# **Author! Author!**

Isaac Asimov

It occurred to Graham Dorn, and not for the first time, either, that there was one serious disadvantage in swearing you’ll go through fire and water for a girl, however beloved. Sometimes she takes you at your miserable word.

This is one way of saying that he had been waylaid, shanghaied and dragooned by his fiancée into speaking at her maiden aunt’s Literary Society. Don’t laugh! It’s not funny from the speaker’s rostrum. Some of the faces you have to look at!

To race through the details, Graham Dorn had been jerked onto a platform and forced upright. He had read a speech on “The Place of the Mystery Novel in American Literature” in an appalled tone. Not even the fact that his own eternally precious June had written it (part of the bribe to get him to speak in the first place) could mask the fact that it was essentially tripe.

And then when he was weltering, figuratively speaking, in his own mental gore, the harpies closed in, for lo, it was time for the informal discussion and assorted feminine gush.

-Oh, Mr. Dorn, do you work from inspiration? I mean, do you just sit down and then an idea strikes you-all at once? And you must sit up all night and drink black coffee to keep you awake till you get it down?

-Oh, yes. Certainly. (His working hours were two to four in the afternoon every other day, and he drank milk.)

-Oh, Mr. Dorn, you must do the most awful research to get all those bizarre murders. About how much must you do before you can write a story?

-About six months, usually. (The only reference books he ever used were a six-volume encyclopedia and year-before-last’s World Almanac.)

-Oh, Mr. Dom, did you make up your Reginald de Meister from a real character? You must have. He’s oh, so convincing in his every detail.

-He’s modeled after a very dear boyhood chum of mine. (Dom had never known anyone like de Meister. He lived in continual fear of meeting someone like him. He had even a cunningly fashioned ring containing a subtle Oriental poison for use just in case he did. So much for de Meister.)

Somewhere past the knot of women, June Billings sat in her seat and smiled with sickening and proprietary pride.

Graham passed a finger over his throat and went through the pantomime of choking to death as unobtrusively as possible. June smiled, nodded, threw him a delicate kiss, and did nothing.

Graham decided to pass a stern, lonely, woman-less life and to have nothing but villainesses in his stories forever after.

He was answering in monosyllables, alternating yesses and noes. Yes, he did take cocaine on occasion. He found it helped the creative urge. No, he didn’t think he could allow Hollywood to take over de Meister. He thought movies weren’t true expressions of real Art. Besides, they were just a passing fad. Yes, he would read Miss Crum’s manuscripts if she brought them. Only too glad to. Reading amateur manuscripts was such fun, and editors are really such brutes.

And then refreshments were announced, and there was a sudden vacuum. It took a split-second for Graham’s head to clear. The mass of femininity had coalesced into a single specimen. She was four feet ten and about eighty-five pounds in weight. Graham was six-two and two hundred ten worth of brawn. He could probably have handled her without difficulty, especially since both her arms were occupied with a pachyderm of a purse. Still, he felt a little delicate, to say nothing of queasy, about knocking her down. It didn’t seem quite the thing to do.

She was advancing, with admiration and fervor disgustingly clear in her eyes, and Graham felt the wall behind him. There was no doorway within armreach on either side.

“Oh, Mr. de Meister-do, do please let me call you Mr. de Meister. Your creation is so real to me, that I can’t think of you as simply Graham Dorn. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, no, of course not,” gargled Graham, as well as he could through thirty-two teeth simultaneously set on edge. “I often think of myself as Reginald in my more frivolous moments.”

“Thank you. You can have no idea, dear Mr. de Meister, how I have looked forward to meeting you. I have read all your works, and I think they are wonderful.”

“I’m glad you think so.” He went automatically into the modesty routine. “Really nothing, you know. Ha, ha, ha! Like to please the readers, but lots of room for improvement. Ha, ha, ha!”

“But you really are, you know.” This was said with intense earnestness. “I mean good, really good. I think it is wonderful to be an author like you. It must be almost like being God.”

Graham stared blankly. “Not to editors, sister.”

Sister didn’t get the whisper. She continued, “To be able to create living characters out of nothing; to unfold souls to all the world; to put thoughts into words; to build pictures and create worlds. I have often thought that an author was the most gloriously gifted person in creation. Better an inspired author starving in a garret than a king upon his throne. Don’t you think so?”

“Definitely,” lied Graham.

“What are the crass material goods of the world to the wonders of weaving emotions and deeds into a little world of its own?”

“What, indeed?”

“And posterity, think of posterity!”

“Yes, yes. I often do.”

She seized his hand. “There’s only one little request. You might,” she blushed faintly, “you might give poor Reginald-if you will allow me to call him that just once-a chance to marry Letitia Reynolds. You make her just a little too cruel to him. I’m sure I weep over it for hours together sometimes. But then he is too, too real to me.”

And from somewhere, a lacy frill of handkerchief made its appearance, and went to her eyes. She removed it, smiled bravely, and scurried away. Graham Dorn inhaled, closed his eyes, and gently collapsed into June’s arms.

His eyes opened with a jerk. “You may consider,” he said severely, “our engagement frazzled to the breaking point. Only my consideration for your poor, aged parents prevents your being known henceforward as the ex-fiancée of Graham Dom.”

“Darling, you are so noble.” She massaged his sleeve with her cheek. “Come, I’ll take you home and bathe your poor wounds.”

“All right, but you’ll have to carry me. Has your precious, loveable aunt got an axe?”

“But why?”

“For one thing, she had the gall to introduce me as the brain-father, God help me, of the famous Reginald de Meister.”

“And aren’t you?”

“Let’s get out of this creep-joint. And get this. I’m no relative by brain or otherwise, of that character. I disown him. I cast him into the darkness. I spit upon him. I declare him an illegitimate son, a foul degenerate, and the offspring of a hound, and I’ll be damned if he ever pokes his lousy patrician nose into my typewriter again.”

They were in the taxi, and June straightened his tie. “ All right, Sonny, let’s see the letter.”

“What letter?”

She held out her hand. “The one from the publishers.”

Graham snarled and flipped it out of his jacket pocket. “I’ve thought of inviting myself to his house for tea, the damned flintheart. He’s got a rendezvous with a pinch of strychnine.”

“You may rave later. What does he say? Hmm-uh-huh-’doesn’t quite come up to what is expected-feel that de Meister isn’t in his usual form-a little revision perhaps towards-feel sure the novel can be adjusted-are returning under separate cover-’ “

She tossed it aside. “I told you you shouldn’t have killed off Sancha Rodriguez. She was what you needed. You’re getting skimpy on the love interest.”

