out in the basement and now I'm about to drown in your pool. You call that friendly?"

I continued, "But right you are. You have to learn to keep the day going. If you put your whole heart into the afternoon, you won't have anything left for tonight."

"I could pour myself into every minute today."

She put her arms around herself, gathering in all her illusions. It was a gesture of love of self, and I envied her sense of personal comfort.

By the time we got to dinner we both carried the conception of the possibility of romance. There were only eight for dinner, so Hazie and I decided to star that night and the two of us put on a show and lifted everyone else's spirits as we simultaneously lifted our own. We kept breaking newer ground.

"So I said to my brother, 'Do you remember that friend of yours that we met at Eleventh Street? I'd like to get him uptown,' " Hazie chimed, remembering our first encounter.

I added, "And before I know it, she's got me out here in her recreation factory and we've been shooting the works and romping in her tank."

Hawes, stiff in his chair and wordless, glared at the two of us. He seemed to be on edge—wondering, in effect, what kind of act we were putting on in his dining amphitheatre.

But the sheer size of everything asked for a big effect. I was unaccustomed to these performance spaces that begged for large dramatic gestures. We were eating at a table that could easily sit twenty, a sort of castle refectory. It would have been enough for Arthur and his entire circle.

After dinner there was a party, other guests arrived and we danced for hours. Hazie's gown was light and her body was soft

and responsive. We danced so long and so close that after awhile, we were enfolded in an embrace.

Late the next afternoon, Del and Hazie insisted on going to the flower show. Knowing that high society met on occasions that would try the patience of less austere breeds, I said nothing about inspecting jonquils nose first. Del, paler by three shades after the previous night's party, had momentarily forgiven Hazie for her lack of cooperation regarding his financial ambitions. His attentions had now enthusiastically turned to driving his automobile at higher-than-safe speeds over open country. The wind snapped at Hazie's blonde hair as she urged her brother on through the meadows where, like noisy retrievers, we flushed whole families of rabbits and birds. The exhilaration of yesterday's flirtation and the sleepy morning had left us quieter. As hard as we had tried the night before, Hazie and I hadn't been able to get away from the other overnight houseguests. We were both in a state of reverie, evaluating each other in long glances as if to discover the meaning of Saturday's outburst.

"Still retrieving afternoons, Mike Jamison?"

"I think I'd rather catch last night's girl," I replied.

"You almost did."

Back on the main road we passed a colony of cottages deployed around a pond, then after taking a sharp turn, sped between the gates of the Hancock place. We drove in past a racetrack adjoining the barns, the stables separated from the planted gardens by a high hedge bordered on each side by the spring

green of graceful willows. As we mounted the half-mile of road and the Hancock place came into view, I could barely control my wonder. It was past belief that homes as large as the one in front of us had ever been built in America.

Only then did the significance of Tad Hancock's name come back to me. This at a time when he had been written up in the magazines as being some sort of American standard. It was a phenomenon of our time that a handsome young man, possessing no particular fame or police record, could emerge as a national figure on the basis of wealth, polo playing, air heroics, and a good row of white molars. But such a thing happened. His army exploits were followed in the newspapers by the whole country. When he was reported missing, black emblems appeared on the sleeves of women that had never laid eyes on him. And when Hancock was discovered in a German prison camp a month later, the Red Cross was besieged by bundles to ease his stay. Again, when further news leaked out that he had escaped his captors but had been wounded during the retreat, an anxious nation waited for additional word. It finally came from a small village on the Swiss border where he and his companions had made their way to safety. And because he had carried one of his friends and a German rifle bullet part way up the Rhine, a grateful government awarded him one of its highest honors. You will not remember him probably. Nothing is older than the war before last. But in his day, he was a phenomenon. On his return to New York, the husky, limping lieutenant brought out the fireboats from their creaking docks to send torrents of welcome across the bow of his ship. The newspapers carried a lengthy description of his arrival home in Westbury. His mother was waiting for him on the portico, with all the servants circled about her, as his father returned him to

his family. One of the old Negro servants unable to control himself had broken protocol by coming forward to weep into the hands of the fair young lieutenant. By then, of course, I had been following his exploits along with everyone else and hardly a week went by without reading some piece of gossip about him. The papers had made him into some kind of modern airborne gladiator. I could barely remember him sprinting across campus with his tennis sweater slung across his shoulders.

This castle of stone was his place. We pulled off the road beneath a cluster of birch and dogwood and walked among the parked limousines to a low auditorium at the extreme end of one wing. The smell of wet flowers was everywhere and a select company of upper society hovered in small groups around the cluster of scents.

We seemed to be the youngest there, and when we joined the men from the previous day's poker session, I asked one of the wives where Tad's friends were hiding.

"I suppose they're all out riding and breaking their necks," I ventured.

