



WILL OF IRON, FLESH OF STONE

It's a thing you have to work up to . . . not one of those natural and instinctual acts that comes out of the genes. When you think about it, the whole procedure is laughably artificial, even comical. But, innocent that you are, you are drawn into it—an experimental coupling with forces that are far larger than yourself. As with other addictive sources of intense pleasure, the process proceeds inexorably. Suddenly you find yourself a victim gripped by such insatiable desires and such insupportable lusts that what was a pleasure has become something very dangerous indeed.

What follows is a personal story of my fall into the abyss—slightly fictionalized, to be sure—but mostly for the sake of decency and good manners—

I can still vividly recall the first time she and I tried it. She looked at me with hesitation in her eyes. On the one hand, our relationship was young and she wanted to be cooperative. On the other hand, she had been brought up to be too conservative and too traditional in her attitudes to really let herself go.

"Come on," I said, "let's try it. What the hell!"

She blushed. "I'm not sure we should," she said, dropping her gaze.

I was already intensely excited at the simple thought of it, so I pressed her. "Absolutely," I said, "you only live once, and 'tis far better to live just one day as a lion than to live one hundred years as a sheep!" From that somewhat mangled quotation, you can correctly infer that I had indulged myself in a cocktail or two before undertaking this adventure. It is probable that the alcohol helped us over the initial barriers, but I believe that we would have finally done it anyhow. In any event, as I look back, it all seems to have the character of inevitability, of fate and manifest destiny.

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In fairness to all concerned, and to avoid being branded a complete cad, I should perhaps explain that the lady in question is now my wife, though we were not married at the time. Her name is Nancy. Perhaps if we had already been married, she and I both would have taken a more conservative stance and the subsequent nightmarish threat which hangs over me now would have been avoided. But we got into the habit when we were far younger and I had a tendency to be more easily aroused by such things. I'm not certain how Nancy feels about this point. I expect she might deny that the passage of a few years has dimmed her ardor for the experience. She might even charitably declare that I haven't really slowed down all that much, but, rather, that it just takes more to get me to the same high plateau of excitement. Be that as it may, let us return to that first time. It is amazing how vividly it is etched in my memory. . . .

I took her by the hand and smiled reassuringly. We sat down, not quite knowing what to do, but we were adults and, of course, had at least some idea of what we wanted to accomplish. As the critical moment approached, I could feel my palms begin to turn clammy with sweat. She seemed strangely calm.

Women are great at hiding their feelings at such important moments. I think she poked me in the ribs just once to give me confidence. I raised one hand tentatively, feeling like a clumsy idiot. A sharp breath from my wife-to-be told me the whole mood of the moment had changed. We were now irrevocably committed, about to be swept along by events, hopelessly ensnared by our passions.

"Are you sure you want it this way?" My voice was half an octave higher than normal.

"Yes," she hissed.

"Okay," I sighed. "How far do you think I ought to go?"

"Just keep going," she said, "I will let you know."

Nancy was gaining confidence with every passing second, while I was getting more and more concerned. Every man knows in his heart that the myth of the weaker sex is a snare and a delusion. Seldom has an experience driven home to me the great strength of woman more emphatically than the one I am relating.

"Are you really, really sure?" My voice was almost pleading.

"Yes, go on," she whispered.

I raised my hand again. It was more a gesture of utter surrender and

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hopelessness than anything more admirable. Then with great suddenness and a resounding crash, the climax was upon us!

"SOLD!" shouted the auctioneer.

"My God," I whispered. "We bought it."

The color drained from my wife's face.

"Are you sure?" she said.

"Absolutely, absolutely, I was watching his eyes when he dropped the gavel. He was looking right at me, I tell you."

Nancy's face was now flushed. "What do we do next?"

"Christ, I don't know. I guess we have to pay for the damn thing!"

"In front of all these people?"

"Let's just sit here and watch," I concluded sagely.

There was a merciful break in the action at the slightly shabby storefront auction hall on North Broadway. I took advantage of it to write out a check at a little make-shift cashier's cage hidden behind a row of bedraggled palms.

"You can't pick it up until after the auction is over sir," I was told by a bored young girl.

"Okay, we'll come after it this evening."

Later that night, in the quiet of our house, Nancy and I stared at our piece—a badly battered little end table.

"Why did you want this thing?" I asked.

"I did not want it," she replied. "I thought *you* wanted it."

"You thought I wanted it? Hell, I was just trying out the procedure. I didn't know how auctions worked and you seemed to want it so badly I took a chance and bid on it. Where do you want to put it?"

