

Two Short Novels

NEW YORK/
Siena

STEVEN KEY MEYERS



The two sharply-rendered short novels of New York / Siena rush with wit and verve to provide two period takes on American ways of "growing up." In *The Man Who Owned New York*, fledgling cleric "Dick Rover" Stackpole commits a gaudy crime to secure a farmer's claim to his parish's property. *Springtime in Siena* follows a young academic leading a semester-abroad student group to Tuscany in 1974 who coldly modifies his own voracious behavior.

New York/Siena

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Steven Key Meyers

New York / Siena: Two Short Novels

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Visit the author's website: stevenkeymeyers.com

In somewhat different form, *Springtime In Siena* appeared online 2002-2003 at FreeAirPress.com.

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First Edition

1.

EDITH WHARTON DIED the other day.

I always wondered what she made of him the Press thirty years ago dubbed *The Man Who Owns New York*, and regretted that she never treated of his sensational story in her incomparably nuanced fiction. Now she never will. But an outlander (and one with a beautiful daughter) fighting for the colossal fortune in Manhattan real estate stolen from his forebears, the sanctimonious occupiers wheeling up battalions of legal artillery, while the city's social bastions rock in resistance and capitulation—Wharton would have made a great thing of it. Even Henry James might have found sufficiently evocative the return to New York of a lordly Tory family, exiled since the Revolutionary War, in the person of a rangy Kansas farmer.

Now James and Wharton both have gone without making use of him or his story. If it is not to be forgotten, it seems left to me. I was there, a figure on the periphery but placed so as to

see the whole, and it happened that I—or rather, my crime (*oh, my gaudy crime!*)—resolved the episode. An account might also serve as my spiritual autobiography, for without *The Man Who Owned New York* I might never have found my own true path.

It was, then, a pull at the doorbell that precipitated me into the affair.

The doorbell in question belonged to the rectory of All Angels, the old church that stoppers the maw of Wall Street at Broadway. At eleven o'clock of the forenoon, on Wednesday, November 6, 1907, in only the second month of my first, and decidedly plum, parish assignment, I was at my desk outside Father Day's office. Supposedly I was double-checking his calculations for a Greenwich Street store lease, but in truth I was admiring how fallen leaves complement crumbling grave markers, the soft, sodden colors melting into the half-dissolved stone. Perhaps I was also daydreaming about my future; five weeks in it proved New York the loneliest place I'd ever known.

Then the doorbell rang. Usually Mrs. Brown or one of her maids answered it, but for some reason *I* bounded downstairs. Through the etched glass I saw the silhouette of a man wearing a homburg hat. I opened the door, prepared to send him round to the tradesmen's entrance in back, when from the side came a frightening white flash: *Floomp!* Startled and half-blind, I saw a photographer retreating down the steps with his three-legged contraption, while the man in the homburg said, "Father Day?"

"What is this? Who are you? Did that man take my *photograph?*"

"Hopkins of the *World*," he replied, naming the city's most scurrilous newspaper. "May I come in, Father Day?"

"The rector is busy," I said. "I'm Father Stackpole, his secretary, and *no*, you certainly may *not* come in."

"All right, Rover Boy, all right," said Hopkins. "Keep your shirt on."

My voice shook as I repeated my name, for his spontaneous appellation infuriated me.

Heroes of a popular series of boys' books, the Rover Boys were the epitome of clean-cut, blue-eyed, manly all-American youth, resourceful foes of wrongdoers and miscreants. And *Dick Rover* happened to have been my nickname at Groton, Yale, even Divinity. In my schooldays I took it in good part—behind the mockery lay envy, especially of my playing-field exploits—but as an ordained minister of the cloth I thought it impertinent coming from a stranger.

"Well, Reverend, Mr. Denton Slaughter of Ellinwood, Kansas came by the *World* this morning to tell us how All Angels Church stole his family's farm in lower Manhattan more than a hundred years ago. According to him, everything your church says it owns really belongs to him, and he's here to collect."

"Stuff and nonsense!" I snapped with utter disdain. *Floom!* "Good *day*, gentlemen."

"Thanks, Dick," Hopkins said flippantly as I slammed the door shut.

I returned upstairs and reported the incident to Father Day, ending by asking, "Can there be any truth to such a claim?"