She answered, "The girls are on the back terrace and the men are all locked up in the library solving the problems of the world."

I excused myself and, on the pretense of sniffing my way along a border of tulips, rounded the back of the house. Through the sun's slanting rays, the Hancock place rose up around me, its high brick walls imposing their will on my wooden aspirations.

Tucked in a garden away from the house, I looked down and could see the women who a few years earlier had decorated our best proms. Among them, Ashley Melrose sat quietly and comfortably in harmony with her sister royals. I followed the path farther until I could hear men talking indistinctly through a long leaded window whose light fell in twisted pattern on the shady lawn. Inside thirty or so men sat composed in the book-dusted air. One of them—it must have been Hancock—stood pointing at a map, expounding some or another notion. If they were affecting great schemes, their manner was artless.

I stepped inside the passage and met a friend from school whom I hadn't seen since Paris, and he invited me into the library to join in. Unnoticed, we sat down in the rear of the room. Hancock was quite tall with a handsome face that was either sun- or wind-burnt. He had uncomplicated looks, fresh and honest-looking, and only around the set of his eye could I see a trace of some old pain. When he spoke he had a way of looking at us that carried us along with him, that made us open to his words, as if we were there at the creation of a large idea.

"Long Island's new name—Mayfair. I suppose it means that we've gone batty British," Hancock was saying. "Heavy English shoes. English wools that weigh a ton. And hopefully, from the north, light whiskey."

He continued, "I prefer the name Whitman knew from the Indians—Paumanok. When he roamed around these farms and hills, author Whitman knew that behind him the trail led back to a natural state, the Indian forests that the Puritans found. And he understood the suffering the colonials had to endure—not so long ago or far away. Whitman's family worked hard but were

starved off the land just a few years before the old man was born."

The "old man," Teddy Roosevelt, had died a few months earlier, ailing and broken by the death of his aviator son and the refusal by President Wilson to allow TR to resurrect a regiment of old riders. In 1915, when Hancock first joined the French cavalry and before he learned to fly, he too had hoped to ride with the former president.

"Whitman envisioned that the average man could grow into a Lincoln. Later, Roosevelt showed us something different—that the wealthy could become something other than speculators, that they could contribute the way squire Jefferson did. But we don't have a simple farm culture anymore and the rich man's war killed too many of my friends."

His mouth tightened. "And it's not like when TR was young. His being rich in a simpler society was feudal. He learned that democracy was something more than honest friends sitting on a horse-rail fence. The truth is that both Whitman and Roosevelt were blown to hell by war, and we'd better find a new way."

He moved to a nearby table. "Now it's Day One of the modern age. Our families have done well. We've come a long way. We know that a man with a family name has to live up to a standard. That he has to provide for his women and bring his children into the light of reason. We know that we have to foster a kind of excellence. That tact can't be learned in the middle of a brawl. All that. The old truths we know. We'll just have to find some new ones."

He spoke for awhile, spinning out his ideas, encouraging us to think along with him, trying to figure a way out of war's letdown, warning us not to collapse in disillusion, enlisting our support without organizing us. We stayed until his father came in and told us that he wouldn't be able to keep the young women waiting much longer.

The men began to move outside. They passed inspection to a man. Not a dull eye among them. Inside, Hancock stood alone, self-sufficient and centered, as the others filed out. I lingered for a moment near the bookcases inspecting the bindings. Opening Pascal, I followed Tad's movements into a room off the library, and from where I stood I could make out the edge of an altar and the trappings of a chapel. It was then that I remembered some rumor that the war had turned him into a French convert.

I left and a few minutes later he appeared on the lawn. I watched him as his eyes followed the lines and chimneys of his home and I imagined that the place had changed little since he was a boy. As he passed at a distance, I noticed his face was strong and composed. He walked with his slight limp towards the sunken garden, where Ashley Melrose, and much to my surprise and jealousy, Hazie Hawes, waited impatiently for him.

2

On the upper reaches of Lexington Avenue in Manhattan is a racial interlude that separates the mixture of plump Germans and freckled Irish from the Anglo population of the Upper East Side before plunging into the black density of Harlem. There, you may have noticed the large broken heart of Emmanuel Josplin twinkling in the morning sun. This valentine cracks in agony on the second-story window of his corner "fix-it" shop and the valve sometimes casts its rosy shadow upon him as he pieces together the chips and splinters of his mending trade. Visible from the street side and etched in black below the lower left ventricle is his motto: "We fix all but a broken heart." The heart pulsates with regularity above the shoppers' heads and across the neighborhood, throbbing with romantic heat. However much it struck me with terror the first time I saw it, there was no denying that it had a vague existence and suffered, and was a reminder of the pain associated with an ill-timed love.