She took a long look at the table.

"In the garage," she said with finality.

The range of things you can buy at auction is mind-boggling. Anything that the human hand can create or wrest from nature is fair game. You can buy collections of preserved ants and butterflies, worn out factories, surplus underwear, square miles of barren desert, great art and bad art, trivia and masterpieces—in short, almost anything after which a human heart may lust.

Here are a few examples of the length and breadth of the auction scene:

Imagine yourself in the presence of one Mr. Ader Piccard Tajan, auctioneer. It is December 1983 and you are not in an ordinary auction gal-

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lery, but in a cozy little room on the first floor of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The room is abuzz with excitement. Crowded into the smallish space are not only prospective bidders but twenty humming television cameras, skittering hordes of photographers popping flashbulbs, and dozens of journalists madly scribbling in their notebooks or whispering into their tape recorders. The lights are dimmed and the crowd is treated to scenes from motion picture films shot among the Eiffel Tower's soaring steel girders. Slides of the early days of the Tower flick on and off the screen. Background music adds to the din. The crowd turns nostalgic. Long gone French vocalists sing throaty lyrics about lost lovers and the symbol that uniquely identifies the City of Light. In one corner, an Ader assistant mans an open line to New York City so that Americans, too, can enter the eager bidding. And precisely what is the focus of all of this lust to possess?

The center of attention is the Eiffel Tower itself. No, it is not being auctioned. Just a piece of it is. As part of a general refurbishment, the Escalier Helicordal—the spiral staircase which ascends the Tower, but which has been closed to the public for decades—is about to fall under the gavel. The staircase has been cut into pieces and some twenty chunks are waiting to be bought.

The first piece to go contains fourteen steps. Until the welders and metalworkers did their duty, it had been some 800 feet above ground level. George Larcelin, a member of the firm responsible for restoring the Tower may have wanted a souvenir but he also paid \$15,900 for a twenty-five feet section which he generously planned to install inside our Statue of Liberty. It seems a lovely and appropriately Gallic gesture given the origins of the Statue of Liberty.

The City Fathers of New Orleans are apparently sentimental too. They were willing to part with \$12,200 for twenty-five feet of staircase going from nowhere to nowhere.

For more commercial reasons, the Mickey Mouse folks shelled out \$22,000 for twenty-four feet of the escalier to be installed at Disney World.

A New York bar bought thirteen feet for \$14,000.

A French singer, Guy Bayart, proudly reminded all concerned that the relic he was purchasing was part of a "Staircase of Hope," as he gladly laid out \$7,300 for sixteen feet of the spiral which originally comprised exactly 1,789 steps. The French have many ways of remembering the storming of the Bastille.

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In all, about 1.8 million francs were raised in the sale. The money will be used by the City of Paris to complete the restoration of the Tower. Next time you visit Paris, you may see a refurbished Tower, but the great spiral staircase will no longer be there.

Within a week of the gavel-down of the Eiffel Tower stairway, another auction was held at New York's Seventh Armory. Where the Eiffel Tower auction dealt with sentimentality, symbolism and a pure lust to possess, the New York auction went more directly to a baser sense. It was concerned with the lust to consume. The subject was Cuban cigars. I am told that Polinex Smoke Grabber ashtrays were strategically placed throughout the place but, nevertheless, many of the No Smoking signs on the Armory walls were completely obscured by dense grey clouds. It seems the auction house of Guernsey had come upon a virtual treasure-trove of honest-to-goodness Cuban cigars. These cigars were not merely made of tobacco from Cuban seed grown elsewhere. These were the real thing—Cuban from wrapper to ash. Two hundred thousand of the little tubular delicacies were on hand for this very first and very last legal sale of Cuban cigars in the United States since the trade embargo against Castro's island was established in 1961. The 200,000 cigars had been shipped to Spain before Castro's revolution. Over the intervening years, they had been stored on Spanish soil in a special humidity-controlled environment as they awaited their opportunity to give inestimable pleasure to those lucky or rich enough to consume them. In fact, some experts say they waited far too long. Even with careful handling, cigars can get pretty musty in a quarter century! In any event, by some route I have not been able to divine, the cigars arrived in the United States in 1982, touching off a frenzy of interest among those cigar smokers in-the-know. As the auction progressed, one Armory employee watching the proceedings through the blue-gray clouds is reported to have observed that the scene reminded him a great deal of feeding time at the aquarium. Successful bidders would, of course, not wait until they got their treasures home to try them out and the more cigars were sold, the more the standing-room-only audience huffed and puffed.

