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The pleasing notions of Novotny have ranged, in these pages, from a lake of pure bourbon to a lottery with Helen of Troy as prize; but the peculiar talent of Jesse Haimes may well be the most enviable idea that Novotny has yet conceived. (WARNING: I have gathered that there are a few readers who object to sex in fantasy. It seems only fair to warn these poor abstainers from the splendid source that they should immediately and rapidly skip to page 53.)

A Trick or Two

by JOHN NOVOTNY

AT NINE THAT EVENING LAURA walked beautifully into the apartment.

"Hello, Jesse," she said softly. "For some reason I thought you had given up."

"You underestimate me, Laura," he said, removing her coat. "And yourself. You never looked lovelier."

"Thank you, Jesse," she smiled, accepting a glass of champagne. "I've never been in better shape. I'm ready to go ten rounds, if necessary."

"That was uncalled-for, darling," he said, hurt. "You make me sound crude. Perhaps in other days . . . but now I'm of a different mind."

"Fine," Laura applauded, laughing gayly. "Don't tell me what role you're playing tonight. It will be more fun if I have to guess."

Jesse had a wonderful dinner waiting and they ate by candlelight.

Later they sipped benedictine by the picture window overlooking the river.

"You make it seem so worthwhile, Jesse," Laura murmured. "There are moments when I almost feel like giving the devil his due."

"That's what I'm planning on," Jesse said casually.

"Oh?" Laura answered questioningly. "You expect me to succumb, to offer myself to you, out of the goodness of my heart?"

"Or the badness," Jesse added.

"I wish you luck."

"Thank you," Jesse said. "Then you agree that should you stand before me unclothed, I might assume, rightfully, that I have won the game?"

"Unclothed—by force?"

"No, my dear. No force," he smiled.

"I agree that under those circum-

stances you'd have a pretty good assumption," Laura said. "When do you expect me to go into this disrobing act?"

"Most anytime," Jesse said. "To hasten your decision, let me show you a few little presents I have for you."

Jesse kept himself from hurrying as he led her to the two closet doors. He opened one and pointed to the furs hanging inside.

"My choice?" Laura asked.

"All of them," Jesse said. "Look them over."

She stepped inside the closet and Jesse smiled. His mind raced over the events of the past week.

Jesse Haimes sipped his Scotch pensively, then placed the glass decisively on the table and leaned toward his friend.

"Mind you, Tom," he said, "it isn't that I haven't tried. Lord knows, I've played the gentleman, the brother, and the man-of-the-world. I've been patient, impatient, persuasive."

"Generous?" Tom inquired.

"Abundantly," Jesse insisted. "I even bought her a poodle."

"And through it all," Tom Casey smiled, "Miss Laura Carson remains unconquered, unsullied, unbowed."

"Disgustingly so," Jesse admitted.

"Let's have another drink," Tom suggested, signaling the waiter. "Or do you have a conference this afternoon?"

"Nothing," Jesse said. "A few

letters to get out and some desks must be moved. We're changing the accounting room to the Forty-eighth Street side."

"Dry work," Tom Casey said. "Another scotch is definitely in order."

They sat back, waiting for the drinks, and pondered the enigma of Miss Laura Carson. Tom watched Jesse light a cigarette. As Jesse brought his hand down to drop the match in the ash tray, Tom reached forward and snapped his fingers.

"Abra-ca-dabra," he said. The ash tray vanished. Jesse's hand froze and he stared at the spot where the glass container had rested. Finally he smiled foolishly.

"Well done, Tom," he said. "How did you do it?"

"Magic," Tom said, self-consciously. "I don't usually fool around in public, but I just had the urge."

"I didn't know that was your hobby."

"It's not," Tom laughed. "That's my trick. Nothing else."

"Bring it back," Jesse said.

"I can't," Tom confessed. "I can make small items disappear. Where they go, I have no idea."

Jesse stopped smiling and began to frown. He restrained himself as the waiter approached and served the drinks. He watched the man walk away; then he turned hurriedly back to Tom Casey.

"Are you trying to tell me that this business is on the level?" he

demanded, gesturing aimlessly at the center of the table. Tom nodded foolishly.

"I don't believe it," Jesse said. "After all . . . come now, Tom."

"Put your swizzle stick out there," Tom said.

Jesse slowly pushed the plastic stirring rod to the spot indicated. Tom snapped his fingers at the stick.

"Abra-ca-dabra," he said. The object disappeared.

"Good Lord," Jesse breathed. "And to think I doubted Dunninger."

The two men sat silently until Jesse called the waiter.

"Two more scotches," he ordered, "and an ash tray."

The waiter brought the drinks and the ash tray, surveyed the table and its occupants suspiciously, and departed.

"Can you teach me?" Jesse asked.

"I don't think so," Tom explained. "An old proofreader out in Denver told me about it. Everybody has one trick he can do. The proofreader could change water into whisky. That was his trick and a very handy one."

