

Hook, line, and sinker [conclusion]

Autor(en): **Young, Philip**

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Hook, Line, and Sinker

(Conclusion)

The trip was ill-starred from the beginning; it never could have succeeded. I had left the larger part of myself back home, still sitting in the red armchair in my apartment, waiting for the phone to ring, for the light animal steps outside my door. I had not been travelling towards the south for more than two hours before I realized that I would not have a good time.

In almost all of us there is a kind of stubborn blindness at work. We make our plans, and simply because they are plans, and have been made, we are reluctant to alter them. Two years before, I had translated a novel of the Middle Ages, set in Albi, Carcassonne, and Foix, names hung with magic for me, because of my long absorption in the work. This trip to see them had been planned for months; Terry had been in my life for two weeks. The intensity of the experience with him should have outweighed the *habit* of thinking about the trip. And so it did—some hours too late.

I went to Carcassonne first. It was charming, it was medieval; the long line of plum-colored hills lay against the horizon, the air was golden, and full of the smell of grapes and melons. The handsome French soldier whom I met on the train, a boxer before he started his service, was a pleasant companion. He knew the district; he spoke English well. He guided me here and there; we drank apéritifs together at a sidewalk table under a green awning; he was good to be with, and he made the nights a pleasure. But behind and through him, through the broad white chest and the excellent shoulders, I saw the lanky passionate form of Terry, and the soldier-boxer faded into a luminous zero, quivering and empty. Terry's face with its lean planes and burning eyes was always there.

On the third day I dropped my new camera on the cobblestones. It was enough of an omen for me. I went back to the hotel, cancelled my room, got a sleeper, and left. I could not find Jacques to say goodbye. Possibly he did not wait too long for me at the cafe; his nature was gregarious. Poor Jacques. Poor me. Poor everybody.

I got back on Wednesday evening, having left on Saturday before. Yet when I opened the door to the apartment, I realized I had made another mistake. It was emptier than it had ever been. There was no Terry asleep on the bed to be wakened, there were no more grins for me, no more stalking around of his lithe nakedness to delight my eye. I sat down in the chair and stared at the wall. If I had only postponed my leaving until Tuesday — the same day that Terry was to leave to take his job in the south — I could have had three more days with him. Hustler or not, money or worry or blackmail, I felt that I still wanted him, perhaps even more than ever. For we are self-destructive in a sense, when pleasure is the questing's end; and the little touch of evil, or danger, or mystery sometimes creates a fatal attractiveness.

In desperation I rang Jack, who had got him for me in the first place. He stuttered over the phone:

«D-don't t-tell me you're back!» he said.

«Things didn't work out at all,» I said. «I didn't have a good time.»

I could almost see his shoulder-shrug: Ah, well, anything is to be expected from this one. «I'm going out of my head,» I went on. «Can you come over to talk a little?»

There was a curious pause from him. «Terry?» he said finally.

«Yes,» I blurted. «That, and just plain loneliness.»

«I'll be over,» he said.

He knocked at the door half an hour later. I took his coat and got him a pair of slippers, for he likes to wear them. He had scarcely settled himself in the chair than I began.

«Have you heard anything from Terry?» I asked. «Did he say goodbye to you? When did he go?»

Jack shifted in the chair a little uneasily. «I . . . er . . . don't think he's gone,» he said. I gaped at him, mouth open, looking like an idiot.

«Matter of fact,» said Jack, «he called me from some place in town about ten minutes before you did. Asked me if he could stay the night. I said no, I was busy.»

«But . . . but he said he was leaving to take the job,» I protested.

Jack spread his hands. This time the shrug was eloquent. «Can you believe him?»

A ripple of gloom passed through me. «I guess not,» I said. «Still, he is wonderful. I suppose he . . .» Suddenly I thought of a tale I'd heard a long time ago. «How much did you give him the first night you met him?» I asked.

Jack hedged. «What did you hear I gave him?»

«Twenty.»

Jack's roar of laughter was disconcerting. «Twenty!» he howled. «I gave him five. Do you think I'm made of money? With my income, he was lucky to get that. No hustler's worth more than five, and most of 'em hardly that.»

