

The bargain hunters

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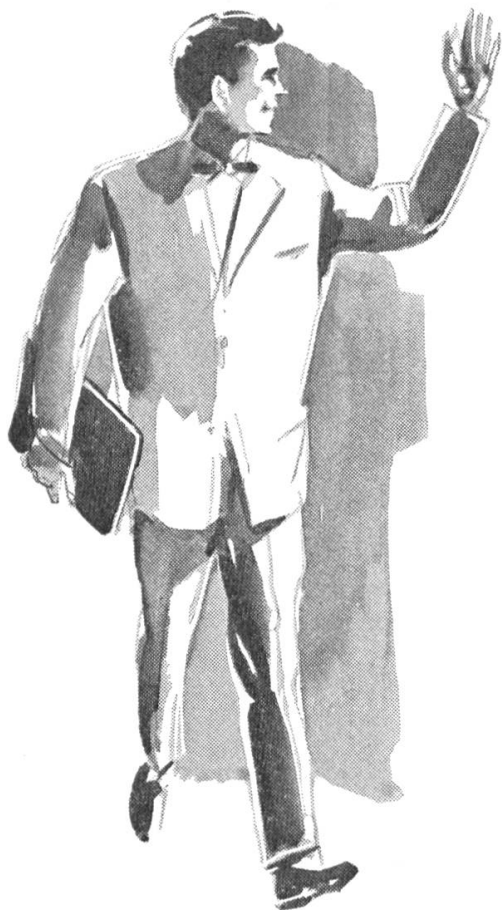
The Bargain Hunters

by Ward Stames

He stood at the high French window, one hand holding back the deep garnet drape, and looked down the hill and across the bay. A flighty piping whisper of wind breathed in the night, and rustled the leaves on the trees in front of his house. Two flights down, the sidewalk glistened in the moisture from the evening's fog; and farther down the hill, over the yellow glow of the occasional lights of streetlamps and houses, he saw the black glitter of the bay, the patches of light that were the prison and the naval base, and the looping string of bright lights on the bridge that led across the water to the city on the other hill.

Then he heard the front door open and close, and a moment later he saw the husky figure of Danny, the streetlight on his head and broad shoulders. And at the point where the small sidewalk joined the main one, Danny turned around—as he always did—and gave a little half-salute with his hand to his bare head, back to the window—his little 'teacher-wave', he had once called it, with his wry sardonic grin.

The professor waved back, and then let the drape fall, and with an absent motion pulled the cord that drew the folds together across the whole of the wall. Thus curtained in garnet, and carpeted in grey, with the few exquisite pieces of furniture gleaming expensively golden and mahogany in the subdued light, and the three walls of books showing through the arch into the library, the rooms became a dream of richness, a setting with some of the drama of a stage, for the tall and elegantly groomed figure of John Sanders.



He dug his hands into the pockets of his black and silver dressing gown, and sank into the deep chair beside the phonograph. He looked idly at the pictures on the walls—the sketch that Picasso had made of him when first they met at Gertrude Stein's, the framed signed photograph of André Gide that stood on the English desk, the excellently detailed Tchelitchev that hung on the right wall, and all the others, and he sighed.

It was a satisfactory structure of life that he had created for himself. At a comparatively early age, John Sanders was already a legend at the University—suave, intellectual, friend of the great and near-great, winner of prizes and awards, author of three novels and innumerable articles, noted for the gem-like perfection of his every lecture, thoroughly the gentleman, always discreet—garnished with all the exotic blooms of a decaying civilization, and buffered against the unclean outer world by books and pictures and music, and his thoughts. At once friendly and yet curious-

ly aloof, he never mixed with his colleagues, nor gave his students much encouragement.

There were very few persons who had ever succeeded in penetrating the wall around him, but Danilio was one; and fewer still who had ever seen him lose the dignity which cloaked him daily in his jampacked classes. He sighed, and stretched his ankles before him and locked them like ivory links, reaching out with one hand to the crystal bowl of the brandy glass. A little remained in the bottom; he swirled it slowly around, letting his hand warm the goblet, and the pleasant bitter fumes touched his nostrils. He sipped once—and the taste was like that of the *petite madeleine* for old Proust; its memory carried him back, back to Danny's first visit, and then earlier, to the time he first saw him . . .

*

Eight winters ago. He sat in the basement of the arts building, with the secretary of the Fine Arts Club.

«What's on the program tonight, Miss Carson?» he asked.

She fiddled with some papers on her lap. «Carl Preebe is going to show how all of Debussy's music is built on a small chromatic theme, Dr. Sanders,» she said.

