

SHOCK

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That pesty editor almost didn't give me a chance to introduce a single story in this issue. He's jealous, that's why. He doesn't want people to love me. He can't understand why men love my long silky hair, and spidery shapely legs, and women envy my unique beauty. Hah! I'll teach him a lesson, someday. He'll end up like some of the unfortunate people in this lovely, lovely story. I can hardly wait until he takes his next bath . . .

OPEN HOUSE

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

THERE WAS A KNOCK. ONLY ONE, but the glass-squared door shook in its poor-fitting jamb and sent sharp sounds trembling throughout the apartment.

Mr. Pierce froze. His head jerked up like the head of a feeding animal suddenly startled; then he recognized the sound and fear began to rearrange him, draining

the blood from his head, stopping his throat, popping his heart up into his craw. He listened and watched his nerves and his courage and his future all eddy away, like rotted lace in a quick wind.

The knock rang again, louder this time.

"Wait!" The word choked loose so softly he could scarcely hear

it; it was a prayer. "Wait—just a second. I'll be there in just a second!" Then there was another sound; the tinny clatter of the carving knife that had slipped slowly from his hands and fallen to the pink tile floor.

Mr. Pierce rose and looked at the bathtub. At the water that was not water any longer but, instead, bright red ink, burning red against the glistening white porcelain sides. At the pale things floating in the bright red water, the pale soft things, floating, drifting, turning, the pieces of lamb in a simmering stew.

"Hey, Eddie!" The voice came muffled from behind the knockings. "Anybody home?"

The little man let some air come out of his lungs. He tried to swallow and then started from the bathroom. "Just a minute, will you!" He was almost to the door when he stopped, returned and washed his hands and removed the oilcloth apron that had once been yellow and was now other colors. He dropped the apron to the floor, pulled the shower curtain across the tub—or very nearly across; it had never fit quite snug—inspected himself for stains and went out, closing the door.

Be logical, he told himself. Be calm. And quiet. And cool. Everything is all right. Nothing has happened. Nothing whatever. Emma is . . . visiting friends. Yes.

He opened the door.

"Wie Geht's!"

Two grinning men of nearly middle years stood at the threshold. Mr. Pierce eyed them, closely.

It was Lew Hoover, in a soup-and-fish and a new mustache, and someone else whom Mr. Pierce had never seen before.

"Was ist los mit der gesundheit?"

"My God, Lew!" How long had it been? A year?

"Eddie, you old son-of-a-gun!" Hoover turned to his companion and delivered a sharp elbow. "This is him, pal. Greatest guy there is. Eddie Pierce. God damn. Eddie, want you to meet—man, what's your name?"

"Vernon," the other said. "Vernon F. Fein. I've told you that seventy-three times."

"All right; don't get smart." Hoover leaned forward and whispered hoarsely, "Just met him tonight. At the bar. Square."

Mr. Peirce said nothing. His throat was calcified. He felt a pressure on his hand.

"Didn't get you up or anything, did we?" Hoover asked.

"Oh, no. No. I was just sort of cleaning up a little."

"We come in for a few minutes?"

"Well . . ." Mr. Pierce dropped his eyes. He thought of the times he had prayed to see the face of Lew Hoover, or Len Brooks, or Jimmy Vandergrift, or any of the

old gang. How many times. He thought of all the lonely nights, alone, with Emma, here . . . "Well, isn't it kind of late, fellows?"

"Shank of the evening! Fein, I want you to look at a guy that didn't used to even know what late was. Three o'clock, four o'clock, five— God, Eddie, remember?"

Mr. Pierce smiled and nodded.

"Then come on—for old time's sake, what do you say? One drink. Then we'll blow. All right?"

"It's awfully late, Lew."

Hoover giggled and belched. His breath smelled strongly of gin. Vernon F. Fein looked pleasantly noncommittal.

"Eddie, I promised my pal here, George, that we'd all have one short one together. I promised him. Don't make me out a liar, huh? Or"—Hoover's voice lowered—"would it disturb the little woman?"

"No, as a matter of fact that isn't it at all. Emma's away, visiting. She's not here."