«Do you suppose he thought it made him seem more — high-class, to say he'd got more?» I said.

Jack spread his hands. «Who knows?»

We talked a little longer, and I began to feel better. Just as Jack was leaving, he turned to me and said. «Oh, by the way — where did you have those cufflinks made that you gave to Charles?»

I told him. The little frivolity had been for Charles' birthday — a pair of cufflinks with an innocent small whorl of a design, yet to the initiate the two digits that made it up, each with its loop turned to face the other's stem, was good for many a chuckle. «Are you going to get some made?» I asked.

Jack shook his head. «Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this,» he said. «but Charles got drunk, and was rolled and beaten. Lost a lot of things from his apartment. He was brokenhearted about the cufflinks, and wants to have them replaced without your knowing.»

I shook my head. «Too bad,» I murmured. But Charles was always in hot water, from his drinking and drunken indiscretions. «I'll keep the secret.»

I fretted around the apartment until the following Monday, the 'official' day of my return. I found myself hurrying back from my occasional shopping trips, subconsciously fearful I might have missed a call from *him*. Yet with the rational part of myself, or what was left of it, I knew it would be better if I never heard from him again.

But on Monday night the phone rang. It was his deep husky voice. My heart gave a sudden leap, and a vein chugged heavily in my throat. «Where are you?» I asked.

He named a town about thirty minutes away. «The other job didn't pan out,» he explained. «My new boss found out I was a deserter, and I got the sack.»

I did a little calculation: he must have found out in a hurry, within four days — *if* Terry had gone there at all to work. «What are you going to do now?» I asked.

«I've borrowed a motorbike from a friend,» he said, «and I'm coming in to see my father, to get some money to go to French North Africa. I gotta swell new job there. And so I thought that on my way to see him, I'd drop in on you. If you don't mind . . .»

«Oh, sure,» I said, «be glad to see you.»

Half an hour later, his heavy knuckles rapped on the door. He never used the bell. I opened to him. Lord, what a vision! The balcony light behind him put an aura of light around his shoulders. He wore a black leather jacket and a motorcyclist's cap set on the back of his head. His long legs were encased to the knee in shining leather boots; he stood with his legs apart, his fists doubled on his hips, in one hand a pair of heavy black gloves. Behind him, the white birches rustled in the gusty winds of evening. The rain had left a wet sheen upon the black jacket.

«Hi, ole buddy!» he said, and threw his arm around my neck. I felt the wet coldness of the leather against my skin. A flame leaped up my thighs, and burst from my armpits.

It seemed then that in one stride he was in the center of the room. «Can't stay but a minute,» he said. «Gotta see the old man. Gotta get me some money, but he prob'ly won't give it to me.» It was clear he'd been drinking some; I smelled it on him, too. He threw the gloves down into a chair. «Got a job with the Schermerhorn Dairy; they got a branch in North Africa. Signed the contract. Got my French visa 'n everything. But damn!» He wrinkled his brows. «I sure hate to tackle the old man. He won't gimme a damned cent. I can't get there without a ticket, now, can I?» He looked down at me with narrowed eyes, and grabbed my arm.

I pulled myself loose, gently, and refused the gambit. «Oh, he may,» I said, laughing a bit nervously. «He may want to get rid of you.»

Terry laughed, his mouth wide open. «Lissen,» he said. «I'll be back — you hear? One hour — flat. Can you put me up for the night? Then I won't have to ride clear back on this wet night. Huh, can you?»

I nodded, dazed. The animal magnetism he had was turned on full force; it left me limp and without will. «G'bye then,» he shouted, and dashed from the apartment. The door slammed hollowly against the night.

I took a deep breath, and went to the kitchen, and pulled down a bottle of brandy — a thing I rarely do — and had a half glass. I was still shaking.

But it was not one hour — it was three. And when he did come back, he was really drunk. His hair was mussed; his eyes gleamed. His voice was thick. He spoke German, and that annoyed me, for I knew only French and English. Finally I asked him if he had got the money.

«Nein, Liebchen,» he said, and added something that sounded like 'what the hell does it matter.'