That I happened to be standing in that sanguinary light the following Saturday morning was due to the sexual misadventures of Del Hawes. He had roused me at an early hour and brusquely bawled and cajoled from the street until I appeared at the window. My eyes fuzzily recorded the drive uptown, and we were well above 34th Street before I was fully awake. No less than his motivation, the sun baffled me, and not until we were traveling on upper Fifth did Hawes attempt an explanation. The fact that he kept repeating that it was almost 10:30 in the morning did nothing to make his story more credible.

"I want you to meet a friend of mine," Hawes said. "I thought maybe it would be a good idea to get you out for a change. You don't make money sitting around making up your mind."

"I'd like to meet your friend," I said, "but I usually make my first appearance each morning to an egg."

White-capped governesses lit our way along a fashionable sidestreet. There, Del more or less pushed me in the door of a low-ceilinged teashop. Facing the silver spout of the coffee service, I felt my morning congealing in a more normal order. Spring flowers smiled from the table and the thick linen was sparkling white. The table contrasted with the dark walls crosshatched in Tudor-type timbers, delinquently late in the age of Windsor. Mockingly English, it was one of the few places outside Chinatown where one could order fish for breakfast, and I suppose that's probably one of the reasons I never went there.

Hawes waited patiently until the night airs that shrouded my brain began to lift. I must have been looking at him curiously, because he asked me if something were the matter.

"No, I was just wondering if all that business about ambitious men rising early in the morning was true, because if it is, I think I'm damned to mediocrity," I said.

"Do you really want to know why I'm out so early?"

He was really a bore to spill out such a story at breakfast.

"There's a girl," he began. "And I'm in a stew about her."

She was as demanding as she was beautiful. Somehow word of their liaison had gotten around and was complicating his social life. He said he trusted my advice and wouldn't I like to look her over—much like a horse trainer. He didn't mind the gossip so much but she had dazzled him and he was slipping sideways and couldn't I help straighten him out. As he told me about her, he slouched his large body over the table and stared at his folded hands, looking like a hulking choirboy who had just been cowed by the vicar and was sulking aloud. His oversize ego had been bruised badly by this vixen.

The boor. Why the hell couldn't he keep his affairs to himself? I couldn't understand how he was so hellfire successful about money and have such poor judgment about women.

"What will you do with my opinion?" I asked. "How am I supposed to know how you feel about somebody?"

"Come, Jamison, you're not being fair. Or maybe you shouldn't give the impression you do. I thought you figured yourself to be a good observer. That's your gimmick, isn't it?"

That was also unforgivable—to dent a man's vanity so early on a weekend morning. No man likes to be called inept, even if he can't find a good job for himself.

We sat silently as a refined form of dislike trickled down between us.

There haven't been many times in my life when someone has angered me before noon, for the simple reason that I don't respond fast enough to cause friction that early in the day.

However, Hawes in blurting out his story had touched a nerve. In my circle, we had been taught to control those kinds of outbursts as well as the hilarity or depression that almost always followed them. The inner check on our feelings had a moderating influence among us although the upheaval of the war years had taught us that we had to find a new way to express ourselves. The slaughter in France had kicked the stiffness out of everyone. But that didn't mean there had to be a stampede towards gushing emotionalism. Leaking out your feelings to a near stranger was still inexcusable. I hoped it wasn't a family trait.

But Hawes was not a man to be halted by one skirmish.

"Come on, let's spend the day together anyway," he said. "I insist you meet her."

I hesitated, and then said, "Only after a second cup of coffee, and only because I revere womankind."

A few minutes later we parked beneath Emmanuel Josplin's red heart on Lexington and walked up a flight of stairs whose steps curled at the edge like a pair of old shoes. When we entered, a woman with a round, lifeless face moved slowly toward us. Her eyes were pale, and because her complexion was wan, she appeared rather like the face of the moon.

"Good morning, Mr. Hawes," she said. "I'm afraid you won't see much progress this week. My husband's still stringing the pieces."

She gestured to the rear of the shop where two figures, a man sitting at a table and a woman on the floor, were piecing together the smashed remains of a chandelier, whose skeleton was suspended from the ceiling like a picked fish.

"Thought I'd drop by anyway," Hawes said with an uneasiness in his voice. "How's it coming, Josplin?"

The man in the rear lifted his eyes and nodded. Beside him, a young woman swayed gracefully, the sound of crystals stirring in her fingers like muted bells. Instead of the usual white blouse and long skirt of a shopgirl, she wore a kind of flowing dance costume. Silence embroidered by the tinkling crystal began to ring us in embarrassment. Only the young woman was unconcerned. There was something dramatic about her moves, as if her life intuitively provoked a form of acting in her. Everyone was concentrating on the bell ringer, but she was completely self-possessed and had no intention of greeting us. I decided she needed a rise.

