

For the sake of a hustler

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For the Sake of a Hustler

by NEIL HAMILTON

This is the story of three guys, and of the three I knew George the best. Our friendship covered a number of years, beginning the day we found ourselves in the same army unit during World War II. Dick, the hustler, I met a year ago and I still see him occasionally. Wayne I met only once, right at the end when there was no chance any more to repair the damage, and I feel sure neither of us ever wants to see the other again. Looking back on this brief meeting with Wayne, I still feel ashamed of myself for letting go the way I did, although there was every possible justification for my kind of behavior at the moment I met him for the first — and only — time. My feelings towards Wayne have softened in the meantime. Perhaps ultimately he was only the weapon that fate chose capriciously to strike with.

When World War II broke out George was in his thirties. With his unbounded enthusiasm for causes he at once joined the forces voluntarily. I met him in 1943 in the South Pacific. Though a dozen years his junior, we became fast friends very quickly. A chance remark let us realise our respective natures just as quickly, and so the barriers were down between us very soon. George took his service duties seriously, not because he was essentially a soldier but because with his unbreakable zest for ideas he saw war as a process of liberation. In our off-time we enjoyed life together, went cruising and very often had an excellent time, especially later on when we were stationed on the Fiji Islands. Here George was able to spend time on one of his few hobbies—painting. His sketches from these months on the Islands are amongst the most exquisite he ever did.

He was good fun to live with, not easily ruffled, happy with whatever came his way, frugal in his tastes, content to live on very little and demanding equally little from the world around him. Even at that time when he was in his thirties he was quite able to live on his own resources. You couldn't even upset him by calling him «June» as I frequently did, as he so often seemed to me to be a male version of June Forsyte and her preference for 'lame ducks', as Galsworthy has painted her in his famous novel. «What the hell do you mean?» he asked me when I remonstrated with him, «these creatures have as much right to their own individual way of living as you and I.» Needless to say, years after the war his 'lame ducks' were mostly recruited from the ranks of our own brotherhood. With my own happy-go-lucky nature, I felt sometimes quite guilty when I saw his great unselfishness. And when in the course of his lame-duck rescuing a nice morsel fell his way, no one was more grateful for it than he was.

We soldiered together for the last two years of the war. We were sent home together and discharged at the same center. I disliked very much parting from him because our friendship had become such an essential part of our lives. But he was heading for the West Coast whereas I was going back to Detroit. We kept in touch with each other for a couple of years but finally, through a miscarriage of mail, we lost sight of each other.

Nearly eight years passed. I had left Detroit and had settled down finally as a publishers' reader in New York, a job with enough money in it to keep body and soul together, yet giving me enough free time to lead my own life. In those eight years there was so much I'd have loved to have shared with George—lots of fun, adventures, cruising, books, music, and the plays. I often longed to hear his infectious laugh again. But, alas, my last letters to him were returned

from the West Coast, and his own to me may have been lost the same way because I had lived practically all over New York until I had found the right apartment to suit my taste.

It was close to eight years since I had seen George last, when the incredible thing took place, the sort of thing which can only happen in a place like New York. On an early Spring afternoon I was taking a round-trip on a boat up the Hudson and down the East River. It was one of my favorite pleasures. In all these years I had never tired of the massive spectacle New York offered from the rivers. A misplaced, ill-begotten concept for a Wagner opera the sky line of New York might be, but it still had the power to thrill me.

On that sunny afternoon boat ride, I was watching the other passengers (there is always something of the hunter in all of us) when my eyes fell on a man leaning on the railing a few feet away from me. The shape of his head and the set of his shoulders looked oddly familiar, so familiar in fact that I started walking towards him. Though I couldn't yet see his face, I was sure after a couple of steps that this was George. When I reached him I put both my hands on his shoulders and forcibly turned him around. He stared at me with faint hostility for a second. Then his irresistible and well-remembered grin broke all over his face. Despite the crowd on the boat we embraced each other. My god, what a reunion we had that day! When we parted in town late that night we were both drunk—drunk from too much alcohol as well as from the pleasure of our paths crossing again.

This was the beginning of our renewed friendship. George was by now on the other side of forty, but he had essentially remained the same person I'd appreciated having for a friend. His enthusiasm was still burning as brightly as before. I was soon to learn that his interest in the cases of 'lame ducks' hadn't diminished either. He had drifted around for some years after the war, trying to make a living by his painting but had finally failed.