"*Not here!*" Hoover pushed past and weaved across the room to the couch. He made a face and said, "*Was ist los mit der gesundheit?*"

Mr. Pierce fought down the hysteria. He beckoned the stranger in and closed the door. "Well," he said, "just a short one, Lew. Got to rise and shine in the morning."

"That's what I was talking about, one short one, isn't it?"

Mr. Pierce went into the kitchen and quickly made three Scotch and waters. When he returned, his visitors were laughing.

"Eddie," Hoover chuckled. "Lordy— I can't believe it's been so long." He stopped chuckling. "Man, what happened?"

"I don't know what you mean, Lew."

"Don't know what I mean! George, what your bloodshot orbs envisage tonight is a miracle in the flesh. You wouldn't believe it, George."

Vernon F. Fein took a large swallow and shifted uncomfortably.

"You see that dried-up mess of bones there?" Hoover renewed his giggling. "That, Fred, was once the sweetest bastard that ever walked on two legs. Fun? Oh my God. Just two years ago. Two stinking years. Every night, a ball. Right, Eddie? Am I right or wrong, every night a ball?"

Mr. Pierce threw down some Scotch.

"No loot in his pocket, all right. No job, all right. You want to get cheered up, who do you see? Eddie Pierce, that's who. Then—whammo!"

"Whammo?" Fein finished his drink and hiccupped.

"It all goes bust. You know what?" Hoover grabbed the beefy man's lapels, roughly. "He wanted to be a writer. Like me: I'm a writer. Movies. Anything wrong

with movies?"

"I've always like Claudette Colbert," Fein said.

"Yeah. Well, Eddie could have had it all. But he was going to write novels. And—you want to know something, stupid? He was good. I'm telling you."

"I wonder," Fein said, dreamily, "what ever happened to Laird Cregar. There was a real actor."

"Shut up, Fred. Are you listening to me or not? Eddie, here, was *good* is what I'm trying to get through that hog's head of yours. He would have made it, too. Right on the damn brink. He—what the living *hell* is this?" Hoover was contorted on the couch. His hand reached up to touch the fringe of a greenly floral lampshade. "Eddie, how come you let her keep such crap in the house?"

"Mr. Pierce," Fein interrupted, cordially. "May I inquire as respects the sort of work you do? I mean your line of business. Do you—"

Hoover howled. "I'll tell you, Jim. He's a goddamn butcher. Yah! That's right, all right. His wife's uncle got him a real nice spot in a meat market. Ham hocks and sides of beef—the greatest writer, the sweetest son of a—oh, hell!"

Mr. Pierce felt suddenly ill. He could hear the ice cubes rattling in his glass.

"Maybe we ought to leave,"

Fein said. "Maybe we're keeping people up."

"Then he got married," Hoover went on, his words slurred and indistinct. "A Suth'n belle: very nice, oh my. Course, you can't expect him to spend so much time with the old gang now he's married, right? And, what the hell, you can't expect a wife to get out and work and support her husband while he's slaving over a hot typewriter trying to get ahead, now can you?"

"I understand," Fein said.

"The hell you do, George, the hell you do."

"Lew..." Mr. Pierce stepped forward.

"Eddie, listen, remember the party over at Len's where you and me went to sleep in the bathtub? And what's-her-name, Doty, came in and turned on the water. God damn, we almost drowned!" Hoover chuckled; he was sinking farther down in the couch. "And that trip to Tiajuana—huh? How long were we drunk? Was it really a week? Hey, and how about the ball we tossed when you sold your first story—"

"I wonder," Vernon F. Fein said, "if I could please have another drink."

"Damn right," Hoover said. He rose and stumbled into the kitchen.

Mr. Pierce sat remembering it all. His wonderful little bachelor

apartment and all his things, just so; the parties; and, most important, his friends. Lew and Jimmy and Len and Paul and Ron . . . the best, the loyalest, closest gang of buddies that ever was.

And then, as Lew had said, Emma. Sweet Emma, who'd caught him when the novel wasn't going right and he was feeling low for no reason, low and—at this he smiled—lonely.

What had made him do it, finally? he wondered for perhaps the first time. Exactly how had it happened? he asked himself . . .

Things had been strange, that's all he'd known right at the moment.

There had been a wind and it blew city-breath into the branches of the outside elms and made them groan like broken flutes; it plucked up tumbleweeds from empty lots and sent them rolling ponderously down the night-darkened streets like fat brown ghosts; it made the windows and screens of every house quiver together with its small fury.