“You write it! I’m through with de Meister. It’s getting so clubwomen call me Mr. de Meister, and my picture is printed in newspapers with the caption Mr. de Meister. I have no individuality. No one ever heard of Graham Dom. I’m always: Dom, Dom, you know, the guy who writes the de Meister stuff, you know.”

June squealed, “Silly! You’re jealous of your own detective.”

“I am not jealous of my own character. Listen! I hate detective stories. I never read them after I got into the two-syllable words. I wrote the first as a clever, trenchant, biting satire. It was to blast the entire false school of mystery writers. That’s why I invented this de Meister. He was the detective to end all detectives. The Compleat Ass, by Graham Dom.

“So the public, along with snakes, vipers, and ungrateful children takes this filth to its bosom. I wrote mystery after mystery trying to convert the public”

Graham Dom drooped a little at the futility of it all.

“Oh, well.” He smiled wanly, and the great soul rose above adversity. “Don’t you see? I’ve got to write other things. I can’t waste my life. But who’s going to read a serious novel by Graham Dorn, now that I’m so thoroughly identified with de Meister?”

“You can use a pseudonym.”

“I will not use a pseudonym. I’m proud of my name.”

“But you can’t drop de Meister. Be sensible, dear.”

“A normal fiancée,” Graham said bitterly, “would want her future husband to write something really worthwhile and become a great name in literature.”

“Well, I do want you to, Graham. But just a little de Meister once in a while to pay the bills that accumulate.”

“Ha!” Graham knocked his hat over his eyes to hide the sufferings of a strong spirit in agony. “Now you say that I can’t reach prominence unless I prostitute my art to that unmentionable. Here’s your place. Get out I’m going home and write a good scorching letter on asbestos to our senile Mr. MacDunlap.”

“Do exactly as you want to, cookie,” soothed June. “And tomorrow when you feel better, you’ll come and cry on my shoulder, and we’ll plan a revision of Death on the Third Deck together, shall we?”

“The engagement, “ said Graham, loftily, “is broken. “

“Yes, dear. I’ll be home tomorrow at eight”

“That is of no possible interest to me. Good-bye!”

Publishers and editors are untouchables, of course. Theirs is a heritage of the outstretched hand and the well-toothed smile; the nod of the head and the slap of the back.

But perhaps somewhere, in the privacy of the holes to which authors scurry when the night falls, a private revenge is taken. There, phrases may be uttered where no one can overhear, and letters may be written that need not be mailed, and perhaps a picture of an editor, smiling pensively, is enshrined above the typewriter to act the part of bulls-eye in an occasional game of darts.

Such a picture of MacDunlap, so used, enlightened Graham Dom’s room. And Graham Dom himself, in his usual writing costume (street-clothes and typewriter), scowled at the fifth sheet of paper in his typewriter. The other four were draped over the edge of the wastebasket, condemned for their milk-and-watery mildness.

He began:

“Dear Sir—” and added slowly and viciously, “or Madam, as the case may be.”

He typed furiously as the inspiration caught him, disregarding the faint wisp of smoke curling upward from the overheated keys:

“You say you don’t think much of de Meister in this story. Well, I don’t think much of de Meister, period. You can handcuff your slimy carcass to his and jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. And I hope they drain the East River just before you jump.

“From now on, my works will be aimed higher than your scurvy press. And the day will come when I can look back on this period of my career with the loathing that is its just—”

Someone had been tapping Graham on the shoulder during the last paragraph. Graham twitched it angrily and ineffectively at intervals.

Now he stopped, turned around, and addressed the stranger in his room courteously: “Who the devilish damnation are you? And you can leave without bothering to answer. I won’t think you rude.”

The newcomer smiled graciously. His nod wafted the delicate aroma of some unobtrusive hair-oil toward Graham. His lean, hard-bitten jaw stood out keenly, and he said in a well-modulated voice:

“De Meister is the name. Reginald de Meister.”

Graham rocked to his mental foundations and heard them creak.

“Glub,” he said.

“Pardon?”

Graham recovered. “I said, ‘glub,’ a little code word meaning which de Meister.”

“The de Meister,” explained de Meister, kindly. “My character? My detective?”

De Meister helped himself to a seat, and his finely-chiseled features assumed that air of well-bred boredom so admired in the best circles. He lit a Turkish cigarette, which Graham at once recognized as his detective’s favorite brand, tapping it slowly and carefully against the back of his hand first, a mannerism equally characteristic.

“Really, old man,” said de Meister. “This is really excruciatin’ly funny. I suppose I am your charcter, y’know, but let’s not work on that basis. It would be so devastatin’ly awkward.”

“Glub,” said Graham again, by way of rejoinder.

His mind was feverishly setting up alternatives. He didn’t drink, more, at the moment, was the pity, so he wasn’t drunk. He had a chrome-steel digestion and he wasn’t overheated, so it wasn’t a hallucination. He never dreamed, and his imagination-as befitted a paying commodity-was under strict control. And since, like all authors, he was widely considered more than half a screwball, insanity was out of the question.

Which left de Meister simply an impossibility, and Graham felt relieved. It’s a very poor author indeed who hasn’t learned the fine art of ignoring impossibilities in writing a book.

He said smoothly, “I have here a volume of my latest work. Do you mind naming your page and crawling back into it. I’m a busy man and God knows I have enough of you in the tripe I write.”

“But I’m here on business, old chap. I’ve got to come to a friendly arrangement with you first. Things are deucedly uncomfortable as they are.”

“Look, do you know you’re bothering me? I’m not in the habit of talking to mythical characters. As a general thing, I don’t pal around with them. Besides which, it’s time your mother told you that you really don’t exist.”

“My dear fellow, I always existed. Existence is such a subjective thing. What a mind thinks exists, does exist. I existed in your mind, for instance, ever since you first thought of me.”

Graham shuddered. “But the question is, what are you doing out of my mind? Getting a little narrow for you? Want elbow room?”

“Not at all. Rather satisfact’ry mind in its way, but I achieved a more concrete existence only this afternoon, and so I seize the opportunity to engage you face to face in the aforementioned business conversation. You see, that thin, sentimental lady of your society—”

“What society?” questioned Graham hollowly. It was all awfully clear to him now.

“The one at which you made a speech—” de Meister shuddered in his turn—”on the detective novel. She believed in my existence, so naturally, I exist.”