"Is there to be a matinee today, Miss?"

With ease and a show of bodily strength, she glided up from the floor. Aware of her own beauty, she controlled its expression and moved towards us. I remember thinking that each step had a sensual meaning of its own. As she approached, I had the distinct feeling a miracle was going to occur, but all that happened was that the moon-looking woman seemed to fade away. It was obvious that the woman in the harem outfit had Hawes within her power; when I glanced at him, he looked like a sedated gorilla.

When we were introduced, her dark black eyes calmly surveyed mine for gleanings of manliness. I noticed they also evaluated the size of my shoulders, and whatever it was she sought, she didn't find it in me and never looked my way again. There was to be between us not the expectation of some ultimate romance that so often holds people together but the silent acknowledgement that our stars were destined to glide on separate tracks.

Her face, sculpted by high cheekbones, was perfectly framed by masses of black hair and her complexion had the color of off-white petals. Excitement fluttered across her lashes and although she wore no perfume, she smelled of love. I had the feeling that she was incurably passionate. When I recalled Del's talk about the money game, I cringed at the thought that his damned money could also capture this kind of prize.

Hawes moved forward and was standing close to her as doctors do. He stammered, "Would you like to spend the day with us?"

Though she never agreed, her manner assented. She spoke calmly and neither her expression nor movements gave any indication of her real intent. She excused herself and a long fifteen minutes later she reappeared. At the door, when Hawes announced some practical deceit designed to arrest the suspicions of the older couple, her nostrils quivered disapprovingly.

Downstairs, we climbed into his closed black car, circled the neighborhood, and then sped down Madison to a three-story townhouse in the East Sixties. Inside the first-floor apartment where Hawes entertained his mistress, a profusion of gold and

white trappings glittered beneath the heavy cornices. On the ceiling, in rondo, figures of Venus and her maids reclined in a small dome-like cove and in one corner of the room beside a piano, a fan palm waved.

"How do you like it?" Hawes asked when her ladyship retired to bathe. "It's a little too Frenchified for me, but I let her do it over her way."

It had a frizzed-up neoclassical look—three hundred years late and about four thousand miles from home—but it represented a style of opulence that made you think of redoing your own apartment. It also made you think that you might do things here that you wouldn't dream of doing in your moldy old parlor.

He crossed the room and pushed aside the two sliding doors parting the wall to unveil a lavishly decorated bedroom. It had a warm rich look, as if desires were exquisitely satisfied and left to melt there. Honey-looking and flesh-colored, it waited for some golden lion to stalk in. There was in that room some trembling pursuit and crazed response that led to the summits of pleasure. We could hear Pamela splashing in her bath.

"She'll be out in a minute. I'll fix a drink meanwhile. See if you can find a place to sit under all those cushions. There must be a seat there somewhere. Sorry it's messy. I know she brings other people here." Then resignedly, he added, "But if I didn't keep her, somebody else would."

When he disappeared into the kitchen, I had an instinct to flee; my haircloth mores were colliding with the satin indulgence of a more favored class. But I stayed because I wanted to see this

courtesan again. She came in wearing a kimono. Soft on soft, the bright material clung to her and swayed gently across her voluptuous body. Coming and going, she set off firecrackers in my imagination.

She wasn't in the room a moment before she sent Del scurrying to the telephone for lunch from a nearby restaurant. Then she turned back and closed herself behind the doors to the bedroom and wasn't heard from again for over an hour. The lunch arrived and Hawes with no apology made the Filipino waiters return the napkin-covered plates until madame was ready. When she finally re-emerged and was reclined on an Empire-inspired lounge in much the same way as the ladies on the ceiling, Hawes again sent for the luncheon. It promptly reappeared, and save for a great quantity of champagne spilled on the rug by one of the large-eyed waiters, the food was savored and the dishes sent rattling back to the restaurant.

Pamela said, "Del, why don't you set the telephone working and invite a few friends over?"

Then she lay back and closed her eyes. I looked at her and at Hawes, but he could only shrug his shoulders. I sat there for a long time without saying a word while Del rang up some people, few of whom he had met more than once. She was the most sumptuous visual feast I ever laid my eyes on. If ever a mendicant sought the food of life, he needn't traipse further. But my tongue was jammed; I was so perplexed that I couldn't talk although I fancied I could almost taste her. Then I stood up. The event was too ludicrous. I was going to leave.

At that, she opened her eyes and said, “Del, don’t send him away. Tell him he’ll have to stay the day.”

She expressed herself in a deep-voiced chiding way, in tones that resonantly clung to the heavy décor for a moment before evaporating.

While Del chatted on the phone, she motioned me over. “Are you shy?” she asked, “and should I ask if you like my gown? Or are you judgmental, or what?”