Father Day rocked his chair back and removed the green eyeshade he customarily wore at his desk. Stroking the fading black eye thus revealed (suffered kneeling in private devotions), he sought the answer in the opulence of his office, which like the rest of the rectory resembled one of the more exclusive men's clubs. Its walls were paneled in walnut, Tiffany windows muffled Broadway's noise and colored the vista of

graves, there was a Saint-Gaudens overmantel of bronze, a choice Burne-Jones *Holy Family*, and a suite of gleaming mahogany furniture made by the Herter Brothers.

Sighing, he joined his palms in a steeple atop the dome of his stomach.

"Exactly *how* All Angels came to be so richly endowed, we cannot know with certainty, Albert," he pronounced. "Tradition tells us it is to Queen Anne's munificence we are beholden, but the exact truth seems lost to the mists of time. We must simply be humbly grateful that it is so."

"Yes, Father, but —"

"Never mind that we work like slaves to make proper eleemosynary use of it, naturally our property makes us a target for every kind of sharper. It is self-evident that the person you speak of is one of them. Unless, indeed, he is only the dupe of a larger conspiracy."

"Yes, but if —"

"Money and property go, in the end, to the virtuous. That is the truth on which our country was founded, Albert, and why America comes every day closer to being the earthly paradise."

"But —"

The steeple collapsed and Father Day's manner took on the austerity that reminded me he would one day be a bishop. He rocked his stocky body forward, clapped the eyeshade back to his brow, and reached for the ground lease he had been marking up when I interrupted.

"Father Stackpole, we have work to do!"

2.

OVER THE SOUP at lunch, I braved Father Day's frown to relate my Press encounter to our colleagues Fathers Andrews and Morris.

"‘Stuff and nonsense,’ I told them, and they left."

"Where on earth could such a notion arise?" asked Father Morris with a sniff.

"Isn't this a claim that recurs?" suggested corpulent Father Andrews, who had been at All Angels since before I was born.

"There are indeed occasional letters," Father Day confirmed. "Missives scrawled from such places as Iowa or Ohio (however you pronounce it) claiming ownership of our demesne on the basis of obscure family legends."

"How do we respond to them?" I asked.

"Why, they go to Sullivan & Cromwell, of course," he answered, naming our attorneys. "How *they* shut them up, I have no idea. But they do it. Rest assured, what All Angels possesses no pretended claimant will tear away from it."

"*Laches*," said Father Andrews.

"*Laches*?" I repeated. "What an odd word. What does it mean?"

In silence a maid removed the soup bowls, and Mrs. Brown herself brought in the roast and placed it before Father Day. Lunch was our most substantial meal. Father Day complimented Mrs. Brown, then answered my question before taking up the more congenial task of carving.

"*Laches* means the right to dispute someone's possession of something lapses with time. In New York State, I believe, after fifteen years."

"Unless possession is due to fraud," murmured Father Andrews, "in which case there is no—*um*—statute of limitations."

Father Day's knife and fork clattered to the tabletop, and he stared balefully.

"The matter is *moot*," he said, uttering the *t* in so final a manner the roast was sprayed. "It is true, there is an unfortunate murkiness to the record. During the Revolution, confusion reigned, for even as the Continental Army was expelling the British from the city, our Episcopalian predecessors were giving the boot to the Church of England. And the fire of 1793 burned not only the church but its entire archives. But though we cannot document exactly *how* All Angels came to possess two hundred acres of lower Manhattan, after one hundred twenty-five years' uninterrupted possession, and in the complete absence of any evidence of wrongdoing, we are quite, *quite* safe."

Father Day resumed carving and we passed the plates. As we ate, he reverted more cheerfully to his favorite topic.

"As I was telling Albert this morning, money—property—*land* have a natural affinity for the good. They come to us as though they know the way by heart. And thank goodness for it! Only last week, Morgan personally stopped the Panic—saved

the *country*—by advancing the Treasury fifty million out of his own pocket. The affinity of money to virtue, to *power*, is *most* beneficial to society.”

He shook his head in admiration. How he would have loved J.P. Morgan as a parishioner! But Morgan, alas, was faithful to the Stuyvesant Square congregation of St. George’s.