He finished his cigarette and flicked it out with a negligent twist of the wrist.

“The logic,” declared Graham, “is inescapable. Now, what do you want and the answer is no.”

“Do you realize, old man, that if you stop writing de Meister stories, my existence will become that dull, wraithlike one of all superannuated fictional detectives. I’d have to gibber through the gray mists of Limbo with Holmes, Lecocq, and Dupin.”

“A very fascinating thought, I think. A very fitting fate.”

Reginald de Meister’s eyes turned icy, and Graham suddenly remembered the passage on page 123 of The Case of the Broken Ashtray:

His eyes, hitherto lazy and unattentive, hardened into twin pools of blue ice and transfixed the butler, who staggered back, a stifled cry on his lips.

Evidently, de Meister lost none of his characteristics out of the novels he adorned.

Graham staggered back, a stifled cry on his lip.

De Meister said menacingly, “It would be better for you if the de Meister mysteries continue. Do you understand?”

Graham recovered and summoned a feeble indignation. “Now, wait a while. You’re getting out of hand. Remember: in a way, I’m your father. That’s right. Your mental father. You can’t hand me ultimatums or make threats. It isn’t filial. It’s lacking in the proper respect and love.”

“And another thing,” said de Meister, unmoved. “We’ve got to straighten out this business of Letitia Reynolds. It’s gettin’ deucedly borin’, y’know:’

“Now you’re getting silly. My love scenes have been widely heralded as miracles of tenderness and sentiment not found in one murder mystery out of a thousand. -Wait, I’ll get you a few reviews. I don’t mind your attempts to dictate my actions so much, but I’m damned if you’ll criticize my writing.”

“Forget the reviews. Tenderness and all that rot is what I don’t want. I’ve been driftin’ after the fair lady for five volumes now, and behavin’ the most insufferable ass. This has got to stop.”

“In what way?”

“I’ve got to marry her in your present story. Either that, or make her a good, respectable mistress. And you’ll have to stop making me so damned Victorian and gentlemanly towards ladies. I’m only human, old man.”

“Impossible!” said Graham, “and that includes your last remark.”

De Meister grew severe. “Really, old chap, for an author, you display the most appallin’ lack of concern for the well-bein’ of a character who has supported you for a good many years.”

Graham choked eloquently. “Supported me? In other words, you think I couldn’t sell real novels, hey? Well, I’ll show you. I wouldn’t write another de Meister story for a million dollars. Not even for a fifty percent royalty and all television rights. How’s that?”

De Meister frowned and uttered those words that had been the sound of doom to so many criminals: “We shall see, but you are not yet done with me.”

With firmly jutting jaw, he vanished.

Graham’s twisted face straightened out, and slowly-very slowly -he brought his hands up to his cranium and felt carefully.

For the first time in a long and reasonably ribald mental life, he felt that his enemies were right and that a good dry cleaning would not hurt his mind at all.

The things that existed in it!

Graham Dorn shoved the doorbell with his elbow a second time. He distinctly remembered her saying she would be home at eight

The peep-hole shoved open. “Hello!”

“Hello!”

Silence!

Graham said plaintively, “It’s raining outside. Can’t I come in to dry?”

“I don’t know. Are we engaged, Mr. Dorn?”

“If I’m not,” was the stiff reply, “then I’ve been turning down the frenzied advances of a hundred passion-stricken girls-beautiful ones, all of them-for no apparent reason.”

“Yesterday, you said—”

“Ah, but who listens to what I say? I’m just quaint that way. Look, I brought you posies.” He flourished roses before the peep-hole.

June opened the door. “Roses! How plebeian. Come in, cookie, and sully the sofa. Whoa, whoa, before you move a step, what have you got under the other arm? Not the manuscript of Death on the Third Deck?”

“Correct. Not that excrescence of a manuscript This is something different”

June’s tone chilled. “That isn’t your precious novel, is it?”

Graham flung his head up, “How did you know about it?”

“You slobbered the plot all over me at MacDunlap’s silver anniversary party.”

“I did not I couldn’t unless I were drunk.”

“Oh, but you were. Stinking is the term. And on two cocktails too.”

“Well, if I was drunk, I couldn’t have told you the right plot”

“Is the setting a coal-mine district?”

“—Uh-yes.”

“And are the people concerned real, earthy, unartificial, down-to-earth characters, speaking and thinking just like you and me? Is it a story of basic economic forces? Are the human characters lifted up and thrown down and whirled around, all at the mercy of the coal mine and mechanized industry of today?”

“—Uh-yes.”

She nodded her head retrospectively. “I remember distinctly. First, you got drunk and were sick. Then you got better, and told me the first few chapters. Then I got sick.”

She approached the glowering author. “Graham.” She leant her golden head upon his shoulder and cooed softly. “Why don’t you continue with the de Meister stories? You get such pretty checks out of them.”

Graham writhed out of her grasp. “You are a mercenary wretch, incapable of understanding an author’s soul. You may consider our engagement broken.”

He sat down hard on the sofa, and folded his arms. “Unless you will consent to read the script of my novel and give me the usual story analysis.”

“May I give you my analysis of Death on the Third Deck first?”

“No.”

“Good! In the first place, your love interest is becoming sickening.”

“It is not.” Graham pointed his finger indignantly. “It breathes a sweet and sentimental fragrance, as of an older day. I’ve got the review here that says it.” He fumbled in his wallet.

“Oh, bullfeathers. Are you going to start quoting that guy in the Pillsboro (Okla.) Clarion? He’s probably your second cousin. You know that your last two novels were completely below par in royalties. And Third Deck isn’t even being sold.”

“So much the better-Ow!” He rubbed his head violently. “What did you do that for?”

“Because the only place I could hit as hard as I wanted to, without disabling you, was your head. Listen! The public is tired of your corny Letitia Reynolds. Why don’t you let her soak her ‘gleaming golden crown of hair’ in kerosene and get familiar with a match?”

“But June, that character is drawn from life. From you!”

“Graham Dorn! I am not here to listen to insults. The mystery market today is swinging towards action and hot, honest love and you’re still in the sweet, sentimental stickiness of five years ago.”

“But that’s Reginald de Meister’s character.”

“Well, change his character. Listen! You introduce Sancha Rodriguez. That’s fine. I approve of her. She’s Mexican, flaming, passionate, sultry, and in love with him. So what do you do? First he behaves the impeccable gentleman, and then you kill her off in the middle of the story.”