“I was just wondering if you were living backwards,” I said. “Something about you is too young to be so experienced, or so wise, or something like that.”

She smiled. Following the advice of a European friend of mine who adored women, I sat very close to her. He said in doing so, you both lowered your voices. The deeper the tone, the easier the message got through, making it easier for the chemicals to get stirred up.

She said lightly, “Helps me make people feel uneasy. I’ll remember to look like that this afternoon. What do you think?”

“Me? I think I’ll murder Hawes and run away with you,”

“That’s fine with me. But get his money first.”

I answered crisply, “I don’t like his money.”

“You mustn’t get personal about money, friend. His money shops as well as any other.”

On the phone, Del was urging an invitation, "Come on over, Charlie. We're all going to get mild." He laughed and turned to us. "Charlie thinks its bad form to start before sundown."

Pamela said, "Tell him we'll draw the blinds."

While he phoned, Pamela told me about the thing she liked second-best—shopping.

"Once I did thirty stores in a row."

That she owned one hundred twenty hats was the only other numbered fact that she ever told me. She spoke of the other things she liked to do. She enjoyed lying on the beach and floating in warm water. But she didn't like to drive fast or be hurried. She was soft and slow and liked to possess things. When she took my hand in hers, it seemed the most natural thing for her to do. She was the loveliest scandal I'd ever known and, I think, the only pagan.

She had once danced. Formerly, there had been morning lessons and evening recitals, and a strain of exercises, but she didn't perform now. However, she gave the impression that she arranged, or more specifically, advised programs for a few of her friends. Even now there was something doing. Her friends would be along. I would see for myself.

"I'm connected with a small dance company and I practice with them when I'm not tired."

I gathered she didn't attend class too often. She certainly wasn't up to it today. Today it was as if she were lulled almost to sleep by the exhausting remembrance of some immense love battle.

"It's nice this time of day, quiet and lazy. It seems like the day just upped and stopped this afternoon, and is waiting for us to want something. I can barely remember yesterday and it's too early to think about tonight."

If I asked too many questions, she would smooth my hand or watch her own blue-veined hands glide along a satin pillow, inspecting her nails, or she would doze off languidly. Then she would open her eyes but they were heavy and she would close them again, while her musky odor yawned through the room. I told her she must be a sleeping machine but she didn't bother to hear me.

The brocade-backed door opened, and an inquisitive dwarf with a round face peered in. He was barely higher that the knob.

"You mean, I'm the first one," he said smiling in a way that puffed out his cheeks.

Pamela lazily opened her eyes. He seemed to have disturbed her just this side of paradise. Her long lashes blossomed, and she motioned him to come in.

"I've brought one of my friends," he said.

"Bring her in for inspection," Pamela said, presuming the visitor's gender.

He faded behind the door for a moment and reappeared with a six-foot showgirl of wonderful proportion. He hobbled in on his short legs, terribly proud of his bauble.

"How do you like my new girl?"

Pamela drawled, "I think she needs a little eroding."

I bit my lip and smiled into my drink as she added dryly, "Wind her up and walk her over here."

Pamela never introduced people to one another. Nor did she pay attention to last names. Words seemed to have little meaning to her as if they were unable to express what was really happening around her. Perhaps she felt that our primitive eyes were our only necessity; only through them could we act out the things we wanted from one another. She could have been a silent star in a gushy motion picture with those eyes. Or perhaps she was only expressing the emotions of her dance friends who were accustomed to jumping about without speaking parts.

Pamela entreated Johnny, the little man, to entertain her on the piano. He obliged by playing a waltz rapidly. He would be playing with few breaks for the next ten hours while his girlfriend filled her address book.

There was a clatter at the door and in came a young man pushing a teacart filled with flowers. The iron wheels groaned across the rug, leaving their tracks on the thick pile. The cart remained parked behind Pamela's lounge for the rest of the day, and I vaguely recall that somewhere around midnight its blossoms began to wilt from all the cigarette smoke. But they

were new-burst buds now, delivered by one of the freshest talents on Broadway. He had one of those happier-than-life faces that you couldn't help but like. As he approached Pamela I had the impression that he was going to break into song.

"What colors," she thanked him.

She took one of the stems and fondled it, stroking the soft petals along her face. It was a blending of two beautiful elements, neither spoiling the other, both enhanced and softened by the caress.

"They'll live a beautiful death today," she said and kissed the giver in a way that would make most men trumpet.

As people began to arrive, Hawes dropped the phone and lodged himself near her worship.

Suddenly, as happens at a party, there was a roomful of guests. A group of heavy-set men came in with their lackadaisical-looking women. Nobody talked to them however, and everybody seemed glad when they left. They had a connection to Hawes but no one knew in exactly what way.