"Do you mean I have some bit of magic I can do?" Jesse asked excitedly.

"Everyone has," Tom said. "Mine you just saw."

"How does a person find out his trick—if that's what you call it?"

Tom shrugged.

"Most people never do, I guess,"

he said. "I just stumbled on mine."

"Maybe mine is the same as yours," Jesse suggested.

"Try it," Tom said, isolating the ash tray. Jesse replaced it with a swizzle stick.

"The waiter would raise hell about another ash tray," he explained. He took a deep breath, snapped his fingers, and intoned the necessary phrase. The stirrer remained.

"Did I do something wrong?" Jesse asked hopefully. Tom shook his head.

"Perfect technique," he said. "Negative result."

"I guess I have a different talent," Jesse murmured. "Damn it! How am I going to find out what it is?"

"It's not that important," Tom Casey said. "Unless it's the water and whisky deal, of course."

The waiter was summoned again and soon Jesse was glaring balefully at a glass of water.

"No luck," Tom said. "I wouldn't worry about it. As I said, I hardly ever use mine. It's embarrassing when people ask questions. I can't explain the trick, so I automatically am classified as a stinker or a drunken bum. I'd just forget about it if I were you."

Jesse shook his head. The two men finished their drinks and left the restaurant. As they parted at Madison and 49th, Jesse smiled at his companion.

"First time in weeks I've been able to think about something other

than Laura Carson," he said. "See you next week."

"These letters, Mr. Haimes—"

Jesse smiled at the slim brunette.

"Yes, Carol?"

"They're ready for your signature. And Mr. Wigmann would like to have two more cabinets in Accounts Payable."

"Fine," Jesse said, accepting the papers. "Tell Wiggy he'll have his cabinets in a few days."

He watched his secretary walk to her desk in the far corner of the large, tastefully decorated office they shared. After the girl settled at the desk and was busy calling Wigmann's secretary, Jesse drew his hand out from under his own desk. He looked down expectantly at the hat he held.

"Abra-ca-dabra," he muttered. No rabbit materialized.

"Thank God," he whispered. "I wasn't particularly anxious to have that ability."

Carol finished her call and came across the office.

"Yes, Carol?"

"Mr. Wigmann requests that if the cabinets are among the surplus items in the next room, could he look at them, in order to plan where they will be placed."

"Tell him to come over in five minutes. We may have to move a few things."

The girl returned to the phone and then joined Jesse as he unlocked the door to the small office next to

his. It had been pressed into use as a storage area during the reorganization period and was filled with varied pieces of office equipment. Jesse pointed.

"As I suspected," he said. "Damn! All the way in the back. I'll push these desks aside if you'll move the lamps and chairs."

After a few moments of cooperative endeavor Carol and Jesse Haimes stood before the two cabinets. Each was two and a half feet wide by seven feet tall. The cabinets had no shelves and were intended to hold clothing. Jesse opened one of the metal doors and looked inside.

"Wiggy will have to arrange for shelves," he said, closing the door. "He can call Griswold and—"

Jesse stopped and looked at the cabinet. Dimly he recalled a vaudeville act he had once enjoyed.

"Carol," he said, hesitantly. "Would you—well, this may seem odd—"

"Yes, Mr. Haimes?"

Jesse decided that wording was less important than results.

"Would you mind stepping into this cabinet for one moment?"

Carol smiled.

"Into the—cabinet?"

"Yes. Into the cabinet."

"I don't understand."

"In all probability," Jesse said, "there will be nothing to understand. If there is I will explain later."

"I hope so," Carol said, still smile-

ing. She lifted the hem of her skirt slightly and stepped up into the locker-like affair.

"Thank you," Jesse said. He closed the door and stepped back. With squared shoulders he faced the cabinet.

"Abra-ca-dabra," he said, softly enough so that Carol couldn't hear. He opened the cabinet and smiled in assuringly. Jesse swallowed hard as he looked at the empty space. Hurrily he leaped to the remaining cabinet and opened the door.

"Don't be alarmed, Car—Oh, Lord!"

Carol stood framed in the cabinet. She was nude and she was angry. Jesse looked away and then, deciding the hell with it, he looked back.

"What have you done with your clothes?" he asked.

"What have I done?" Carol said, ominously. She pushed one bare foot forward, then pointed to her neck. "From pumps to my black choker ribbon. *Whsst*. You've never been better."

She stepped carelessly from the cabinet and sank into one of the surplus swivel chairs.

"You said you'd explain," she said. "This had better be good. Your apartment is one thing, the office is entirely different. I've always insisted—"

She stopped and looked at the cabinet she had just vacated.

"That's not the one I— Oh brother, you better start talking. I think I'll scream."

She opened her mouth and Jesse leaped forward to cover it with his hand.

"I can explain!" he said quickly. Carol relaxed and Jesse took his hand away.

"OK," she said. "Explain."

Jesse looked at the two cabinets and then back at Carol.