“Hmm, I see-You really think it would improve things to have de Meister forget himself. A kiss or so—”

June clenched her lovely teeth and her lovely fists. “Oh, darling, how glad I am love is blind! If it ever peeked one tiny little bit, I couldn’t stand it. Look, you squirrel’s blue plate special, you’re going to have de Meister and Rodriquez fall in love. They’re going to have an affair through the entire book and you can put your horrible Letitia into a nunnery. She probably be happier there from the way you make her sound.”

“That’s all you know about it, my sweet. It so happens that Reginald de Meister is in love with Letitia Reynolds and wants her, not this Roderiguez person.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“He told me so.”

“Who told you so?”

“Reginald de Meister.”

“What Reginald de Meister?”

“My Reginald de Meister.”

“What do you mean, your Reginald de Meister?”

“My character, Reginald de Meister.”

June got up, indulged in some deep-breathing and then said in a very calm voice, “Let’s start all over.”

She disappeared for a moment and returned with an aspirin. “your Reginald de Meister, from your books, told you, in person, he was in love with Letitia Reynolds?”

“That’s right.”

June swallowed the aspirin.

“Well, I’ll explain, June, the way he explained it to me. All characters really exist-at least, in the minds of the authors. But when people really begin to believe in them, they begin to exist in reality, because what people believe in, is, so far as they’re concerned, and what is existence anyway?”

June’s lips trembled. “Oh, Gramie, please don’t. Mother will never let me marry you if they put you in an asylum.”

“Don’t call me Gramie, June, for God’s sake. I tell you he was there, trying to tell me what to write and how to write it. He was almost as bad as you. Aw, come on, Baby, don’t cry.”

“I can’t help it. I always thought you were crazy, but I never thought you were crazy!”

“All right, what’s the difference? Let’s not talk about it, any more. I’m never going to write another mystery novel. After all—” (he indulged in a bit of indignation)—”when it gets so that my own character-my own character-tries to tell me what to do, it’s going too far...

June looked over her handkerchief. “How do you know it was really de Meister?”

“Oh, golly. As soon as he tapped his Turkish cigarette on the back of his hand and started dropping g’s like snowflakes in a blizzard, I knew the worst had come.”

The telephone rang. June leaped up. “Don’t answer, Graham. It’s probably from the asylum. I’ll tell them you’re not here. Hello. Hello. Oh, Mr. MacDunlap... She heaved a sigh of relief, then covered the mouthpiece and whispered horasely, “It might be a trap.”

“Hello, Mr. MacDunlap!...No, he’s not here....Yes, I think I can get in touch with him....At Martin’s tomorrow, noon.... I’ll tell him...With who?...With who???” She hung up suddenly.

“Graham, you’re to lunch with MacDunlap tomorrow...

“At his expense! Only at his expense!”

Her great blue eyes got greater and bluer, “And Reginald de Meister is to dine with you...

“What Reginald de Meister?”

“Your Reginald de Meister.”

“My Reg—”

“Oh, Gramie, don’t... Her eyes misted, “Don’t you see, Gramie, now they’ll put us both in an insane asylum-and Mr. MacDunlap, too. And they’ll probably put us all in the same padded cell. Oh, Gramie, three is such a dreadful crowd.”

And her face crumpled into tears.

Grew S. MacDunlap (that the S. stands for “Some” is a vile untruth spread by his enemies) was alone at the table when Graham Dorn entered. Out of this fact, Graham extracted a few fleeting drops of pleasure.

It was not so much, you understand, the presence of MacDunlap that did it, as the absence of de Meister.

MacDunlap looked at him over his spectacles and swallowed a liver pill, his favorite sweetmeat

“Aha. You’re here. What is this corny joke you’re putting over on me? You had no right to mix me up with a person like de Meister without warning me he was real. I might have taken precautions. I could have hired a bodyguard. I could have bought a revolver.”

“He’s not real. God damn it! Half of him was your idea.

“That,” returned MacDunlap with heat, “is libel. And what do you mean, he’s not real? When he introduced himself, I took three liver pills at once and he didn’t disappear. Do you know what three pills are? Three pills, the kind I’ve got (the doctor should only drop dead), could make an elephant disappear-if he weren’t real. I know.”

Graham said wearily, “Just the same, he exists only in my mind.”

“In your mind, I know he exists. Your mind should be investigated by the Pure Food and Drugs Act.”

The several polite rejoinders that occurred simultaneously to Graham were dismissed almost immediately as containing too great a proportion of pithy Anglo-Saxon expletives. After all-ha, ha-a publisher is a publisher however Anglo-Saxony he may be.

Graham said, “The question arises, then, how we’re to get rid of de Meister.”

“Get rid of de Meister?” MacDunlap jerked the glasses off his nose in his sudden start, and caught them in one hand. His voice thickened with emotion. “Who wants to get rid of him?”

“Do you want him around?”

“God forbid,” MacDunlap said between shudders. “Next to him, my brother-in-law is an angel.”

“He has no business outside my books.”

“For my part, he has no business inside them. Since I started reading your manuscripts, my doctor added kidney pills and cough syrups to my medicines.” He looked at his watch, and took a kidney pill. “My worst enemy should be a book publisher only a year.”

“Then why,” asked Graham patiently, “don’t you want to get rid of de Meister?”

“Because he is publicity.”

Graham stared blankly.

“Look! What other writer has a real detective? All the others are fictional. Everyone knows that. But yours-yours is real. We can let him solve cases and have big newspaper writeups. He’ll make the Police Department look silly. He’ll make—”

“That, “ interrupted Graham, categorically, “is by all odds the most obscene proposal I have ever had my ears manured with.”

“It will make money.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Name one thing it isn’t....Shh!” He kicked a near-fracture into Graham’s left ankle and rose to his feet with a convulsive smile, “MI. de Meister!”

“Sorry, old dear,” came a lethargic voice. “Couldn’t quite make it, you know. Loads of engagements. Must have been most borin’ for you.”

Graham Dom’s ears quivered spasmodically. He looked over his shoulder and reeled backward as far as a person could reel while in a sitting position. Reginald de Meister had sprouted a monocle since his last visitation, and his monocular glance was calculated to freeze blood.

De Meister’s greeting was casual. “My dear Watson! So glad to meet you. Overjoyed deucedly.”

“Why don’t you go to hell?” Graham asked curiously.

“My dear fellow. Oh, my dear fellow.”

MacDunlap cackled, “That’s what I like. Jokes! Fun! Makes everything pleasant to start with. Now shall we get down to business?”