A troupe of dancers, traveling in a pack, leapt into the room twirling and bouncing, bringing with them the heavy wooden smell of their rehearsal halls. One narrow-waisted blade dove across the room in two skips, sailed right over the lounge, spun in midair and landed on his knees facing her. They appeared obsequious however and much too happy, as if they owed someone money. Among them was a pale figure whose wispy beauty shone so fragilely that I drew her closer to greet Pamela.

They knew one another and the teenager bent down and kissed Pamela and solemnly whispered something in her ear.

The dancers were fresh and straight-backed and Pamela said, "You're like flowers—long stems and all."

They all crowded around her and spoke at once. The conversation ricocheted around Pamela and she punctuated their remarks with her own patronizing responses. I couldn't tell if they were being friendly or if they were simply engaged in some form of offstage performance. They all came to the end of their nervous banter at the same time, sidled away laughing, seeking plates of vegetables delivered by the caterer.

The piano notes sparkled around the room, chasing the laughter of a newcomer, greeting one of the dancers. The dwarf felt the counterpoint of voices, and swung into a faster tempo. Supine on her couch, Pamela flicked away one of Del's caresses.

I needed a companion. The pale wispy dancer held my glance with her large eyes and we quickly joined.

"She's venom," the girl hissed.

The girl obviously meant our hostess. Pamela was the only one in the room who could inspire that much emotion. She received the flattery of love and hate, because everyone envied her. The sleepy wench was exactly the person she wanted to be. It was like being in a room with a single celebrity. Everyone wanted to spoil her. Does she need a cushion? Can you believe that mass of hair? Would anyone else dare wear that outfit?

I replied, “She has warm hands, that I know. And more, I suspect.”

The gamine said, “I suppose you’re one of her drones.”

“I haven’t been initiated yet, if that’s what you mean. A matter of fact, I’ve never seen her before today.” Attempting to distract her, I said, “Have you noticed how many pillows there are in this room? The place must have kept some mill busy for a week. You can hardly sit, it’s so lumpy.”

She paid no attention to me. “Do you know what that witch did to us?”

Refilling her glass, I said, “I haven’t the vaguest idea.”

She looked hurt, and I felt bad that I hadn’t sympathized, shown more care. She was the image of the downtrodden, and though I knew most dancers were physically strong, she looked frail, the kind that suffers in a passive voice. In the arts, the dedicated regularly receive wayward wounds. We call them naïve or overly sensitive and are surprised to find their anguish so real.

“Sorry I offended you. But you’re being so dreadfully serious.”

Hawes, leaving his station beside Pamela, joined us, and I introduced him to my sad-faced friend. Why he looked out of place at his own party, I don’t know, but that was my reaction, as if he had taken a step down in class, like one of his racehorses. Even his banking schemes seemed to be drowsing under Pamela’s influence.

"My friend's emotions," I said to Hawes, "are all unsettled because of the woman lounging there beside the flower cart."

We were all talking about her as if commenting on a local masterpiece.

Hawes looked over at Pamela and then back at the dancer. "She shakes me up a bit too. What is it that's bothering you, my dear? Anything basic like jealousy?"

She replied, "She gave us dancers a raw deal. She came to us with promises that she would help. She's some rich man's bitch. She was going to give us money for a production. But she's reneged."

I turned to Hawes to anticipate his reaction. For a moment I thought he might call for his checkbook and order up a theater. But apparently not. Bond salesmen who called on him must have noticed that same surprised, faintly humorous look, one that seemed to question the petitioner's sanity. Hawes searched her eyes, and gave her an ambiguous look. Then he reached for a bottle of champagne and poured a river of bubbles into her thin-rimmed glass. She responded with a weak, grateful smile.

"I guess it's not your problem, is it," she said and turned away.

"Sponge," was all that Hawes said.

I don't know if she heard him, but I was mortified. Once a gauche acquaintance of mine, standing behind a well-known actress, disparaged the thickness of the woman's ankles in a

loud voice. I had hoped that I would never have to feel as I did then—but here I was again.

Dozens of people had arrived. I turned around to survey the masquerade. Into that gold-shaded room were compressed all the social types hardy enough to withstand the pace and excitement of the years that followed. But one would be hard-pressed to call them the flowers of a new age. It wasn't so much a gathering of friends this afternoon as a convention of celebrants, huffing on their new noisemakers, trying on their new masks. Already careless missionaries went among the uninitiated spreading the gospel of alcohol. Come, let us worship Bacchus. There would be much coming and going. There was another party and they really couldn't stay. But it had been fun and they were glad they had stopped by. No caravan was ever to have so many waystations or drink so deep from the well.