He stood up, and violently and drunkenly got rid of his clothes. Then he turned to me, towering like a young colossus. «C'mere!» he said, and jerked me into his arms.

*

Later, I lay listening to his heavy breathing, and the wind blowing with the rain outside. I did not sleep much that night. I saw the windows grow slowly into pale squares of light, and when dawn came, I wearily climbed over his long body, and started breakfast. I moved through the apartment and the morning chores automatically. And when he finally awakened, yawned, and stretched, he grinned again at me in the old way. But something was gone.

Over breakfast he returned once more to his wildly improbable schemes. I listened with only half a mind, trying to think of something he had said the night before, something that again seemed false. But it eluded me.

On his third piece of toast, he looked at me and said point-blank: «Could you lend me the money for the ticket?»

I shook my head. «Not a chance, I'm afraid,» I said. «That foolish trip to France cost me all my savings. And it was really a kind of drain keeping you for those two weeks, boy. As a foreigner here, I don't make too much money, you know.»

He chewed thoughtfully. «Yeah,» he said, «and I suppose you gotta watch your step, too. One contact with the police and they'd expel you, wouldn't they?»

That almost pushed my panic button, but I remained calm. It sounded like a threat. But it might have been merely an observation. Desperately, I cast around in my mind for an escape.

«Tell you what,» I said. «I'll call a friend of mine and see if he'll lend me the dough. He's got enough. How will that be?»

«Fine,» he said. «But if he doesn't, I may have to stay in town and work until I get it. Mebbe I could be here with you again, huh?»

I shook my head firmly. «No,» I said, «I can't afford it. And besides — I lied a little — «I've found out you have to be registered with the police if you stay in this building — a new regulation.» I could see he didn't believe it.

«What you'd really ought to do,» he said, «is throw over all this damned bourgeois life you're leading, and come to Algiers with me. I could give you the kind of life you ought to have.»

«That's a mad scheme,» I said.

«Nah,» he said, with his mouth full of bacon and eggs. «Really it's not. Here you're subject to all kinds of pressures. Suppose some queer showed up in your office with rouge on his face and mascara — how long do you think you'd last?» He had a kind of faraway look in his eyes, a little smile over some secret inner jest. It chilled me. I could think of nothing but how to get him out of the apartment as quickly as I could.

At last he finished, stood up and stretched, and then buckled on his black jacket. In the grey light of a cloudy morning he did not look nearly as darkly romantic as on the night before. His eye fell on a small suitcase, an overnight bag I had bought to take on my trip to France with me.

«Say,» he said, with a heavy laugh. «How'd you like to give me a going-away present? I could sure use a nice little bag like that.»

«Sure,» I said. «Take it.» I began to sweat a little.

He picked it up. «You know that old pair of corduroy pants?» he said. «You don't wear 'em much, and I could use 'em to work in the dairy.»

«All right,» I said. I got them, and he stuffed them in the bag, humming. He looked up at me. «People always give me things,» he said, and smiled. He fished in his pocket, and found nothing. «Gimme a piece of paper,» he said,

«and I'll put down my address, in case you want to call me before I leave on Friday.»

«Okay,» I said. He wrote it down, folded the paper, and gave it to me.

Then he stood up. «Well,» he said, «guess I'll be goin'. Thanks for everything.»

«Sure,» I said. «Goodbye.» We did not shake hands.

He no sooner closed the door than I called Jack. Yes, he was home; yes, I could come over. I did not go to work that morning. I hurried to Jack's, and told him everything. He looked a little puzzled, and worried.

«Well,» he said, «we can at least check on a few details.» He pulled the phone towards him. «What's his stepmother's number?»

In quick succession we discovered a number of things. Terry's stepmother had not the foggiest notion where he was; and no, certainly, he had not been to see his father the night before. A call to the recent employer in the south uncovered the fact that Terry had not been fired, but had simply not shown up regularly for work, that he had a bad reputation and was divorced, and that he had finally just disappeared. A third call to the Schermerhorn Dairy established the fact, amid much laughter, that they had no branch in North Africa —. «We can hardly make a go of it here,» someone giggled. Jack was about to make a fourth call, when I remembered the detail that had been puzzling me: you do not need a visa from here to visit French North Africa! But Jack called anyway, and verified my memory. Then he put down the phone and looked at me.