“Certainly. The dinner is on the way, I trust? Then I’ll just order a bottle of wine. The usual, Henry.” The waiter ceased hovering, Flew away, and skimmed back with a bottle that opened and gurgled into a glass.

De Meister sipped delicately, “So nice of you, old chap, to make me a habitué of this place in your stories. It holds true even now, and it is most convenient. The waiters all know me. Mr. MacDunlap, I take it you have convinced Mr. Dom of the necessity of continuing the de Meister stories.”

“Yes,” said MacDunlap. “

“No,” said Graham.

“Don’t mind him,” said MacDunlap. “He’s temperamental. You know these authors.”

“Don’t mind him,” said Graham. “He’s microcephalic. You know these publishers.”

“Look, old chappie. I take it MacDunlap hasn’t pointed out to you the unpleasanter side of acting stubborn.”

“For instance what, old stinkie?” asked Graham, courteously.

“Well, have you ever been haunted?”

“Like coming behind me and saying, Boo?”

“My dear fellow, I say. I’m much more subtle than that. I can really haunt one in modem, up-to-date methods. For instance, have you ever had your individuality submerged?”

He snickered.

There was something familiar about that snicker. Graham suddenly remembered. It was on page 103 of Murder Rides the Range:

His lazy eyelids flicked down and up. He laughed lightly and melodiously, and though he said not a word, Hank Marslowe covered. There was hidden menace and hidden power in that light laugh, and somehow the burly rancher did not dare reach for his guns.

To Graham it still sounded like a nasty snicker, but he cowered, and did not dare reach for his guns.

MacDunlap plunged through the hole the momentary silence had created.

“You see, Graham. Why play around with ghosts? Ghosts aren’t reasonable things. They’re not human! If it’s more royalties, you want—”

Graham fired up. “Will you refrain from speaking of money? From now on, I write only great novels of tearing human emotions.”

MacDunlap’s flushed face changed suddenly. “

“No,” he said.

“In fact, to change the subject just a moment—” and Graham’s tone became surpassingly sweet, as the words got all sticky with maple syrup—”I have a manuscript here for you to look at.”

He grasped the perspiring MacDunlap by the lapel firmly. “It is a novel that is the work of five years. A novel that will grip you with its intensity. A novel that will shake you to the core of your being. A novel that will open a new world. A novel that will—”

“No,” said MacDunlap.

“A novel that will blast the falseness of this world. A novel that pierces to the truth. A novel—”

MacDunlap, being able to stretch his hand no higher, took the manuscript.

“No,” he said.

“Why the bloody hell don’t you read it?” inquired Graham.

“Now?”

“Well, start it.”

“Look, supposing I read it tomorrow, or even the next day. I have to take my cough syrup now.”

“You haven’t coughed once since I got here.”

“I’ll let you know immediately—”

“This,” said Graham, “is the first page. Why don’t you begin it? It will grip you instantly.”

MacDunlap read two paragraphs and said, “Is this laid in a coalmining town?”

“Yes.”

“Then I can’t read it. I’m allergic to coal dust.”

“But it’s not real coal dust, Mac Idiot.”

“That,” pointed out MacDunlap, “is what you said about de Meister.”

Reginald de Meister tapped a cigarette carefully on the back of his hand in a subtle manner which Graham immediately recognized as betokening a sudden decision.

“That is all devastatin’ly borin’, you know. Not quite gettin’ to the point, you might say. Go ahead, MacDunlap, this is no time for half measures.”

MacDunlap girded his spiritual loins and said, “ All right Mister Dorn, with you it’s no use being nice. Instead of de Meister, I’m getting coal dust. Instead of the best publicity in fifty years, I’m getting social significance. All right, Mister Smartaleck Dorn, if in one week you don’t come to terms with me, good terms, you will be blacklisted in every reputable publishing firm in the United States and foreign parts.” He shook his finger and added in a shout, “Including Scandinavian.”

Graham Dorn laughed lightly, “Pish,” he said, “tush. I happen to be an officer of the Author’s Union, and if you try to push me around I’ll have you blacklisted. How do you like that?”

“I like it fine. Because supposing I can prove you’re a plagiarist.”

“Me,” gasped Graham, recovering narrowly from merry suffocation.

“Me, the most original writer of the decade.”

“Is that so? And maybe you don’t remember that in each case you write up, you casually mention de Meister’s notebooks on previous cases.”

“So what?”

“So he has them. Reginald, my boy, show Mister Dom your notebook of your last case. -you see that. That’s Mystery of the Milestones and it has, in detail, every incident in your book-and dated the year before the book was published. Very authentic.”

“Again so what?”

“Have you maybe got the right to copy his notebook and call it an original murder mystery?”

“Why, you case of mental poliomyelitis, that notebook is my invention.”

“Who says so? It’s in de Meister’s handwriting, as any expert can prove. And maybe you have a piece of paper, some little contract or agreement, you know, that gives you the right to use his notebooks?”

“How can I have an agreement with a mythical personage?”

“What mythical personage?”

“You and I know de Meister doesn’t exist.”

“Ah, but does the jury know? When I testify that I took three strong liver pills and he didn’t disappear, what twelve men will say he doesn’t exist?”

“This is blackmail.”

“Certainly. I’ll give you a week. Or in other words, seven days.”

Graham Dorn turned desperately to de Meister. “You’re in on this, too. In my books I give you the keenest sense of honor. Is this honorable?”

De Meister shrugged. “My dear fellow. All this-and haunting, too.”

Graham rose.

“Where are you going?”

“Home to write you a letter.” Graham’s brows beetled defiantly. “ And this time I’ll mail it. I’m not giving in. I’ll fight to the last ditch. And, de Meister, you let loose with one single little haunt and I’ll rip your head out of its socket and spurt the blood all over MacDunlap’s new suit.”

He stalked out, and as he disappeared through the door, de Meister disappeared through nothing at all.

MacDunlap let out a soft yelp and then took a liver pill, a kidney pill, and a tablespoon of cough syrup in rapid succession.

Graham Dorn sat in June’s front parlor, and having long since consumed his fingernails, was starting on the first knuckles.

June, at the moment, was not present, and this, Graham felt, was just as well. A dear girl; in fact, a dear, sweet girl But his mind was not on her.

It was concerned instead with a miasmic series of flashbacks over the preceding six days:

—Say, Graham, I met your side-kick at the club yesterday. You know, de Meister. Got an awful shock. I always had the idea he was a sort of Sherlock Holmes that didn’t exist. That’s one on me, boy. Didn’t know-Hey, where are you going?