I thought of the other drawing rooms in town with quieter colors for the most part, comfortably the same from year to year so that one always felt at home. Tea was being served in the overstuffed parlors of the Madison mansions and friends of mine were congregating to damn all the new outrages against their sensibilities. Dada, for instance, had incited their contempt as well as other recent exhibitions of strange behavior, such as people conducting themselves abominably in public. Many of my friends would vanish into unfulfilled lives, but some would remain untouched by the new madness and keep faith with our Edwardian past. Among these last, their doors would always be open to one another. A friend, after all, was one who came to stay.

The white-paneled doors of the bedroom had been opened to accommodate the latest arrivals. The rear drapes had been pulled aside, and the curved window seat served as an observation post into the garden where the late-day sun cast soft shadows. Behind this and other elegant facades on the East Side, tiny squares of lawn were spliced into the smallest patches of horticulture—miniature arboretums. Through the bushes and birdbaths we could see that workmen had raised a red-striped tent on the plot behind ours. There would be another party, and people were already deserting this one.

Those assembled at the window in Pamela's boudoir had already appointed an emissary to visit the neighboring party. Huff Harris, the Broadway singer, who had wheeled in the flower cart earlier, was designated to explore the advantages of trading this party for that one. He was personable, full of dash and charm. Bottles of champagne were tucked inside his jacket, and a bundle of flowers stuffed under his arm. We watched him tumble over fences, juggling his tribute. Trespassing one enclosure, he offered a flower to an old woman and bowed graciously. When he hurdled into the midst of the adjoining party he was greeted warmly. In fifteen minutes he returned with the outrageous announcement that there was to be a cockfight under the canvas and that we were all invited to attend.

"They have a couple bandy roosters over there and a fat hen. Plus a coop full of beautiful girls."

It was an invitation everyone accepted; even Pamela deserted her cushions to join the adventure. Someone managed to set up a network of stepladders between our party and the other and

we all went climbing off to the cockfight. Alone in Pamela's drawing room, the little man continued to finger the intricacies of some sad song.

I remember quite vividly all that happened until then, but as I began elevating up and down and over those fences in the last rays of the day, a mild gin fog began floating along the rims of my vision.

It was a rather gruesome affair, those two cocks scratching at one another. There were preliminaries, as a hen was waltzed before the bloodshot eyes of the two arrogant males. Everybody thought that part was good fun, but after the birds started clawing each other in earnest, it was another story. The birds strutted and screeched and sometimes took an unconcerned sidestep before coming back with a bloody scrape to the midsection. Some of the onlookers were more repulsed than others, but no eyes showed more horror than those of the sad dancer. On the other hand, the most excited by the spectacle was Pamela herself.

As the birds circled madly around, she turned her head and laughed, "Don't they remind you of my dancer friends?"

The dancers fell away from her as they would from a corpse on stage. They had fawned and expended their charms upon Pamela and she had repaid them with ridicule. Sickened by the bloodbath and stung by her rebuke, they silently drifted off. The day would change the sad-faced dancer. Years later I saw her high-stepping in the chorus of a black and white revue, older and much sadder. Only her makeup smiled—a vaudeville hoofer in spangles with soul all astrain.

The bout between the two birds continued as they mangled each other's feathers. The handlers insisted on poking the birds toward one another at the slightest pause. Transfixed, a lovely thin girl shivered with delight through the entire gouging. Inspecting too close, one man received a hand scratch and was walked off to a doctor. There had been, of course, some wagering, and after the battle arguments flared up but were smoothed over quickly by the respective hosts. Actually the birds had fought to a draw. They both died.

"Now that they're dead," Pamela said, "and it's so messy over here, why don't you all come back to my place."

The thought that the two parties should consolidate was acceptable and the others followed us up and over the fences back to Pamela's rooms, servants, service and all. Through the evening, dim figures could be seen entering the patio under the adjoining canvas, screaming at the sight of the carnage. That invariably woke up the hen. She had slept through most of the fight. There was nothing new in her nest.

We made some favorable additions to our party. A tall and stunning English actress came over with the others. She was refreshing and outspoken and the eligible men from our crowd began buzzing around her as soon as she entered. Announcing that she was Melissa Downes, she deftly deflated the confidence of several boors until she had selected out three or four of us she deemed worthy foils.

She was, like many Englishwomen, not influenced or even aware of the social climate of other countries. But we were her kind. It was plain to see she liked the crowd. Same madcap and

loose ends. All around, things were pretty much the same down her mews.

"I've been here a week and I'm going so fast I'm afraid I'll never run on English time again. Everything's at double Greenwich here. But I'm trying to keep up, marching from one madness to another." She continued, "Last night was fun. Not that the fire brigade thought so. In the end, they were probably happy to get their waterwagon back at all."

"What?" I asked.