The most expensive lot of the Flor de F. Farach, a not particularly distinguished brand in its time, went for \$2,100—an astonishing 87 dollars per cigar, or something around a buck a puff. The purchaser of the lot was Mr. Al Goldstein, appropriately enough the publisher of Cigar Newsletter but

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less appropriately also publisher of Screw Magazine. Mr. Goldstein, it seems, has a wide variety of indulgences.

By the end of the cigar sale, the cash register had hit \$220,000, coincidentally about the same amount as raised by the Eiffel Tower sale. No doubt many people left the Armory puffing happy trails of smoke into the night air. Those who could not bring themselves to spend enough to capture a box probably trailed enviously behind the winners sniffing in the wind.

One of the nice things about auctions is that you can have lots of fun (and learn a good deal) without spending any money at all. You can, for example, just watch your fellow participants. Auction-goers, including the present one, tend to be a trifle peculiar. As I have already made clear, the species is united around a lust to *possess*. There are, however, many clearly delineated sub-species which make for wonderful watching and, unlike bird-watching, you do not have to be very quiet, you need not get up early in the morning nor must you tramp through woods and muddy fields. Auction-watching is a sport you can enjoy in comfort surrounded by beautiful things.

One of the most touching little birds I have ever seen at an auction is a little old lady who makes a habit of attending certain Chicago antique sales. She is the archetypical member of the sub-species "Opener." As nearly as I can tell, she will bid indiscriminately on almost anything provided only that the object is cheap and that she can be the first bidder. She flicks her hand or bidding paddle at the very instant the auctioneer begins his chant and will seldom, if ever, bid again to answer any opposition. In the half dozen or more times I have encountered her personally, I have never seen her win anything. Undaunted, she goes on flicking up her opening offers whether for a collection of tattered peacock feathers, a chipped vase, a chipped candy dish, a horseshoe guaranteed to be at least 100 years old, a wagon wheel, or a zircon ring. I have come to miss her when she isn't there.

A second sub-species might be termed the "Rigid Raiser." This is the fellow who extends his arm after he makes a first bid. Elbow permanently locked and fingers opened toward the ceiling, he appears as if he will *never* bring his hand down. His intent, I am sure, is to convey an unshakable will to win at any cost. While other bidders flick their signals to the auctioneer, Rigid Raiser never waivers. The auctioneer has only to look in his direction and catch the steely glint in his eye to raise the bid another notch. It is an

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intimidating tactic and it sometimes even works. If and when Rigid Raiser is beaten, he collapses like a building whose base has been dynamited. His hand sags slowly toward his lap and he slouches on the end of his spine hiding from the rest of the audience. But in a few minutes he generally revives and returns to the contest as determined as ever.

Another sub-species might be called "Quick Trigger" and, as you might guess, there is an opposite number—"Stretch-Out." The Quick Trigger operates on the theory that he can intimidate the opposition by answering a competitive bid so quickly with a raise of his own that the other side is totally demoralized. He wants to generate a sense of inevitability about the outcome. No matter what the opposition does he will be there a few hundredths of a second later with a topper. Stretch-Out plays to the opposite theory. He launches a Chinese torture-style attack on the enemy's will. The enemy makes a bid, the chattering auctioneer looks around hopefully for a higher bid, Stretch-Out waits. The auctioneer's bright exuberance begins to fade. Expectation gives way to desperation. Finally, depending upon the auctioneer, the chant takes on a tone of disgust, disdain, disbelief or even abject misery.

"Going Once!" No answering bid. "Going twice!" The expectant winner is feeling exaltation well up in his breast. The hammer is about to fall. This is Stretch-Out's moment to strike. He signals the tiniest possible raise delivering a crushing dose of frustration at minimum cost. This process can be repeated four, five, or even six times during the course of sale of a single item. By the time the poor opposition has gone through so many cycles of victory and defeat, he no longer cares who gets the damned Louis XIV chair or that Rolls Royce hood emblem or the cloisonne cockatoo that once seemed so important.

I would class myself as a member of yet another and fairly nasty sub-species—the "Triangle Killers." I speak with intimate knowledge of the theory that motivates this group. What you do is spot something that you truly lust after and then, during the bidding, pretend that you are not the least bit interested in it. Ideally, the two final competitive bidders should be positioned so that they can see your utterly relaxed attitude. When the two combatants have exhausted each other in mortal combat, you catch the auctioneer's eye, straighten up determinedly and, in the style of Stretch-Out, inject yourself, thus unexpectedly creating a *triangular* bidding war. The idea of this tactic is that the other two seekers after the Holy Grail or,

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more likely, the Chinese ivory, or whatever, will be shattered at the prospect of a new, fresh and determined adversary. Once again, a victory almost in hand is snatched away, psyches are fragmented and wills are hopelessly broken. Or so goes my theory.