"I can't," he said unhappily. Carol opened her mouth wide.

"Wait!" Jesse pleaded. "I mean I don't know how it happened. Passing you from one cabinet to another just happens to be my trick."

"Oh," Carol said, raising her eyebrows. "Your trick, eh? Do you mind if your naked little secretary says you certainly have a fine collection. And may I ask what you intend to do right now?"

She swiveled in the chair and made a complete circle.

"Not very much room in here," she said tersely.

"Carol, I—"

"Apartments are apartments. Offices are offices. And I don't care for that trick. If you—"

"*Mr. Haimes. Mr. Haimes.*"

They both leaped up as Mr. Wigmann's voice floated in from Jesse's office.

"Wait there!" Jesse shouted.

"Oh, I can come in and—"

"No," Jesse shouted frantically. "Just wait a moment. Until I get things—straightened out."

"Very well," Wiggy answered. They could hear his steps as he wandered about the office.

"Get in the cabinet," Jesse whispered to Carol.

"Like hell," Carol whispered. "Never again."

"Carol," Jesse pleaded. He leaned down and kissed her full on the lips. "Ten dollars a week raise. The Winter Garden and the Stork Club one evening next week. A new gown."

Carol melted.

"Mr. Haimes. That isn't necessary."

"It certainly is," he said. "I've done you an injustice. Offices are offices. I promise to remember."

She threw both bare arms around his neck and kissed him. Drawing away, she smiled, "Into the cabinet." As she stepped in, Jesse permitted himself one light pat on Carol's pert rump and closed the door.

"Wiggy," he called. "Now you can come in. I've finally located them."

Mr. Wigmann walked into the smaller room and approached the cabinets.

"Excellent, perfect," he said. "Good of you, Haimes, to go to the trouble. Heavens, you're perspiring something fierce. I assure you I could have waited."

"Not at all," Jesse assured him, leading him away.

"But the insides—"

"Nothing. Bare," Jesse coughed on the last word. "You'll have to arrange for shelves. See Griswold."

He ushered Wiggy to the door, shook hands, and propelled the little man into the hall. Jesse then went to the phone and dialed.

"Miss Devins? Jesse Haimes," he announced. "No, don't call B. J. I want to speak to you. I have a favor to ask. My club is putting on a show and we're missing one outfit—a girl's. I'd have asked Carol but she is out on business at the moment.—You will? Fine.—Size?—Oh, about Carol's size. One each of the following: dress . . ."

A little later he returned to the small office and released Carol.

"Don't worry about your clothes," he said. "I've sent down for a complete new outfit."

"Who?"

"B. J.'s secretary. Miss Devins," he told her.

"Good," Carol smiled. "She has excellent taste and is very conscientious. She'll take at least an hour."

Hand in hand they returned to Jesse's office.

Three days later he completed the construction work in his apartment. The two cabinets were built in flush with the wall and looked like nothing else than closet doors. Jesse put his tools away and prepared the final test. He took the small kewpie doll and placed it on the floor of closet number one. Carefully he patted the lace dress in place and rearranged the tiny cap. Finally he stood up, closed the door, and backed off.

"Abra-ca-dabra," he said, waving a few fingers negligently. He strode to cabinet number two, opened the door, and smiled as he picked up the shiny little plastic body.

"Excellent," he murmured. "Now to call Miss Laura Carson."

Jesse silently closed the cabinet door behind Laura as she hummed through the furs. Quickly he stepped back and raised his arm.

"Abra-ca-dabra," he sang.

The room was quiet except for the soft music Jesse had playing in the background. He walked to cabinet two and opened the door. Laura stood there and Jesse drew a deep breath even though he was prepared. She smiled, unflustered and completely calm, as she stepped from the cabinet. Her body was flawless, perfect, warm and soft. Graceful movements shadowed ivory-tan skin as she walked in the soft lights. Her dark hair was long and lay tantalizingly on exquisite shoulders. Jesse was forced to lock his hands behind his back. Laura walked half-way across the room, then turned and looked at the two doors.

"You're naked," Jesse said hoarsely. Laura looked down at herself.

"Never more so," she laughed. As her body moved in laughter Jesse

was forced to remove his tie. Laura walked to the big window where moonlight crept across her body. Jesse removed his shirt.

"You seem very much at ease," he remarked. "No surprise?"

Laura shook her head as he continued undressing.

"It's quite obvious that you have discovered your trick," she said.

For a moment Jesse stopped, balancing on one leg.

"Even so," he said, determined not to lose the advantage, "the circumstances have worked out."

"That's true," Laura said, "but please do me a favor."

"Yes?"

"Will you hold that fire iron out at arm's length?"

Jesse walked wonderingly to the fireplace, picked up the poker, and held it out. Laura raised a long slender forefinger and pointed at the brass tool; and in Jesse's hand the poker became pliable, soft, and wilted like wax before a flame. He stared at it in horror.

"Jesse," Laura said. "I discovered my trick long ago."