It was at that point of his story that the name of Wayne, his oldest friend, entered the tale for the first time. Wayne and he had been close friends since childhood, had gone to the same high school and graduated from the same university. Wayne had not been drafted during the war because of a shortened leg. He had made good use of his opportunities, and had built up a flourishing business in New York. When finally George came to the end of his tether, he approached his old friend who offered him a job as a supervising accountant in his firm—a job modestly but sufficiently well-paid to enable George with his small needs to live in relative comfort. Moreover, it gave him enough freedom to pursue his painting. I do not honestly think that his painting amounted to very much, but his oils of male nudes were understandably the best work he ever did. He was strangely reluctant to part with any of these canvases, however. They were far superior to the trash Quaintance was putting out at that time. But it was in vain that I pointed out to George over and over again how comfortable a living he could make by painting his excellent male nudes commercially. He never yielded to my entreaties.

The triptych George did of Dick is in my possession. That triptych consists of a vertical panel, showing Dick in the nude leaning relaxed against a column, and it is flanked by two vertical canvases in one of which Dick is lying stretched out full length on his back. On the other he is on his stomach.

In the meantime we resumed our old friendship. Once again we shared all that happened to both of us. It was one of those rare cases of a genuine friendship

between two homosexuals, a friendship not based on physical intimacy. Our preferences rarely clashed though our tastes ran often along the same lines. But we each respected the other's lovers.

Soon after we had resumed our old companionship, the name of Wayne appeared more and more often in George's tales. He seemed to play such an important part in my friend's life that I sometimes felt foolishly jealous of him, especially since I was never 'privileged' to lay eyes on him. «He is so frightfully shy of new people,» George used to say. «He is terribly retiring by nature and dreadfully afraid of making new contacts.» I frequently wondered whether this version gave a true picture of Wayne.

It appeared from what George told me that Wayne had been associated for a long time with Jack, a most handsome lad, to judge from the couple of snaps George showed me of him. Jack was 'straight', it appeared. Wayne was the only exception he had made to the other side of the coin. I was suspicious of the reason for Jack's making an exception in Wayne's favor. Wayne, with a flourishing business of his own and a beautiful residence on Long Island, was the sort of man worth the effort of milking. And I smelled a hustler but one with far subtler methods than hustlers usually have.

A couple of years after I'd met George again, Jack got married and Wayne found himself at loose ends. Shortly afterwards a friend of Wayne's introduced him to one of his boys. This boy was Dick, a professional hustler. Wayne fell heavily for him and the two of them lived together for nearly a year. It seemed to work out quite successfully, as I gathered from all George told me about the situation. George himself liked Dick a great deal, a very great deal indeed. But since Dick was his friend's lover, George never made even the slightest pass at him. On the contrary—no one was more pleased than he when Dick gave up hustling and came to live with Wayne. Wayne got him a good job, well-paid, and things went well for a long time.

Then Dick fell in love with a girl and wanted to marry her. It looked like a repetition of the business Wayne had gone through with Jack. Things came finally to a head between Wayne and Dick, and they broke up. Dick also got married and, as George told me, wasn't seen around the 'meat-rack' of Washington Square any more.

Months passed. One night George and Wayne went to a movie, the 'première' of an extravagant Hollywood production that was being road-showed at expensive prices. During the intermission, down the length of the ornate gold and red-plush lounge to which they had gone to smoke, George spotted the elegant slim dark handsomeness of Dick, standing alone under a painting of the three Norns. George turned to Wayne and nudged him. «How's about it?» he said, «are you ready for another fling with our tall, dark, and unfaithful there?»

Wayne blushed a little, smiled, and rather shamefacedly admitted he was.

«Tell you what,» said George, «I'll change seats with him, and you two lovebirds can hold hands together for the rest of this colossal production,» and forthwith he was gone before Wayne could stop him, talking to Dick, taking a tiny bit of pasteboard from him, and guiding him back to Wayne. Then George went off to sit by himself, happily enough, for he'd done another good deed that evening. And he saw them off in a taxi after the show was over, with never a regret nor a feeling of meanness nor of self-pity at being left to find his own way home. He was a damned fine guy.

But this second quadrille with Dick didn't last long, only a couple of months.

The main reason for Wayne's and Dick's second break was Jack's unexpected return to Wayne. Though I had never met Jack I had my own ideas about this 'return of the prodigal son'. Though George hotly denied it, the main reason for Jack's return was the pot full of honey. Wayne was made exceedingly happy by Jack's return. He seemed to have forgotten Dick, and cut him out of his life very easily.

Some time after Wayne had resumed his old relationship with Jack, George told me one evening that Wayne had said, 'I'm so happy, in fact, that I've made up my mind not to have any other relationship at all. Even if Dick should happen to knock at my door, he'd find the door locked against him.' It was on that assumption George acted shortly afterwards, with an outcome none of us suspected at the time.

George had been going steady with a boy for a year. I had never cared much for this partner. Aggressive, demanding, self-centred—I had never liked him. Though I could see the animal-like fascination he held for George. They parted finally, to my great relief. Despite all his magnetism I had never thought him a suitable companion for one who was one of my few really close friends. But I had minded my own business.