The last sub-species type we shall have time to discuss considers himself so different from all the others that he would be insulted to find himself in their company. Let me call him "The Pro." The Pro wants others in the audience to *know* he is a pro. While he wants such recognition, his ego demands that he be subtle about getting it. The Pro's techniques rely upon long experience and participation in many gruelling contests. No little amateur lady Opener is he. No grandstand player like Rigid Raiser. Far be it from him to be so ostentatious in his bidding. The Pro has developed a magical way of communicating with auctioneers which seems to defy the laws of both man and nature. Even when working with an auctioneer he has never seen before, he finds a way to communicate his bid silently and unseen by the opposition. Since his techniques are so refined and may, in fact, even depend upon supernatural or parapsychological phenomena, it is hard for me to describe exactly what he does. I suspect that some Pros bid by wiggling their ears, and others by crinkling their eyebrows. Possibly, a signal can be conveyed by the noise of a toe twitch inside a shoe. Whatever the secret alchemy is, it works. The auctioneer never misses the bid of a Pro and the Pro never disowns a bid that the auctioneer ascribes to him. In the heat of some auctions, I have felt that the Pro is a figment of my imagination or, more precisely, the self-serving imagination of an overly exuberant auctioneer. At such moments, bids seem to come from nowhere without the slightest hint of how the auctioneer learns of them. All of this brings us close to the subject of shills—a topic we have no time to discuss.

Do auctioneers merely invent some of the bids they take? Is there always a Pro around? Alas, I have found no way, to stop the whole procedure in midstream to conduct the requisite investigations.

At a relatively recent auction something happened which brought me face to face with a terrible problem. It has become, for me, the stuff of Shakespearian tragedies. It all seemed so innocent at the outset. The occasion was a sale of art objects at which a handsome French bronze of a cavalier was to be offered. The object was nearly three feet high, not including the lance. It was done by Sacarriere Pre Pelatour of Paris and dated 1878.

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"I really like that," my wife declared. There was a firmness in her voice and a steely glint in her eye.

"I do too," I said meekly, and, in fact, I found the piece very appealing. It was just that she sounded so determined.

By the end of the auction, we were the pleased owners of the bronze. That was fine. But it was now obvious that my occasionally hesitant partner in the bidding process had gone forever. Gone were the times she would nervously roll her eyes as my highly developed "triangle killer" technique failed to dissuade the opposition from going higher. Gone were the pokes in the ribs during the bidding to signal me that I might be going too high. During the bidding for the bronze, I never heard the usual quick gasps from Nancy when I raised my hand. Everything was too calm and too certain.

The bronze cavalier now stands quietly in the corner of a room of our home, waiting for me to build some kind of a pedestal to elevate it to a proper height. We have been remodeling our home for some years and I am not quite down to such details yet. It is a lovely piece and we, in fact, did not overpay for it; but the experience has, along with events which began in 1978, cut deep scars in my personality. To tell the truth right out, I am now subject to recurrent nightmares . . . a ghoulish dream visits and re-visits me these days. I think I fully understand its significance. To me it is altogether plain and straightforward and quite unFreudian but shortly you may judge for yourself. Although the incident of the cavalier was a key triggering event, my terrible problem has much earlier origins.

Before I get to that story, I want to tell you one more little tale of another auction block. It concerns one of the great salesroom events of the last decade. One of the participants, Nicholas Poole-Wilson of the London Dealers—Bernard Quaritch, must have had nightmares that make mine seem like pleasant little daydreams. Poole-Wilson, aided and supported by a well-known, German-born, New York book dealer, Hans P. Kraus, and Mr. Herman Abs, who is no less than the former head of the great Deutsches Bank, were all members of a team which had been assembled in a grand attempt to acquire one of the great works of German art and history. Kraus and Abs, dressed in typical old World bankers' attire—dark suits and vests—tittered nervously as they eyed their opposition numbers at Sotheby's in London. Poole-Wilson, Kraus and Abs were actually pointmen for a massive German consortium which included the state of Lower Saxony, the state of Bavaria, the Prussian Cultural Foundation of West Berlin, and the

government of West Germany. This consortium had early retained the houses of Quaritch and Kraus to lead their bidding, leaving most of the competitors with less impressive representation.