But it wasn't the wind alone that had made things strange.

Work, perhaps? It hadn't been a heavy day, especially. Oh, sure, he'd caught the tip of his finger in the grinder, but that wasn't anything new. He'd cut and sawed and weighed the meat and hated it no more and no less than ever before.

The apartment? That clump of

dust beneath the record cabinet and that half-nibbled melting block of chocolate on the couch arm . . .

No. Not the wind, not the job, not the apartment. Not singly, anyway.

Then what?

Mr. Pierce got up and picked a cigarette from the coffee-table humidor and eased back into the dust-heavy chair, carefully, uncertainly, as if he half expected someone to strap him in, attach electrodes to his wrists and ankles and throw a switch.

He remembered.

How he had sat just so many hours earlier, and listened to the nasal voice . . .

"Eddie. Sweetheart!"

He had felt his heart come to life, his head begin to throb.

"Eddie, be a lamb and come sit with me."

And he had let the held-in breath rush away, realizing then that the strangeness was not so strange.

"Just a second, honey!" he had called back.

The stubbed-out cigarette uncoiled in the brass ashtray like a dying animal. Mr. Pierce watched it and yielded, while Hoover talked on and on, to the memories . . .

"Eddieeee, baby!"

"Okay; coming."

He had stood up and listened to the splashing sounds. And then

walked quickly across the naked living-room floor, past the spit-shine whiteness of ceramic ducks and ceramic geese afloat on the varnished tops of his bookcases; past the tinted Buddha—a gift from Emma's mother—grinning with the ignorance of the ages hidden in that bare white bursting belly, past Emma's gold-framed "Floral Group" and his Matisse "Odalisque," past and through all the freakish unbalance, the mixture of cheap and expensive, her things, and his things, he walked, and into the bathroom.

She was reading.

"Hi."

"Emma, I—"

But—she was reading. How he loved that! No matter what, Donald Duck, Henry Miller, she became hypnotized.

"I hate you," he said.

Her expression remained serene. She turned a page, smiling.

"I think," he said, "of all the females in the world as a vast regatta—full sails, trim white hulls, sleek, frail, swift. Thousands—millions! And there, in the midst of them all, you, my darling, my dearest: a great untidy barge, filled with rotting fruit and the ghosts of fled rats, chugging, straining, sinking; a gross smudge on the clear water..."

Emma waved one of her hands.

"In a minute, dear," she said.

"Just a couple more pages."

"Read on, until you puffs and

have to be gotten up with a vacuum cleaner," Mr. Pierce said in a soft, reedy voice.

"I love you," Emma said.

But even "the game" did no good. Mr. Pierce laid his horn-rims on the medicine cabinet and hoisted his trousers and rubbed his eyes. The steam floated like layers of mold in the room. He began to perspire. Coldly.

He watched his wife. In the gray water parts of her rose like little pink islands. She studied the pages of her magazine intensely as always, as a rabbit stares in paralyzed fascination at a cobra.

Then, suddenly, without thinking or questioning or wondering, Mr. Pierce snatched the magazine, hurled it across the small room and stood up.

"Why... Eddie!"

He then leaned over, took ahold of Emma's legs and pulled hard. Her massive body shot forward in the tub. Mr. Pierce put one foot on her throat and pushed her head beneath the soapy water: she thrashed and squirmed and bubbled, and splashed, but soon it was quiet.

Then Mr. Pierce shook and trembled for almost half an hour. A full hour had passed before he returned from the kitchen with certain utensils—

"I'm going to clear the air now!" Hoover was weaving uncertainly: his face seemed utterly like warm plastic. "Never had the

guts to say it all. But I've got a little under my belt now, and I don't care. Get sore. Get tee'd off! Fein—we were all for him when he married this chick. Really. Hell, she had us all snowed. Pretended to be understanding—see, she loved him just the way he was, no changes. *His* friends? *Her* friends. And that's the way it went—for the first two months. Then it starts. And like magic, kid, like *magic*, this sweet-talking chubby li'l gal turns a goddamn—I don't know what. Shrew, fish-wife, harridan: you name it. Any of us, the minute we found out she was what she was, we'd of booted her out on her ear. But that's not Eddie. No-o-o! He wants to do the right thing. So instead, we get booted out. And it's all over. His buddies aren't welcome any more. He gives up his ambitions, his friends, and every other goddamn thing. Ka-put. Schluss."