—Hey, Dorn, I hear your boss de Meister is back in town. Ought to have material for more stories soon. You’re lucky you’ve got someone to grind out your plots ready-made-Huh? Well, goodbye.”

—Why, Graham, darling, wherever were you last night? Ann’s affair didn’t get anywhere without you; or at least, it wouldn’t have, if it hadn’t been for Reggie de Meister. He asked after you; but then, I guess he felt lost without his Watson. It must feel wonderful to Watson for such-Mister Dorn! And the same to you, sir!

—you put one over on me. I thought you made up those wild things. Well, truth is stranger than fiction, ha, ha!

—Police officials deny that the famous amateur criminologist Reginald de Meister has interested himself in this case. Mr. de Meister himself could not be reached by our reporters for comment. Mr. de Meister is best known to the public for his brilliant solutions to over a dozen crimes, as chronicled in fiction form by his so-called “Watson,” Mr. Grayle Doone.

Graham quivered and his arms trembled in an awful desire for blood. De Meister was haunting him-but good. He was losing his individuality, exactly as had been threatened.

It gradually dawned upon Graham that the monotonous ringing noise he heard was not in his head, but, on the contrary, from the front door.

Such seemed likewise the opinion of Miss June Billings, whose piercing call shot down the stairs and biffed Graham a sharp uppercut to the ear-drums.

“Hey, dope, see who’s at the front door, before the vibration tears the house down. I’ll be down in half an hour.”

“Yes, dear!”

Graham shuffled his way to the front door and opened it.

“Ah, there. Greetin’s,” said de Meister, and brushed past.

Graham’s dull eyes stared, and then fired high, as an animal snarl burst from his lips. He took up that gorilla posture, so comforting to red-blooded American males at moments like this, and circled the slightly-confused detective.

“My dear fellow, are you ill?”

“I,” explained Graham, “am not ill, but you will soon be past all interest in that, for I am going to bathe my hands in your heart’s reddest blood.”

“But I say, you’ll only have to wash them afterwards. It would be such an obvious clue, wouldn’t it?”

“Enough of this gay banter. Have you any last words?”

“Not particularly.”

“It’s just as well. I’m not interested in your last words.”

He thundered into action, bearing down upon the unfortunate de Meister like a bull elephant. De Meister faded to the left, shot out an arm and a foot, and Graham described a parabolic arc that ended in the total destruction of an end table, a vase of flowers, a fish-bowl, and a five-foot section of wall.

Graham blinked, and brushed away a curious goldfish from his left eyebrow.

“My dear fellow,” murmured de Meister, “oh, my dear fellow.”

Too late, Graham remembered that passage in Pistol Parade:

De Meister’s arms were whipcord lightning, as with sure, rapid thrusts, he rendered the two thugs helpless. Not by brute force, but by his expert knowledge of judo, he defeated them easily without hastening his breath. The thugs groaned in pain.

Graham groaned in pain.

He lifted his right thigh an inch or so to let his femur slip back into place.

“Hadn’t you better get up, old chap?”

“I will stay here,” said Graham with dignity, “and contemplate the floor in profile view, until such time as it suits me or until such time as I find myself capable of moving a muscle. I don’t care which. And now, before I proceed to take further measures with you, what the hell do you want?”

Reginald de Meister adjusted his monocle to a nicety. “You know, I suppose, that MacDunlap’s ultimatum expires tomorrow?”

“And you and he with it, I trust.”

“You will not reconsider.”

“Ha!”

“Really,” de Meister sighed, “this is borin’ no end. You have made things comfortable for me in this world. After all, in your books you’ve made me well-known in all the clubs and better restaurants, the bosom friend, y’know, of the mayor and commissioner of police, the owner of a Park Avenue penthouse and a magnificent art collection. And it all lingers over, old chap. Really quite afIectin’.”

“It is remarkable,” mused Graham, “the intensity with which I am not listening and the distinctness with which I do not hear a word you say.”

“Still,” said de Meister, “there is no denyin’ my book world suits me better. It is somehow more fascinatin’, freer from dull logic, more apart from the necessities of the world. In short, I must go back, and to active participation. You have till tomorrow!”

Graham hummed a gay little tune with flat little notes.

“Is this a new threat, de Meister?”

“It is the old threat intensified. I’m going to rob you of every vestige of your personality. And eventually public opinion will force you to write as, to paraphrase you, de Meister’s Compleat Stooge. Did you see the name the newspaper chappies pinned on you today, old man?”

“Yes, Mr. Filthy de Meister, and did you read a half-column item on page ten in the same paper. I’ll read it for you: ‘Noted Criminologist in l-A. Will be inducted shortly draft board says.”‘

For a moment, de Meister said and did nothing. And then one, after another, he did the following things: removed his monocle slowly, sat down heavily, rubbed his chin abstractedly, and lit a cigarette after long and careful tamping. Each of these, Graham Dorn’s trained authorial eye recognized as singly representing perturbation and distress on the part of his character.

And never, in any of his books, did Graham remember a time when de Meister had gone through all four consecutively.

Finally, de Meister spoke. “Why you had to bring up draft registrations in your last book, I really don’t know. This urge to be topical; this fiendish desire to be up to the minute with the news is the curse of the mystery novel. A true mystery is timeless; should have no relation to current events; should—”

“There is one way,” said Graham, “to escape induction—”

“You might at least have mentioned a deferred classification on some vital ground.”

“There is one way,” said Graham, “to escape induction—”

“Criminal negligence,” said de Meister.

“Look! Go back to the books and you’ll never be filled with lead.”

“Write them and I’ll do it.”

“Think of the war.”

“Think of your ego.”

Two strong men stood face to face (or would have, if Graham weren’t still horizontal) and neither flinched.

Impasse!

And the sweet, feminine voice of June Billings interrupted and snapped the tension:

“May I ask, Graham Dom, what you are doing on the floor. It’s been swept today and you’re not complimenting me by attempting to improve the job.”

“I am not sweeping the floor. If you looked carefully,” replied Graham gently, “you would see that your own adored fiancé is lying here a mass of bruises and a hotbed of pains and aches.”

“You’ve ruined my end table!”

“I’ve broken my leg.”

“And my best lamp.”

“And two ribs.”

“And my fishbowl.”

“And my Adam’s apple.”

“And you haven’t introduced your friend.”

“And my cervical verte-What friend?”

“This friend.”