While slightly less impressive in some ways, those competitors were nevertheless extraordinarily formidable. They were representing interests whose resources were measured in *billions* of dollars. The speculation was that Stephen Massey of Christy's New York Book Department might be bidding for none other than J. Paul Getty Jr. who, like his late father and creator of the Getty Museum, lived in Britain. A counter-rumor running through the crowd was that Massey was going to bid for a well-known collector named Haven O'Moore of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yet another story was that the Christy representative was speaking for Dr. Armand Hammer of Occidental Petroleum. The possibility that Armand Hammer was the money behind Mr. Massey seemed especially persuasive because, in 1981, Hammer had bought another rare and extraordinarily valuable object similar, in some ways, to the one that was about to be auctioned. And what was it that brought all this power and money to one room at Sotheby's-London on December 6, 1983? It was one of the most sumptuous medieval manuscripts in existence—one which had only recently emerged from fifty years of obscurity and a longer mysterious past.

The famous manuscript was that of the Gospels of Henry the Lion. Henry, who ordered the outrageously ornate manuscript created sometime in the 1170's, lived from 1129 to 1195 and was owner of vast estates throughout Northern Europe. He was, in his day, one of the most powerful men in Europe. The Gospels of Henry the Lion were not motivated by pure religiosity on good Henry's part. He was, in fact, trying to convey a political message. The extraordinary manuscript, adorned with more than 1500 superbly illuminated initials and forty-one full-page miniatures, was created as a propaganda piece. Henry's idea was to use this manuscript to put force behind his proposal that he become a German King and Emperor, which he was not and which he dearly desired to be. The real message of the manuscript is that dear Henry was anointed to these roles by God himself. One of the greatest images of medieval art is the Gospel's miniature which shows the coronation of Henry and his wife Matilda by no less a personage than Jesus Christ. The audience in attendance at this solemn event includes, according to the painting in the manuscript, a crowd of angels and saints appropriately intermixed with approving members of the legitimate

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European royalty. This scene, incidentally, is felt by experts to contain what is probably the only existing contemporary portrait of Henry the First of England and the earliest known picture of Thomas Beckett.

For all these reasons and more, the Gospels is considered an unmatched jewel among German historical manuscripts. Indeed, the West German government itself described the Henry manuscript in these terms: "German culture and German history are so uniquely manifested in the manuscript that its reacquisition is a national task of prime importance." They meant it and sent their first team to Sotheby's.

Can you imagine facing the full economic power of Armand Hammer and J. Paul Getty, array against you, while you carried the burden of German national pride into the battle? Such is the stuff of nightmares.

But how had the Gospels of Henry the Lion come to be on the block in Britain? There are only partial answers to this mystery.

Back in the 1100's, creation of the masterpiece was supervised by Monks at a Benedictine Abbey, specifically Helmarschausen, near Brunswick which was Henry's capital. Upon completion, the manuscript was presented to Brunswick Cathedral to work its hoped-for political magic. In this, it seems to have failed, because Henry's official titles are Duke of Saxony, Count of Brunswick and Duke of Bavaria. He never got himself called King or Emperor. Sometime in the 14th Century, the manuscript was given to Prague Cathedral, perhaps by Charles IV. We know that in 1861 the King of Hanover bought the manuscript from the Prague Cathedral for an enormous sum of money. By then, silver-gilt mounts and relics of several saints enshrined under clear rock crystal had been added.

The Gospels remained safely the property of the House of Hanover until sometime after the First World War when those in-the-know seem to have lost track of its whereabouts.

In the 1950's, the West Germans put the manuscript on a list of embargoed national treasures which could never legally leave Germany. The Prince of Hanover responded to that embargo in 1961 declaring that the manuscript was already out of Germany but he never has named the new owner. Many names have been bruted about as possibly being recent possessors of this great medieval prize: George VI of Great Britain, the eagerly acquisitive British Museum, certain members of the Hanovers themselves, and still others. Who owned the manuscript after it left Germany is something Sotheby's was not willing to reveal although they did try to reassure

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everyone by announcing that there was nothing illegal about the sale that was about to take place.

A darker speculation which was circulating in Germany was that Prince Ernst-August of Hanover was, in fact, the owner and potential seller. This would have been a pretty tricky business because after the House of Hanover said, in 1961, that the manuscript was not in Germany, the German government *removed* it from its list of embargoed national treasures. Could the House of Hanover have tricked the government by following the letter of the embargo but not the spirit? Had the Gospels been under German control even though not in Germany? Prince Ernst-August did, in fact, recently sell a fine library and important 18th Century silver to the great distress of West German institutions. What if he was, indeed, the seller despite his denials and the government of lower Saxony's acceptance of his denials? It is but a short step to the plot of a gothic romantic novel.