Listening, Mr. Pierce relived the transformation of his life; all of it, over two years. He relived it in those minutes. How his unconsciously ordered existence had been slowly uprooted and destroyed. How Emma had changed into a new person, one he'd never known. A fat, candy-eating, movie-magazine-reading, dirty-bathrobe-wearing *wife*, with a million nauseating habits. She squeezed his pimples. She made patterns with her feet. She fixed

breakfast eggs that glistened with mucus. She threatened to leave—and never did. Refused to, stood adamant. And then, just yesterday, how she had crept up and put her viselike thumbs upon a tender neck-boil and pressed and cooed (her very words!), "Honey, what would you think about having a little stranger in the house?" Oh, how she had murdered him, by inches, centimeters, by days and nights, each time with a new weapon . . .

Well, it was all right now. He had made it all right. He'd say she ran off with a Turk or an Italian—no one else knew how he had hated her, he'd always been so polite. And if it were done a little at a time, just a little: parts in the freezer, put through the grinder, distributed to a hundred customers over a hundred days . . . who would notice? Who would guess? And without a corpus delicti, of course . . .

Hoover had poured new drinks. He was standing now, weaving like a movie comic. "I'm sorry, Eddie," he said. "Didn't mean to run off at the mouth like that, honest. She'd drive me crazy, personally, but she's your baby I—well, sorry."

"That's okay, Lew," Mr. Pierce said, graciously.

"Mosey along now. I was a jerk to think we could get it back, I guess."

"No, Lew—" Mr. Pierce hesi-

tated. "It'll come back, some day. You wait and see."

Hoover slapped the face of his companion, who had fallen asleep. "Come on, Max. Let's go talk about Claudette Colbert."

Mr. Fein opened his eyes. Hoover picked up his white silk scarf and started for the door. He turned, then, and there was an expression of great sorrow on his face. "And you don't even know what tonight is," he said.

"Who—me?" Fein asked.

"Tell him, Eddie. Or have you forgotten?"

Mr. Pierce shook his head. "I don't think I follow you, Lew."

"Like I told you," Hoover said to Fein, "he's forgotten. Fred, tonight used to be the biggest in the year for us. All Fools Day. For years. And he didn't even remember. It's why I came by in the first place, and I was waiting, just hoping there that he would—but, Eddie, Eddie! You're dead, kid. Dead." He wheeled, snorted and stopped. "Wait. Got to use the bathroom," he said.

Mr. Pierce pulled himself from his regret and from his memories of the parties they had all thrown on this memorable date so many times in the past. He jumped up. "You can't do that, Lew."

"Huh?"

"It's—broken, Lew. Some trouble with the pipes."

Fein had wandered back to the kitchen.

"But," Hoover said, "I've got to."

"It doesn't work. I'm sorry."

Hoover grinned bitterly. "I got people to round up," he muttered. "People that's friends, that remember what the hell tonight is. Time and tide, besides . . ."

"It is out of order," Mr. Pierce said, firmly.

"Okay, then I'll wash my hands. Can I wash my hands?"

"The sink is stopped up."

"Eddie, you're telling me the sink is stopped up?"

"Yes, that's right!" Mr. Pierce almost shouted.

"What are you so jumpy about?"

"I'm not jumpy, Lew. I'm tired. It's all broke, that's all. Can't you understand a simple fact like that?"

Hoover sobered slightly, or seemed to. He looked closely at his friend. "I'm not sure," he said, and pushed forward, stumbling into the bedroom.

"Stop!" Mr. Pierce blanched and threw out his arms. But the tall man in evening dress had already crossed the room.

"Lew, don't spoil everything! It'll be okay. Just leave, will you?"

Hoover paused at the bathroom door. His hand slipped on the knob, crept back upon it and revolved.

Mr. Pierce spoke in a strong, soft voice now. "Don't go in there." He looked terribly small,

terribly frail, terribly helpless.