Several weeks after that parting George and Dick met by chance in town, late at night. They had a drink together, and fell into the easy conversation they had shared during the time Dick had been part of Wayne's life, and George had been the benevolent, nearly paternal onlooker. This was somewhat typical of him—the way he was able to enjoy his friends' happiness.

Well, that night the two men talked for quite some time of things past. George was in one of his rare light moods, and in one of those statements in which the jest cannot be separated from the truth, told Dick that he'd always been quite fond of him and would even have liked to go to bed with him. At which Dick simply said, «Why not now?» George, whose faithfulness towards his friends stands unquestioned, was surprised but all the same acted quickly, and they spent the rest of the night together. «I always liked Dick a good deal, as you know,» George confided later to me, «but that first night with him was something of an eye-opener for me. All of a sudden I understood several things—Dick's success as a hustler, Wayne's deep infatuation with him, and a lot of other things besides.»

George, true to his loyal nature, had acted in the knowledge that Wayne was finished for good with Dick. For a couple of months things went well. Though George saw Dick only occasionally, the young man seemed to possess a nature that made George peacefully relaxed after each of their infrequent meetings. After the attractive animal George had been living with for a year, Dick seemed to be the right solution. George found in Dick apparently a relationship which—though it was based on a financial understanding—was durable and non-exacting. I felt vastly relieved at the way things had turned out.

Then a blow fell. Jack was offered an excellent job at the West Coast. Despite all of Wayne's entreaties and offers, he took it and moved away from New York. That was the beginning of George's having a complex about his relationship with Dick. It was at that time that he introduced me to Dick, and gave me the chance of getting to know him. Maybe by sharing him with me he thought he might atone for what he thought was a breach of faith with Wayne.

As for myself and Dick—he was an eye-opener to me as he had been to George. It was something of a revelation seeing the tawny dark limbs, and the

hair that caught midnight within it, and the sun that had been left beneath the surface of his skin. I enjoyed Dick very much, though I never lost sight of the fact that he was essentially a hustler, that there had been many between Wayne's enjoyment of him and George's. I pointed all this out to my friend to try and set his mind at ease. 'Could anyone in his right mind be jealous of a fountain, where everyone drank?' I asked him. 'Dismiss the whole thing from your mind and your over-scrupulous conscience, dear friend. You betray no one, violate no principle or practice. You have purchased a commodity on the open market, and done nothing a thousand others would not do, have not done. And sweet though it be to you in the night, it is likewise sweet to a hundred others, for money sweetens all hustlers—unless they are so foolhardy as to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.'

But all my reasoning with George was of little avail, though, thank heavens, he went on seeing Dick.

As was only to be expected Wayne soon took up with Dick again after Jack had left him the second time. George told me all about it. Dick (who had really a good many qualities in his favor) never was foolhardy enough to tell on George.

I watched my friend very closely during these months. He was withdrawing more and more into himself. I often had the feeling that except for myself and Wayne (whom he went on seeing naturally) and his infrequent meetings with Dick, George had cut off most of his bonds with people, and life generally. Yet at that time he started painting the beautiful triptych, and the ease and grace of those three paintings showed plainly how content he must have felt at the time with the hustler Dick.

One day George revealed a rather surprising scheme to me. He had some money at the time, having illustrated two childrens' books. Dick had never seen much of the country and had told him how much he'd love to take a trip to Colorado and to see Yellowstone Park. In a reckless mood George had taken stock of his finances, found the situation not too bad, and had invited Dick to share a ten days' holiday with him. I don't know from where my own misgivings about this trip arose but arise they did. It was with very mixed feelings that I saw the two happy travellers off one morning at Grand Central. Dick had been able to square things with his wife. George had re-couped him in advance with the loss of his wages, and so it came about that I finally saw them off.

The trip proved to be a most successful one, if only judged by the large number of sketches George made during it, both of the scenery and of Dick outdoors. They returned deeply tanned and full of the delight this first joint holiday had given them.

However, this delight was fated to be a short-lived one. It was only two weeks after their return that George was asked one morning to see Wayne in his private office. He had no idea why his friend had summoned him like that. Though burdened with a slightly guilty conscience, he was in no way prepared for what was going to take place. The meeting of the two life-long friends was a very brief one. After a few preliminary words Wayne simply asked George to resign from the job he held in his firm. He was quite willing, he said, to give George another three months' salary and the best of testimonials. George realised in a second the real reason for his dismissal. Dick. Neither of the two friends, however, introduced his name into the brief conversation, and within a couple of minutes George found himself at fifty without a livelihood.

I saw him the very same evening. I'm afraid he deceived me completely by

the ease with which he related to me what had happened that same morning. I saw him several times in the few days that followed, and never detected anything seriously wrong with him.

What I underestimated, unfortunately, was the simple fact that for years George had not been greatly interested in life generally, and in his own life individually. It did not mean much to him, living as he did more for the sake and assistance of others, than to foster his own aims.