"One of the fire companies keeps its garage doors open, so me and my mates ponied up and drove off in their red wagon. Didn't even need a key. But take my advice and never drive one of those things, love. It rumbles right and shimmies left and gives your kidneys a bounce."

"Did you get caught?"

"No, we drove into the park so as not to wake the neighborhood. And we were having a good time riding around . . . " she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Until the Mounties spied us. Damned near caught us too. Came galloping after us. Fire trucks aren't as fast as they look."

"And they pinched you?"

"They chased but didn't pinch. Pinching came later. It was dark so we jumped off and up onto one of those sundials they have scattered around the park and we struck a pose and they sailed right past us. Must have thought we were the likes of Apollo and Daphne. Anyway, Jonathan thought we were because he tried to catch me in the bushes, but all he got for his efforts was a stick in the eye."

Speaking to an Englishwoman in America is like playing a fast net game. Melissa Downes had clear, cold eyes and the beset quality in them was one of determination. She was formally aggressive and had obviously intended to inspire some action. Among the colonials now, she hoped to carve out her empire quickly. She had already surveyed the situation between Del and Pamela, and though my mind was fuzzy, I felt a rumbling of competition. So, I precipitated the match by taking Melissa by the arm and marching her straight over to our hostess.

Pamela took Melissa off her guard immediately by addressing her in French, to which the actress responded haltingly. As Melissa stumbled along, Pamela brushed her hand through her hair, and turned away to chat with someone else. Then, with a nice sense of timing, she returned to Melissa, who was struggling along some Gallic construction and commanded, "Coil up here and be comfortable."

Gliding up from her couch quickly, Pamela looked back at Melissa who had taken her place and said, "Is that how I look? I must remind you all of the court tart."

As Pamela took my arm and walked away, Melissa blistered from the smiles of Pamela's admirers.

We had a drink near the rear window and watched the wet night descend. Later, returning to her lounge, Pamela said to the ensconced actress, "Up out of your nest."

Melissa, startled by Pamela's outrageousness, laughed appreciatively and all but swore her allegiance.

Pamela returned to her original nest. Those who followed the tableau were pleased that it was over. It was like the day after elections and all was in order again. A challenger from a far country was put down by the local champion. The natives cheered and resumed celebrating.

Time was slipping away.

Desire, etching on the male matrix, filtered across the warmly burnished room. Pamela's presence pulsated among us, urging us on, and when the acids of lust began burning shrewd inventions into our imaginations, it was Pamela who absorbed our craving—her lips washed with champagne where men began to force their urges.

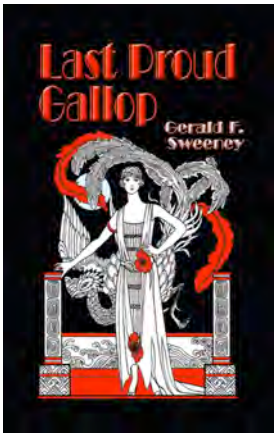
The timid were leaving. And the spirit of the party changed. Those of us who remained became edgy in the cushion-comfort of the gilded room, responding to the drowsy contradictions in our blood. At one stage, Melissa came over and slipped her arm under mine, and we idly drifted in and out of unfinished thoughts. I was tired by then and the embers of passion were extinguished by the promise of another day.

Later Pamela rose from her lounge, her body taut for a moment. Slowly she gazed around at the remaining males and made us

all understand why we had lingered on. She was selecting one of us, and I again felt a crush of emotions stirring inside me. She leveled her black eyes around the room and choose Del Hawes, and he could hardly restrain himself. They disappeared, and so did everyone else, two by four.

At the end, I was about all the party that was left. The servants had been sent packing hours before. But the little man at the piano played on and we sang the Princeton victory song every other time, until he told me he was Ohio State, and then we sang his rouser too. With shoes off, I had propped myself up on Pamela's couch, and threw cherries at Venus and her troop of vixens on the ceiling. Man was made of pretzel bones and gin mist and girls had berries for navels. The lights of the chandelier became gauzy eggs and sleep came. Once, the bedroom wall parted slightly and Hawes stood in his bottoms surveying the debris, and he was ribboned red and bleeding. The music had long stopped. But the little man was cold so I pulled the velvet off the piano to keep our shoulders warm.

Then Hawes was shaking me but he didn't look like one of the fighting birds anymore. Sleep was sustenance, but when the odor came strong and close, I knew it was Pamela who was leaning over me, not him. She was in her kimono again and Hawes was gone. On the telephone, she told someone that she needed something and he should expect her before dawn.



A novel about how men and women love differently, notably a war hero and a true American courtesan. The Jazz Age is about to erupt. Six vibrant, wealthy young youths seek fulfillment in Long Island's polo society, Manhattan and old Southampton.

LAST PROUD GALLOP

by Gerald F. Sweeney