In any event, by whatever means and circuitous route, the Gospels of Henry the Lion were there on the block, December 6, 1983 before a tense and hushed audience. The auctioneer, a gentleman named Richard Came, known amongst auction aficionados as one of the fastest gavels in the business, whipped his way through forty-nine manuscripts of lesser importance and began the bidding for the Gospels at a mere one million pounds. At least five other serious bidders were flicking signals at the auctioneer at one time or another, but the final titanic encounter was, as expected, between Poole-Wilson, representing the German consortium, on the one hand, and Massey of Christy's, representing some unknown on the other.

When it was all said and done, the hammer fell in favor of the Germans who were willing to pay seven million, four hundred thousand pounds, or close to ten and three-quarters million dollars for Henry the Lion's failed propaganda piece.

As it turned out, one of the most powerful opposition groups standing before German bid to recapture their national treasure took themselves out of the action before the bidding began. The people in control of the Getty Museum had decided not to intervene in the bidding "in the hope that such non-intervention would enable the Duke of Saxony's unique legacy to find its way home."

Cynics interpreting this seeming graciousness on the part of Getty point out that the Trustees of the Museum probably realized that they could easily fire up strong resentment in Europe by bidding against the Germans.

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The Getty, with its incredible endowments, could have driven the price to even more astronomical levels because the Germany group admitted that they would have gone on bidding if they had had to. The Getty, chained by its very power, is being forced to behave discreetly in international auction circles. What a spectacle of auctioneering it would have been, had the Getty not been so statesman-like and practical. Billions in oil wealth colliding with the cultural pride of an entire people!

Even at the relatively low price of ten and three-quarters million dollars, the Germans have since been forced to defend themselves for spending such a huge sum at a time of widespread recession in Europe. Apologetically, but pridefully, old Herman Abs noted that about the half the money would come from public funds and the other half from private benefactors.

Appropriately enough, the Gospels have now gone to a resting place near Brunswick, Henry the Lion's old capital, where they will be on permanent display in the library at Wolfenbüttel.

The terrible nightmare dreams which I am sure Messrs. Kraus and Abs must have suffered in the days before the auction for fear of losing their quarry, have now surely gone forever. Not so, unfortunately, with my own nightmare which is both recurrent and intensifying.

The evil seeds of it were sown on Labor Day weekend, early in the shining hot dry month of September 1978. The place was an unlikely little town in Indiana: Auburn. Among other things, Auburn is the place of origin of the long gone Auburn motor car. The occasion was the so-called ACD Festival. A is for Auburn; C is for Cord; and D is for Duesenberg . . . all famous names in the history of the automobile.

I no longer remember how we first came upon the fact that there is an annual Antique Car Festival at Auburn, and I suspect I have purposely repressed the way in which my wife also discovered that there was, during the ACD Festival, not only a parade but, heaven please help me, an Antique Car Show and Auction as well.

As I have already intimated, my wife, who is normally a rational and intelligent human being, has, on recent occasions, turned from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde at the sound of an auctioneer's chant. This is generally a survivable phenomenon, albeit at sometimes, dangerous to the health of my bank account. At some future ACD auction, however, the danger clearly threatens to become cataclysmic in its proportions.

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You must understand something. I am not in any way criticizing my dear partner in marriage. She is almost as much a potential victim as I am. What started at that 1978 ACD Festival was contrived by the devil himself to soften the brain and weaken the will. I have been to several of these Annual Festivals by now and have so far escaped whole. But each time, the margin of survival has narrowed as the Satan continues to work his way with us.

In 1978 we were unmarked innocents, as we rolled into Auburn, checked into a motel, and then took our place on a shady tree-lined small town street to watch one of the greatest antique car parades in the world. For hours on that first day, we were treated to sparkling jewels from the past. A 1937 Cord Model 812 Super-Charged Phaeton in crystalline white; a 1936 Auburn in ruby red with gleaming chrome grilles and serpentine pipes; a glorious 1905 Franklin four-cylinder in yellow; and even a 1903 Holsman high-wheeler looking far more like a surrey from Oklahoma than an automobile. They rolled past us at a mile or two per hour while we sucked cool lemonade through long straws, and the devil whispered his seductive murmurings in our ears.