He died by his own hand three days after he had lost his job.

I had an appointment to see him at his small apartment that evening. We both had keys to each other's apartments. When no one answered my knock I let myself in with my key. That's how I found him.

His death by poison must have been very quick. He lay on his bed with a slightly surprised and puzzled expression on his otherwise peaceful face. He was still warm to my touch. The doctor I summoned arrived within minutes but too late, naturally, to be able to do anything.

There were two letters on the bedside-table, both addressed to me. One of them was marked 'Personal'. The other one contained the typical suicide note amounting to what the English call 'taking his life whilst of unsound mind'. This second letter also contained his last will, naming me as executor.

After the police had been notified and the body had been taken away I went home.

How sound his mind had been when he took his own life was revealed to me when I read his personal message to me. In a way it was a relief to learn that losing his job had been only one last step in taking the course he had taken. Losing his means of livelihood played a part in what he had done, though not as big a part as I had feared. Not that this diminished the anger I felt towards Wayne.

For years, George wrote, he had felt the futility of his own existence. He had been far more exhausted physically and mentally than he'd ever let me know. Though he knew he had done quite a lot of good work for his 'lame ducks', he'd also known for years that as a painter he'd never win recognition. What it all boiled down to was the simple fact of his not being interested any more in just going on. With no family of his own to worry about, no blame would be attached to his suicide. For the friendship I had given him over such a long period of time, he thanked me with words which made me feel a little embarrassed. He told me also that he bore Wayne no grudge.

There were two short postscripts to this letter. One said, «Give all my love to Dick. Tell him how happy he made me all the time I've known him. Let him have some of my personal belongings. But I want you to keep for yourself the Triptych I did of him as a small memento of our own friendship.' The second postscript read, 'I wonder, if only slightly, in which way Wayne learned about my friendship with Dick. Not that it matters any more. But I feel sure of one thing—it wasn't Dick himself from whom Wayne learned of it.'

George had expressed a wish to be cremated. Since he had no living relatives I was by the fact of my close friendship with him pushed into the part of chief mourner. How we had both disliked these conventional formalities! I sent out invitations for the funeral to half a dozen of our mutual friends. I debated for a long time whether to send Wayne one, and finally did.

The service was short and dignified. I think even George would have approved of it. Just before it began, the chapel door opened for one last mourner.

He did not come forward to join the small circle of friends in the front pew. Without turning round I knew this last-comer to be Wayne. The service over, I shook hands with my friends before they left. I stayed behind, aimlessly arranging some flowers near the coffin until eventually I left the chapel myself.

Walking down the central way towards the entrance, I became aware of a man standing there, to all appearances waiting for me. I recognised Wayne from the snaps George had shown me of him. It was only when he stepped forward and approached me that the numbness I had felt for days left me for a fury rising uncontrollably in my throat.

«Could you tell me . . .» Wayne said slowly when we were standing opposite each other.

At that moment my rage burst. I nearly shouted at him. «Yes, I can tell you quite a few things. This business here was labelled suicide. But I have a far more fitting name for it. It was murder.»

Wayne's face turned gray, but I went on relentlessly. «Yes, it was sheer murder. And what for? For the sake of a hustler. I'm not saying a word against Dick. I have even slept with him myself. But that's neither here nor there. The only thing that mattered was George alive. And that's past repairing. But I'd like you to know that there is at least one person alive who disagrees with the verdict given on this suicide.»

I stared at him, and my fury subsided as quickly as it had arisen. But though Wayne's face showed plainly his agony, I was not yet in the mood for compassion. And there was one other thing to be cleared up, though it didn't really matter any more one way or the other.

«How in hell did you find out about them?» I forced myself to ask him calmly.

After some seconds Wayne started slowly on his story. A mutual friend of his and George's had been on a vacation at Yellowstone Park the same time George and Dick had been there. This man had no idea of who Dick was, nor what he stood for in both George's and Wayne's lives. Being a practical joker, he took a couple of snaps of the two unawares and went away without revealing his presence. The joke, in his opinion, was too good to be missed. On his return journey he stopped in New York and told Wayne all about the 'joke'. Later on he sent him prints of the snaps to be forwarded by Wayne to George.

«When I saw who was with George on the snaps,» Wayne went on, «I simply lost my head and dismissed him on the spot.»

Neither of us spoke for a minute.

Then Wayne once again broke the silence that hung between us, saying in a low perplexed voice, «Maybe I acted too impulsively . . .»

«You damn well did,» I retorted with a return of my former fury.

Without shaking hands I turned brusquely and started walking away. At the door I glanced back. He was standing by the pew, his head down, the fingers of one hand moving aimlessly over the edge of the wooden bench.

I never saw him nor heard of him again.

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