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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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Clarissa

by Robert A. W. Lowndes

A century or so ago, no one saw anything amiss with an editor's including his own fiction in the magazine he edited; on the contrary, this was expected of him, both by the publisher and the public. Then, somehow, publishers got the idea that the editor's name on the contents page (outside of a credit line, and often not so much as that) was some sort of deadly sin; and he was permitted to participate only under pseudonyms, often as not without the publisher's knowledge. Happily, this unnatural situation is passing from the scene. In the last decade or so, Anthony Baucher, Avram Davidson, H. L. Gold, Frederik Pohl, and Donald A. Wollheim are just a few editors in the field of imaginative fiction who have not hesitated to take the same risks that all authors take when their stories appear in print.

We say no more, leaving comparisons up to you.

WE CALLED ourselves The Gourmets, and there were seven of us until Clarissa made us eight. It was Paul Le Marc who introduced her to us as a special guest at one of our feasts; where he found her, I shall never know in this life. It was Paul's turn that night, and his right to have one outside guest if he chose.

The rules of our society were simple and to the point: once a month we would assemble for a feast, and all the details were assigned by rotation. The time, the place, the menu — everything was at the dictates of that month's master. Paul Le Marc always chose his own estate as the place, although there was no telling in advance what part

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of it would be the banquet hall this time; Arthur Vernet alternated between his apartment and various exclusive dining clubs. I was confined to the latter, as I have no culinary skill of my own, although I have made suggestions at times which chefs have admired.

We all loved Clarissa, but she chose Paul — and none of us could imagine why. The two became one, though so far as the flesh is concerned, the proportions were something like three to one — Paul Le Marc is a fantastic figure. Thereafter they collaborated, when either's turn came, although one was in charge.

From time to time, one or more of us might have to miss a feast, and I was forced to apply for indefinite leave of absence when my business took me out of the country for some time. This was about a year after Paul and Clarissa were married, and we hadn't entirely recovered from our astonishment that it had happened, or that it had lasted so long. When I returned, Vernet told me that Clarissa was gone, and that Paul would serve the upcoming feast alone. The break had taken place between the present and the previous feast; no one knew any details.

And no one asked. We gathered in the stone summer house, by candlelight, and tried to pretend that it was all as it had

been before Clarissa first made her entrance. I think I was closer to Le Marc than any of the others of the original group, and he asked me to stay and tell him about Peruvian dishes — it was understood that we'd investigate possibilities wherever we went — but we both knew that there was more he wanted to talk about. Everyone else ignored the subtle differences, as well as the overt ones. In former times, Le Marc would have had all the dishes removed before the cigars were passed around.

We sat there alone in the summer night, in the wavering candlelight which made him a grotesque figure, the embodiment of the sensual Buddha. Look at a photograph of it some time and remember the original Siddharthic teachings; you'll see, then, the dichotomy we all saw in Paul. I thought of this as I listened to his voice rebounding along the walls.

"It isn't hard to understand why the Church made gluttony one of the deadly sins. Look at me, Kent. What am I, more than a gigantic stomach, an insatiable appetite?" He refilled his wine glass and emptied it. "When one's organs become so encased in fat as mine, what place can there be for a soul?"

I looked at him and thought again of the distorted Buddha, feeling a certain satisfaction in recalling how men make other

men gods, then how these gods gradually become ever more human as their worship extends. "Worrying about your external soul again?" I asked Le Marc.

"You misapprehend me — but it is a point. What meaning can life have for a man who can do nothing more than digest? I think they were right: we were meant for something more than this. Look at me closely, Kent. Can't you see the caricature of humanity I've become? Is there anything like me in the world outside?"

WE HAD ALL seen it for years; I thought of some of those mediaeval drawings, showing nobles with enormous paunches that had to be supported in little carts when they tried to walk. "Yes," I replied; "there is. There are appetites that are more ravenous than yours, and their owners remain as lean as the famished swine in Pharoah's dream. Your glands function in such a way that your gluttony shows — but your case is harmless by comparison."

The wine was good, though I wondered if Paul was tasting it now. I shrugged. "Perhaps you are right," I continued, "but what of it? It may mean a few years trimmed off what would be your life expectancy otherwise. Does that really matter, Le Marc?" My eyes wandered over to the spot where Clarissa would have been had she been

with us tonight. "Does it matter," I repeated, "when you've lived as you wanted to?"

He had been leaning forward; now he sank back into the depths of his chair, his huge head shaking to and fro. "I haven't."

I looked at the great covered silver platter which contained remnants of tonight's feast — the finest that Paul had yet provided. Lucullus might have arranged for better, I told him, but I doubted it.

"And there you have it, Paul," I said. "You have made your unique contribution, and nothing can take it from you. If you believe that death is the end, then an instant after the light goes out it will mean nothing to you what the world remembers, or if it remembers. I quoted from Pound's *Cantos*: 'What thou lovest well, shall not be reft from thee . . .'"

He closed his eyes. "No — not reft — but it will pass. Once I was like you, Kent. Not merely young — I'm not too old even now — but alive. My soul was still the soul of a slender, vigorous young man whose blood throbs, and whose sinews are not lost in fat. I want to dance with the dance of the seasons, participate in the Olympics, go hunting at night with a bow and arrow with someone also young and lithe and alive.

"But my gods are terrible gods. I made them with my own

hands, to be my servants, but that was a long time ago. The gods you make yourself do not stay small. You hold them in your hands and believe — and your belief makes them grow. They are no longer my servants."

I lit my cigar and wondered which of us I felt sorrier for. "Clarissa's gone," I said. "For your own peace of mind, you have to realize that. She came suddenly and she went suddenly. I don't think any of us will see her again. I think in some strange, psychic way she is part of us all." I frowned at a thought which wouldn't quite solidify. "I had the feeling when she chose you, that in some lesser but still real way she had chosen all of us — and if she ever left you, she would leave us all."

His head bobbed up and down. "Yes." He poured another glass of wine, and lingered over it, as he used to do. "The fault was mine, perhaps. Perhaps I should have tried to steer her to one of you — but I was afraid, Kent. I was afraid if I rejected her . . . You cannot imagine how I hungered for Clarissa."

"Why not?" I asked as his head sank forward. "All of us did. She saw you differently than other people do, Paul. . . . Perhaps she saw you as you are; a woman can, you know."

His eyes were fixed on a candle at the far end of the room, and his voice seemed to come from a farther distance. "Every night I would dream that I was young and lithe again, only to awaken and see myself as you see me. Yet, she loved me, as you know. . . . I think we both knew that she would go quickly some day.

"It is a terrible thing to know such hunger as mine, Kent — to live with it. I think she knew it, too. I could see the realization growing behind her eyes. . . . But who else can know, really know, how I loved her?" He made no further sound, but tears were bright on his cheeks.

"Paul," I said, "you may as well tell me the whole story. You know you want to. Did she say nothing at all? Did she just vanish completely? Didn't you try to find out where she had gone? Are you sure you have no idea?"

A sob welled up from the enormous figure in the great chair. He stretched out a swollen hand for the wine bottle, but his reach fell short and it overturned, reddening the white of the tablecloth.

That was when I took the cover off the barbaric silver platter which still held a few cold slices of delicate, tender white meat.