"My God, they're beautiful," my wife was breathing in short bursts. "Look at that one! Oh, look at that one. I just *love it*. I just *love it*!"

I tried to stay cool but my palms were sweating again. Our weakening resistance was being assaulted by dozens upon dozens of mechanical masterpieces.

"I've *got* to have one," my wife finally gasped.

"You're kidding," I cried plaintively. "Those things are expensive."

"How expensive?" she snapped, as Mr. Hyde began to displace kindly Dr. Jekyll.

Please remember that this was our first antique car auction, and we were as naive about it as we were on that much earlier occasion when I first paid fifteen dollars for a spindly and decrepit table of absolutely no utility whatsoever.

"Oh," I replied, "I'll bet some of these things get up to twenty or even thirty thousand dollars."

She did not comment further, but I saw her eyes narrow as she silently sized our bank account, our house mortgage, our outstanding bills, and our future prospects. She squeezed my hand without turning toward me. The nightmare had been conceived.

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I began to fire questions at her. "What would you do with it?" I half cried under my breath. "Where would you keep it? You know our garage is full of junk because we're still renovating the house! You certainly couldn't just hop in a 1930-something or other and run down to the corner supermarket for groceries! What if you parked it in the lot and it got scratched? How would you get it repaired?"

Unmoved, she fixed her hazel eyes on me. "Someday," she whispered with a resolve I had never sensed before.

We spent the rest of the day following the crowds around the town. After the parade, the show-off owners of the hundreds of cars in the parade park them around the town square and stand in front of their possessions like preening peacocks listening to the ooh's and aah's as we mortal non-owners strolled by. Most of the owners also played a second role. They were *guarding* the flawless paint finishes on their automobiles. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of hours of elbow grease had gone into those finishes and they weren't about to have some drooling spectator lean in to take a closer look at the cockpit leather while scratching the door with a cast bronze Budweiser belt buckle.

There was, in fact, a brisk business being done by a little newspaper stand who forethoughtfully had stocked little six-inch signs which read "Do not lean against this car unless you are stark naked." The signs were available on colored stocks of various hues to complement the paint jobs on the cars in whose windows they were posted.

By the end of the first day, our heads were awl with Bugattis, Carters, Hispano Suizas, Fords, Cords, Packards and Mercers. We took time out to have a Hoosier steak dinner and never once, as I recall, during that first night, did we speak further about the possibility of actually owning an antique automobile. At least for me, the dream, or the nightmare, depending upon your terms of reference, was simply too awesome to discuss. Little did I know what lay ahead the next day.

On the second day, my sweet wife took me by the hand—having done some secret research, she knew exactly where to go—and led me like lamb to slaughter to the DeKalb High School Sports Field just outside sleepy little Auburn. For this one weekend in September, that High School Sports Field becomes the center of the car collector's universe. The Eighth Annual Midwestern United States Collector Car Auction was to be conducted by an outfit named Kruse Classic Auctions Inc. In the intervening years since

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1978, incidentally, much has happened to Kruse, including nasty accusations about slow-pay or no-pay to certain sellers of classic cars, but that is another story.

The High School grounds were a mob scene. Red and white tents were pitched over massed phalanxes of cars waiting to be put on the block. A grandstand had been erected for excited bidders. Before the grandstand, shielded from the broiling Indiana sun, were fast-talking Kruse auctioneers in straw hats, canes and seersucker suits. Music blared from overdriven loudspeakers. People carrying cotton candy collided with each other, sticking together for a moment, then separating to leave little tufts of pink trailing behind them in the air.

We wandered through the tents, hypnotized by the gleam of the brass and chrome, the smell of the beautiful leather, and the seductive visual beauty of the rainbow colors. In one of the tents we encountered a grizzled old man who we took to be merely a guard. I decided he might be a source of inside information so I sidled up to him knowingly and struck up a conversation. It turned out that he was a multimillionaire who was about to auction his collection of about 100 magnificent collector cars. I asked him what he thought he would get, and he replied diffidently, "Hell, I don't know, whatever those Arabs want to pay, I guess."

He called us back after we had said goodbye to give us a piece of advice.

"In case you're gonna bid, buddy, you oughta know something."

"What's that," I asked.

He wagged a finger at me. "Watch out for Bondo," he winked.

"What do you mean,?" I said innocently.