“There are seeming exceptions,” he continued, “rich men who appear villainous. But as if by magic—though really by the iron laws of economics—money works its transformative powers. For example, rough tales are told about Mr. Rockefeller in the Pennsylvania oil fields years ago—but see him today! The sweetest, most philanthropic gentleman! I regret that he worships with the Baptists, but that is his affair. And Mr. Carnegie! Quite the rascal in his time, they say, but today so rich and generous!

“This affinity, to be sure, brings us heavy duties. As the good amass ever more wealth, so increases the irksomeness of finding ways of using it for the benefit of those we have always with us—to wit, the poor. Not to mention the profligate and lazy. It is our duty to do so, however. To a due degree: Not so much as to impede wealth’s beautiful multiplication, which its concentration so materially assists.”

He paused to chew and swallow.

“We need merely look about us to see this concentration of wealth find expression in the skyscrapers that lift our neighborhood higher year by year (closer to heaven, as I like to think), until—how tall is the Singer Building to be?”

The slender black skeleton of the Singer Building clawed at the sky a few blocks to the north. Its tower, widening to describe a lantern that would resemble a great rococo torchiere on high, already rose higher than the Flatiron Building, previously tallest in the world.

“Forty-seven stories,” I offered.

"For-ty sev-en sto-ries!" sang Father Day. "On land leased from All Angels for ninety-nine years. I negotiated the deal myself, though of course the Vestry reviewed it. Over the next century the Singer Building will produce *millions* with which to carry on our good works."

"More churches?" I asked. "More chapels?"

"And above all, the new Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the largest gothic edifice in the world!"

There was a pause before Father Andrews inquired, "But, Father Day, do the poor bear entire blame for their poverty? Surely it takes money to make money?"

"More proof of its love for the good!" retorted the rector. "Its growth merely amplifies the original, hard-won results of enterprise."

"Only the other day our Warden, Mr. Shoatsbury, was telling me about *his* start in business. He was a Western Union boy in the day before stock tickers. Seems he was the fastest lad in New York, and whenever news came in, he ran it like the wind to its destination, no matter the distance or weather, and eventually his effort caught someone's eye, and so on and so forth. He happened to mention that his net worth today exceeds *one hundred million dollars*. A better man I never met."

That afternoon I was drafting routine letters raising office rents on Fulton Street when I heard Father Day's private telephone ring repeatedly, I guessed with calls from our Vestrymen. His voice took on an edge of frustration.

He called me in.

"Albert, would you please go out and find a copy of the *World*? The extra edition."

"Certainly, Father."

This novel assignment (the *Herald-Tribune* and *Wall Street Journal* made up our daily budget of news) was easy to

accomplish, for a newsy was bawling “*Extra! Extra!*” at the bottom of our very steps.

I handed over two cents — and goggled.

On the front page, printed in thick black strokes by the crude photographic reproduction of the day, was the picture of an enraged prig in a clerical collar. That was myself. The caption read ‘*Rover Boy*’ *Throws Out Our Reporter*. Huge headlines proclaimed the scoop:

ALL ANGELS ESTATE QUESTIONED
“AM RIGHTFUL HEIR TO
HEART OF CITY,”
DECLARES D. SLAUGHTER OF KANSAS
Church Theft Detailed—Enormous Wealth At Stake
Farmer Claims 200 Acres Valued At
\$1,000,000,000
Billion-Dollar Inheritance Makes Man
Richest In World!

These headlines, screaming with the conviction of print, I placed in front of Father Day.

“*Dammit,*” he ejaculated. He skimmed the articles, then quoted, with his customary hint of mockery, “‘living embodiment of Dick Rover.’ Indeed, Dick’s the fair-haired one? All right, Albert, I’m handing this matter over to you.”

“Father?”

With distaste he folded up the newspaper and held it across the leather expanse of his desk.

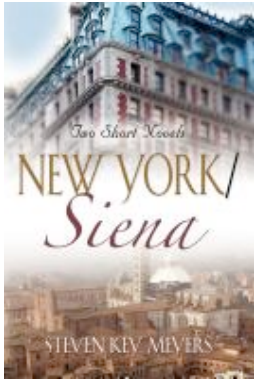
Steven Key Meyers

"I have neither the temper nor the time, whereas this fairy tale seems to pique your curiosity, and clearly you've a rapport with the Press. Take care of it, forthwith. Father Morris can take your desk in the meantime. Nip it in the bud, is my advice."

"Father?"

In exasperation he threw the paper at me.

"It's all yours, Rover Boy."



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