«Well,» he said, «is there any doubt left?»

I shook my head. I felt quite miserable. «None,» I said.

»Can't you go away for a while?» he said.

«I just got back,» said I. «No, of course I can't.»

It was noon when I returned to my apartment again, and this time I had a very real headache. I took an aspirin and went to bed.

The next evening I had put a record on the phonograph and was listening to it, thinking about my worries, when I heard the heavy knuckles on the door. In a burst of panic I jumped up, reached for the lights, and then realized he would hear the music anyway, and had already seen I was home. I hurried to the door, having enough presence of mind to close the inner door to the apartment.

He stepped into the vestibule when I opened. He was dressed in a handsome dark suit, very well cut, and he was drunk as a lord. He peered at me.

«Ole buddy,» he said, «I just gotta have a dollar to get home. Din't buy a roun'-trip ticket. How's about it? Le's go in an' talk things over.»

I stopped him with a hand on his chest. «No,» I said, «there are friends inside; you can't come in. Here,» I said, fumbling in my pocket, «here's a dollar. Now please go.»

He put out his hand, and the sleeve slid back over his cuff. There, winking brilliantly in the light from overhead, I saw one of the cufflinks I had given Charles. There could be no mistaking the design; I had made it myself. It was incredible that there could be another pair exactly like it in existence. I looked down at it, and said calmly, «Interesting cufflinks.»

He held the cuff up to the light, squinted at it drunkenly. «Yeah,» he said, «right nice. Fella gave 'em to me.» He grinned. «'Member, I tol' you people gave me things.»

«Yes,» I said. I put the money in his hand. «So now, be a good boy and leave.» He turned, and I gently eased him out.

Then I went to the brandy bottle once more.

*

I suppose that even the discovery that he was the one who robbed Charles would have been rationalized into silence eventually. I was fearful for myself. I wanted no trouble, nor did I relish scandal. I knew that Charles had reported the theft to the police, and given them a list of all that was stolen. Yet we are such weak creatures, hiding from the light, living in concealment, disguise, and hypocrisy, that our dishonesty to ourselves becomes a kind of accepted dishonor of the spirit, a stain that we know is there, and must compromise ourselves to live with.

I would have done nothing, nothing at all, had it not been for that phone call the next night. The jangle came in the middle of the second movement of a Mozart concerto. His voice was different; the banter was gone. He sounded sober, and cold as steel.

«I've tried everywhere,» he said without preamble, «and can't raise the hundred I need. I've got to get out of town. So I want it from you tomorrow.»

«B-but I —» I began.

«You can get it,» he said in a brittle voice. «Borrow it from that rich friend of yours. I'll come to your place at eight tomorrow evening for it.» And he hung up.

I sat for a long while, looking at the pattern in the rug. I thought of a lot of odd little unrelated things: how good a coke tastes with an Italian pizza, the statue of Ganymede framed by the ice-blue mountains and the lake, and the warmth of my drowsy apartment. The piano concerto proceeded into the third movement, and I remembered — irrelevantly — someone's comment about first movements showing what the composer could do, second ones how he could feel, and third ones — how glad he was it was all over.

Then I got to my feet, rummaged in my desk for a little piece of paper, found it, and put on my raincoat, for the night was wet again, and the wind blowing. I closed the door and walked slowly down the outside steps, and into the street, turning my collar up against the rain that fell thinly, like a whispered shout from heaven.

The avenue was deserted, and the trolley rails gleamed in the wetness under the lamps. I walked down the street a little, to a lighted telephone booth. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. The sound of the night wind died; there was only a faint and lonely patter on the glass walls around me.

I inserted the coin and dialed the number. When the voice answered, I said:

«Please listen carefully; I cannot repeat this. Last week's robbery of Charles Heineman was committed by Terry Mekinrod, who lives at 124 King Street, in Bowden. You will find that you want him for many other things, including blackmail, extortion, hustling, and desertion.»

Then I hung up the phone, and walked out again into the rain.

by PHILIP YOUNG