"Bondo, Bondo," he replied, with a tone of exasperation. "Before you bid, you gotta take out your little magnet," he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small bar magnet "and test for Bondo. You know—it's the stuff they use to pad out the old dents if they don't want to do a real job of restoration. Ruins a good car." He paused to scratch a stubby check. "Wouldn't have Bondo on one of mine, not for anything. You best watch out for it though. Some of these slickers around here use it by the ton. The trick is it's not magnetic, so you can catch them out. All you do is take your little magnet and run it along the coachwork. Wherever it don't stick, that's Bondo."

"Oh, well, gee, thanks a lot," I said brightly as we shook hands again. We turned and headed off across the grassy field towards the buzz of the auction tent and the grandstands.

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"Did you get all that?" my wife whispered nervously.

"Of course I did," I hrrumphed. "Ye gods, you know I'm a physicist."

"Just wanted to be sure," she said softly.

"Why?" I asked with fear clutching at my heart again.

"No special reason," she said.

The nightmare was growing.

An hour later, after watching thirty cars or more go under the gavel, I was acutely aware of my amusing underestimates of the value of collector cars of a class of interest to Nancy. My twenty to thirty thousand-dollar guesses were off not by mere percentages but by factors. Despite the fact that these cars were well beyond our means, and my wife had been brought back to her normal state of rationality by the icewater of the bidding, an event occurred about mid-way through the first day of auctioning that should have warned me that we were not out of the woods yet. An absolutely gorgeous old Cord, one of the very earliest built, rolled up before the grandstand. It was all fire engine red and lavish golden brass. Two saddle leather seats, glove soft and inviting, were positioned behind the most charming automobile windshield I have ever seen. No characterless piece of glass this windshield; instead it was a perfect circle of glass about two feet in diameter and frameless other than at the bottom where an elegant brass cradle, attached to socket joints, allowed it to be positioned comfortably before the face of the driver.

The bidding was approaching 50,000 dollars when I felt my wife's grip tighten and my palms grow damp. "Isn't it gorgeous?" she said, in her Mr. Hyde voice.

"You're not serious," I exclaimed.

"You're right," she admitted, as she beat back the devil.

Naively, I thought that was the end of it. We spoke no more about owning antique cars that day and settled back to enjoy the hurly burly of the auctions. The real trouble and the full-blown nightmare which has come to haunt me since did not really start in earnest until the next day . . . the last day of the auction.

We were slouched in our grandstand seats like old professionals. It was, after all, our second day in the business. I, honestly, didn't see the attack coming. If memory serves me correctly, I was happily munching on a hot dog and wiping a bit of mustard off my shirt when I heard my wife gasp at the sight of it. The whole crowd became reverently silent as it rolled into the

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auction pit. I must admit, it was awesome . . . its creamy white convertible top; huge whitewall tires mounted on the chromium spiderwebs of enormous wirewheels; rakish grillework and headlamps far outstripping anything built by modern man and, most of all, lime green and cream-colored body as smooth as the chamois its tracking retinue of attendants was using to wipe it down one last time. There it was . . . the center of the nightmares which now ruin my sleep . . . this monster from Auburn, Indiana . . . a 1932 Duesenberg X-J 261 prototype La Grande Duel Cowl Phaeton Supercharged!

The auctioneer groaned its pedigree, as my wife slipped slackjawed under its spell. This car had scored 100 points—perfection—in every show in which it had ever been exhibited. The Indiana voice twanged on. I was catching fragments only. “One of the finest Duesenbergs in the world . . . sure to bring a world’s record price . . . extraordinary investment value. . . .” Over the roaring in my ears, I could hear the voice of Mr. Hyde.

“That’s it. That’s it. That’s the one,” Mr. Hyde snapped. “I’ve got to have it. It’s mine. It’s mine. A Duesenberg! Someday, someday, you’ll see.”

That 1932 Duesenberg was gavelled down in 1978 for 237,000 dollars and my otherwise loving and sane wife has tracked it through the years since. She will not tell me who owns it or whether it has been subsequently sold again. She only tells me that she knows where it is and that her time will come. At night I dream ghastly dreams of it. It floats in front of me, several feet above the highway, gliding soundlessly across my vision. It hovers to a stop over an auction stage done in pure gold and platinum. In this nightmare, my wife is with me as she was on that first occasion when we made our first purchase at auction for fifteen dollars. But this time she is a woman totally possessed. She has a will of iron. She *will* possess that car, and in my terrible dream, as she shoves an elbow into my ribs to get me to raise my bid, my flesh turns to stone.*

*This paper was written for the *Chicago Literary Club* and was read before the Club on Monday evening, March 12, 1984. An edition of two hundred copies was printed by the Club for its members.