"When you gotta go," Hoover grinned, "you gotta go. If you don't think so, Eddie, you're all wet. Anyway, I feel a little sick. Sick. *Verstay?*"

As the tall man turned and started in, Mr. Pierce sighed and followed.

Hoover had a glass partially filled with water when he happened to glance at the curtained tub.

His eyes moved to the slit.

"Holy God! Eddie, what—"

Mr. Pierce's arm traveled in a wide arc. The cleaver, which he had plucked off the medicine shelf, sank deep. He wrenched it loose and swung it another time.

Then he pulled open the shower curtain and lifted the now crumpled figure and tumbled it into the tub and did not look at it.

With a soft rag he wiped his hands, thinking, *Lew!* Thinking. Well, that leaves Jimmy, anyway, and Len and . . . It would still be all right.

Trembling, Mr. Pierce surveyed himself in the mirror and returned to the living room.

Mr. Fein was not asleep any more. He was holding a Miro reproduction upside down and making confused sounds.

"How'd it go?" Fein inquired.

"Well," Mr. Pierce said, "Lew isn't feeling so good. He's decided to stay a while."

"I mean about the toilet."

"It's still broken."

Fein got up, staggered, giggled and quickly regained himself. "Take a look at it," he said.

"No—no need. Thanks anyway. I think it'll probably be all right until tomorrow. I've got a plumber coming—"

"Save you money. That's my business, plumbing. Don't have a snake here, do you? What's she do, back up on you?"

"Who?"

"Toilet."

"Oh. Yes, backed up on me."

"Well, we'll take a look-see."

"Ah—have a drink first."

"All righty. Say, tough about Mr. Hoover."

"Too much liquor."

"Uh-huh. It's okay, though, we came in my car."

Mr. Pierce poured two stiff ones and handed a glass to the red-faced man. "You two just met tonight, is that it?" he asked, hopefully.

"S' right. Fine fella, Hoover. Speaks very high of you. Made a bet you'd remember what tonight was. Well, bottoms up! Over the lips and past the gums, look out, stomach, here it comes!"

"Cheers."

"Shame about it, you ask me. No woman is worth losing your friends over, Mr. Fierst."

"I suppose not. Uh—you just decided on the spur of the moment to vist me? I mean, Lew—he

didn't happen to mention to anybody else you were coming over here?"

"Didn't exactly know it myself till we were here. Crazy fella, what he told me was we were goin' to see some broads. I mean, you know, girls. Then," Fein giggled, "we turn up here. I think—say, you got a snake? Take a jiffy if you do. See, I'm on vacation now, otherwise I'd have my tools."

"I think perhaps I do."

"Well, let's get at it. Maybe a plunger would do the trick."

"We'll find something for you,"

Mr. Pierce said, and led the way.

"Must really be nice," Fein said, "to have buddies. Little town where I hail from, not too many friends. That Hoover fella, he told me you got more buddies than anybody he ever knew."

"I had a lot of friends once, yes," Mr. Pierce said. "I will again."

"Sure you will," Fein said.

He had taken no more than two steps inside the bathroom when he gasped, wheeled, gasped again and fell, clawing, to the pink tile floor.

Mr. Pierce steadied himself, removed from Mr. Fein's neck the long thin knife used for trimming fat, and lifted and pulled and strained and at last managed to

get the heavy figure into the bathtub.

Water sloshed over the sides, now, but it was not even like red ink any more, but deeper red, and gummy.

Mr. Pierce sighed, permitted one short spasm to shake his body, sighed two more times, and slipped on the oilcloth apron.

He had it almost tied, when:

There was a knock. Only one, but the glass-squared door shook in its poor-fitting jamb and sent sharp sounds trembling through the apartment.

Mr. Pierce froze.

Then there was another sound; a latch opening, a squeak, a voice, "Happy All Fools Day! Hey—anybody home? Eddie, you old sea-dog, where the devil are you? Hey! It's Len! Just dropped in to say howdy."

"Hi!" Mr. Pierce called out. He removed the apron. "Be with you in a second."

"Jimmy get here yet?"

"No. Not yet."

Mr. Pierce stood erect in the tiny bathroom, looked about, and washed his hands.

Then he walked out with a brand-new sort of smile and a brand-new look in his eyes.

"Good to see you, Len. It's been a long time," he said, wearily. ■ ■