“Friend! Ha!” And a mist came over his eyes. She was so young, so fragile to come into contact with hard, brutal facts of life. “This,” he muttered brokenly, “is Reginald de Meister.”

De Meister at this point broke a cigarette sharply in two, a gesture pregnant with the deepest emotion.

June said slowly, “Why-why, you’re different from what I had thought.”

“How had you expected me to look?” asked de Meister, in soft, thrilling tones.

“I don’t know. Differently than you do,-from the stories I heard.”

“You remind me, somehow, Miss Billings, of Letitia Reynolds.”

“I think so. Graham said he drew her from me.”

“A very poor imitation, Miss Billings. Devastatin’ly poor.”

They were six inches apart now, eyes fixed with a mutual glue, and Graham yelled sharply. He sprang upright as memory smote him a nasty smite on the forehead.

A passage from Case of the Muddy Overshoe occurred to him. Likewise one from The Primrose Murders. Also one from The Tragedy of Hartley Manor, Death of a Hunter, White Scorpion and, to put it in a small nutshell, from every one of the others.

The passage read:

There was a certain fascination about de Meister that appealed irresistibly to women.

And June Billings was-as it had often, in Graham’s idler moments, occurred to him-a woman.

And fascination simply gooed out of her ears and coated the floor six inches deep.

“Get out of this room, June,” he ordered.

“I will not.”

“There is something I must discuss with MI. de Meister, man to man. I demand that you leave this room.”

“Please go, Miss Billings,” said de Meister.

June hesitated, and in a very small voice said, “Very well.”

“Hold on,” shouted Graham. “Don’t let him order you about. I demand that you stay.”

She closed the door very gently behind her.

The two men faced each other. There was that in either pair of eyes that indicated a strong man brought to bay. There was stubborn, undying antagonism; no quarter; no compromise. It was exactly the sort of situation Graham Dom always presented his readers with, when two strong men fought for one hand, one heart, one girl.

The two said simultaneously, “Let’s make a deal!”

Graham said, “You have convinced me, Reggie. Our public needs us. Tomorrow I shall begin another de Meister story. Let us shake hands and forget the past.”

De Meister struggled with his emotion. He laid his hand on Graham’s lapel, “My dear fellow, it is I who have been convinced by your logic. I can’t allow you to sacrifice yourself for me. There are great things in you that must be brought out. Write your coal-mining novels. They count, not I.”

“I couldn’t, old chap. Not after all you’ve done for me, and all you’ve meant to me. Tomorrow we start anew.”

“Graham, my-my spiritual father, I couldn’t allow it. Do you think I have no feelings, filial feelings-in a spiritual sort of way.”

“But the war, think of the war. Mangled limbs. Blood All that.”

“I must stay. My country needs me.”

“But if I stop writing, eventually you will stop existing. I can’t allow that.”

“Oh, that!” De Meister laughed with a careless elegance. “Things have changed since. So many people believe in my existence now that my grip upon actual existence has become too firm to be broken. I don’t have to worry about Limbo any more.”

“Oh.” Graham clenched his teeth and spoke in searing sibilants: “So that’s your scheme, you snake. Do you suppose I don’t see you’re stuck on June?”

“Look here, old chap,” said de Meister haughtily. “I can’t permit you to speak slightingly of a true and honest love. I love June and she loves me-I know it. And if you’re going to be stuffy and Victorian about it, you can swallow some nitro-glycerine and tap yourself with a hammer.”

“I’ll nitro-glycerine you! Because I’m going home tonight and beginning another de Meister story. You’ll be part of it and you’ll get back into it, and what do you think of that?”

“Nothing, because you can’t write another de Meister story. I’m too real now, and you can’t control me just like that. And what do you think of that?”

It took Graham Dom a week to make up his mind what to think of that, and then his thoughts were completely and startlingly unprintable.

In fact, it was impossible to write.

That is, startling ideas occurred to him for great novels, emotional dramas, epic poems, brilliant essays-but he couldn’t write anything about Reginald de Meister.

The typewriter was simply fresh out of Capital R’s.

Graham wept, cursed, tore his hair, and anointed his finger tips with liniment. He tried typewriter, pen, pencil, crayon, charcoal, and blood.

He could not write.

The doorbell rang, and Graham threw it open.

MacDunlap stumbled in, falling over the first drifts of torn paper directly into Graham’s arms.

Graham let him drop. “Hah!” he said, with frozen dignity.

“My heart!” said MacDunlap, and fumbled for his liver pills.

“Don’t die there,” suggested Graham, courteously. “The management won’t permit me to drop human flesh into the incinerator.”

“Graham, my boy,” MacDunlap said, emotionally, “no more ultimatums! No more threats! I come now to appeal to your finer feelings, Graham—” he went through a slight choking interlude—”I love you like a son. This skunk de Meister must disappear. You must write more de Meister stories for my sake. Graham-I will tell you something in private. My wife is in love with this detective. She tells me I am not romantic. I! Not romantic! Can you understand it?”

“I can,” was the tragic response. “He fascinates all women.”

“With that face? With that monocle?”

“It says so in all my books.”

MacDunlap stiffened. “Ah ha. You again. Dope! If only you ever stopped long enough to let your mind know what your typewriter was saying.”

“You insisted. Feminine trade.” Graham didn’t care any more. Women! He snickered bitterly. Nothing wrong with any of them that a block-buster wouldn’t fix.

MacDunlap hemmed. “Well, feminine trade. Very necessary. -but Graham, what shall I do? It’s not only my wife. She owns fifty shares in MacDunlap, Inc. in her own name. If she leaves me, I lose control. Think of it, Graham. The catastrophe to the publishing world.”

“Grew, old chap,” Graham sighed a sigh so deep, his toenails quivered sympathetically. “I might as well tell you. June, my fiancée, you know, loves this worm. And he loves her because she is the prototype of Letitia Reynolds.”

“The what of Letitia?” asked MacDunlap, vaguely suspecting an insult.

“Never mind. My life is ruined.” He smiled bravely and choked back the unmanly tears, after the first two had dripped off the end of his nose.

“My poor boy!” The two gripped hands convulsively.

“Caught in a vise by this foul monster,” said Graham.

“Trapped like a German in Russia,” said MacDunlap.

“Victim of an inhuman fiend,” said Graham.

“Exactly,” said MacDunlap. He wrung Graham’s hand as if he were milking a cow. “You’ve got to write de Meister stories and get him back where, next to Hell, he most belongs. Right?”

“Right! But there’s one little catch.”

“What?”

“I can’t write. He’s so real now, I can’t put him into a book.”

MacDunlap caught the significance of the massed drifts of used paper on the floor. He held his head and groaned, “My corporation! My wife!”

“There’s always the Army,” said Graham.

MacDunlap looked up. “What about Death on the Third Deck, the novel I rejected three weeks ago?”

“That doesn’t count. It’s past history. It’s already affected him.”

“Without being published?”

“Sure. That’s the story I mentioned his draft board in. The one that put him in l-A.”

“I could think of better places to put him.”

“MacDunlap!” Graham Dorn jumped up, and grappled MacDunlap’s lapel. “Maybe it can be revised.”

MacDunlap coughed hackingly, and stifled out a dim grunt.

“We can put anything we want into it.” MacDunlap choked a bit.

“We can fix things up.”

MacDunlap turned blue in the face.

Graham shook the lapel and everything thereto attached, “Say something, won’t you?”

MacDunlap wrenched away and took a tablespoon of cough syrup. He held his hand over his heart and patted it a bit. He shook his head and gestured with his eyebrows.

Graham shrugged. “Well, if you just want to be sullen, go ahead. I’ll revise it without you.”

He located the manuscript and tried his fingers gingerly on the typewriter. They went smoothly, with practically no creaking at the joints. He put on speed, more speed, and then went into his usual race, with the portable jouncing along merrily under the accustomed head of steam.

“It’s working,” he shouted. “I can’t write new stories, but I can revise old, unpublished ones.”

MacDunlap watched over his shoulder. He breathed only at odd moments.

“Faster,” said MacDunlap, “faster!”

“Faster than thirty-five?” said Graham, sternly. “OPA [The Office of Price Administration was in charge of gasoline rationing at this period. Remember “A” stickers? D.R.B.] forbid! Five more minutes.”

“Will he be there?”

“He’s always there. He’s been at her house every evening this week.” He spat out the fine ivory dust into which he had ground the last inch of his incisors. “But God help you if your secretary falls down on the job.”

“My boy, on my secretary you can depend.”

“She’s got to read that revision by nine.”

“If she doesn’t drop dead.”

“With my luck, she will. Will she believe it?”

“Every word. She’s seen de Meister. She knows he exists.”

Brakes screeched, and Graham’s soul cringed in sympathy with every molecule of rubber frictioned off the tires.

He bounded up the stairs, MacDunlap hobbling after.

He rang the bell and burst in at the door. Reginald de Meister standing directly inside received the full impact of a pointing finger, and only a rapid backward movement of the head kept him from becoming a one-eyed mythical character.

June Billings stood aside, silent and uncomfortable.

“Reginald de Meister,” growled Graham, in sinister tones, “prepare to meet your doom.”

“Oh, boy,” said MacDunlap, “are you going to get it.”

“And to what,” asked de Meister, “am I indebted for your dramatic but unilluminatin’ statement? Confusin’, don’t you know.” He lit a cigarette with a fine gesture and smiled.

“Hello, Gramie,” said June, tearfully. “

“Scram, vile woman.”

June sniffed. She felt like a heroine out of a book, tom by her own emotions. Naturally, she was having the time of her life.

So she let the tears dribble and looked forlorn.

“To return to the subject, what is this all about?” asked de Meister, wearily.

“I have rewritten Death on the Third Deck.”

“Well?”

“The revision,” continued Graham, “is at present in the hands of MacDunlap’s secretary, a girl on the style of Miss Billings, my fiancée that was. That is, she is a girl who aspires to the status of a moron, but has not yet quite attained it. She’ll believe every word. “

“Well?”

Graham’s voice grew ominous, “You remember, perhaps, Sancho Rodriguez?”

For the first time, Reginald de Meister shuddered. He caught his cigarette as it dropped. “She was killed by Sam Blake in the sixth chapter. She was in love with me. Really, old fellow, what messes you get me into.”

“Not half the mess you’re in now, old chap. Sancha Rodriguez did not die in the revision.”

“Die!” came a sharp, but clear female voice, “I’ll show him if I died. And where have you been this last month, you two-crosser?”

De Meister did not catch his cigarette this time. He didn’t even try. He recognized the apparition. To an unprejudiced observer, it might have been merely a svelte Latin girl equipped with dark, flashing eyes, and long, glittering fingernails, but to de Meister, it was Sancha Rodriguez-undead!

MacDunlap’s secretary had read and believed.

“Miss Rodriguez,” throbbed de Meister, charmingly, “how fascinatin’ to see you.”

“Mrs. de Meister to you, you double-timer, you two-crosser, you scum of the ground, you scorpion of the grass. And who is this woman?”

June retreated with dignity behind the nearest chair.

Mrs. de Meister,” said Reginald pleadingly, and turned helplessly to Graham Dom.

“Oh, you have forgotten, have you, you smooth talker, you low dog. I’ll show you what it means to deceive a weak woman. I’ll make you mince-meat with my fingernails.”

De Meister back-pedaled furiously. “But darling—”

“Don’t you make sweet talk. What are you doing with this woman?”

“But, darling—”

“Don’t give me any explanation. What are you doing with this woman?”

“But darling—”

“Shut up! What are you doing with this woman?”

Reginald de Meister was up in a comer, and Mrs. de Meister shook her fists at him. “ Answer me?”

De Meister disappeared.

Mrs. de Meister disappeared right after him. June Billings collapsed into real tears.

Graham Dorn folded his arms and looked sternly at her. MacDunlap rubbed his hands and took a kidney pill.

“It wasn’t my fault, Gramie,” said June. “You said in your books he fascinated all women, so I couldn’t help it. Deep inside, I hated him all along. You believe me, don’t you?”

“A likely story!” said Graham, sitting down next to her on the sofa. “ A likely story. But I forgive you, maybe.”

MacDunlap said tremulously, “My boy, you have saved my stocks. Also, my wife, of course. And remember-you promised me one de Meister story each year.”

Graham gritted, “Just one, and I’ll henpeck him to death, and keep one unpublished story forever on hand, just in case. And you’re publishing my novel, aren’t you, Grew, old boy?”

“Glug,” said MacDunlap.

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes, Graham. Of course, Graham. Definitely, Graham. Positively, Graham.”

“Then leave us now. There are matters of importance I must discuss with my fiancée.”

MacDunlap smiled and tiptoed out the door.

Ah, love, love, he mused, as he took a liver pill and followed it up by a cough-syrup chaser.