«Um-m. Very interesting,» he said. And then he looked across the room. He had not seen the boy come in, but there he now sat—and suddenly the room focused upon him, the way the spiral of an Archimedes wheel draws the eye down into the center. He was not above average height, but his body had the density to it that John Sanders liked. Upon the fine-shaped head the black hair lay tightly curled as on a classical statue; the jaw was square, and the chin deep-cleft. A hundred generations of northern Italians had lain together, and bred and given birth, to produce the boy's handsome Renaissance profile, full-lipped, straight-nosed with flaring sensitive wings. He was a 'white Italian', without the tawny gold skin of the southerner, and his black hair quivered with a blue shadow of its own. He had crossed one knee over the other, and one large heavy hand, full-veined, lay quiet in its power upon his leg; the trouser had pulled up slightly, so that Doctor Sanders saw what looked to be the bottom edge of a tattoo upon his sturdy calf.

He nodded in the boy's direction. «Who's the newcomer, Miss Carson?» he asked.

She looked over the top rim of her glasses. «Oh,» she said, «that's Danny di Bella. He's just re-entering this semester. He's been in the Navy four years. As a matter of fact, I think he's in your class in Victorian prose, Doctor Sanders.»

«Ah, that might well be,» murmured Dr. Sanders. «The class is so large I haven't seen to the back of the room yet. I must seat them alphabetically soon.» And then, because he knew very well that Miss Carson did not know a word of Italian, he looked at the boy again, and said in a soft voice, «Che bella cosa!»

Miss Carson looked over the top of her glasses again. «No, Dr. Sanders,» she corrected gently. «It's Danny di Bella.»

«Ah yes,» he said, and smiled at her.

*

And sure enough, the great magic of the alphabet, applied to the vast lecture hall with its two hundred seats, brought Danny di Bella to view, and placed him in the third row from the front, directly under the view of the professor's dark green eyes. He became the central focus of the professor's voice and eyes, just as a great handsome crewcut blond boy was the left side focus, and a handsome darkhaired lad the right center focus for his lecturing. Dr. Sanders never looked at the back of the room, which suffered from neglect.

More and more he came to talk directly to Danny, and to watch him as he lectured. It was extremely gratifying to see how alert his face was, a mirror to catch the polish of the exquisitely turned phrase, to reflect the glitter of a bon mot. And no matter how sly the innuendo, how esoteric the reference or subtle the *double-entendre*, he always caught the glimmer of comprehension from the young man's expression. The eyes danced, or the mouth quirked a bit at the corner in the quickly quenched beginning of a wry smile, or there was the ghost of a nod. And thus rewarded, Doctor Sanders reached towards new peaks of eloquence. His lectures crackled with wit and sensitivity. Once in a while, deliberately, he played with Danny to watch his reactions.

He remembered the lecture on *Sartor Resartus*, and Carlyle's philosophy of clothes. It had been—oh, so easy!—to slip into a small digression on the 'problem of the uniform'—and from that into the sort of facile poetry that was the delight of all the girls in the class, and some men.

«It would seem then,» he said carefully, «that the uniform of a military man—say, a sailor—is glamorous for a greater reason than that it is well-cut. It is glamorous because it represents a way of life that most of us can never know, a way that is certainly beyond the reach of the young ladies here. The sailor knows far suns and seas, the bamboo huts of savages, the stone lacework of Indian castles, crystal pools and sands of Persia, white columns against the dark blue Greek skies, the golden suns and fountains of red-walled Rome. His background, like Othello's, is romantic, dark, and strange. He fights for those who are left behind in the dull round of living. And then when he takes you, his light-of-love, in his strong young arms, you feel that beneath the rough black wool there beats a heart more brave and gallant than any you have ever known, that here is one who has felt the caresses of mermaids beneath the sea, whose lips have tasted the brown sweet savor of Arabian throats.»

He paused, pleased to see the dull red burning of Danny's ears, as the boy looked down at his notebook. And then, with the timing for which he was known, and his delight in dropping the dream-eyed ones back to reality with a semantic shock, he said pleasantly: «All this is merely hogwash, of course. The sailor is hardly braver than a housewife plunging towards a bargain counter. The uniform is only the psychic link, the gazing-glass through which we look into another world. Thus, ladies and gentlemen, the point that Carlyle makes—» and he was smoothly back on the track that he had left for Danny's benefit.

The boy was looking up at him, then, a slow and gently incredulous smile growing upon his face, an ever-so-slight negative shaking of the head as if in wonder, and astonishment. Their eyes caught and held a moment, and with a small but happy panic, Doctor Sanders knew that Danny knew.

But it was Danny who delivered the last jolt in the little episode. At the end of his brief paper on Carlyle, he put a single unrelated sentence:

«Genet, in *Querelle de Brest*, says that the sailor's uniform was designed to decorate the coast of France rather than defend it.»

And Doctor Sanders felt his own neck begin to burn.

*

During the few semesters remaining of Danny's education after the Navy interruption, they came to know each other as well as Doctor Sanders ever permitted his students to know him. There were occasional visits to the professor's office—'conferences', technically, but really nothing more than good conversations, in which Dr. Sanders grew more and more to appreciate the quality of Danny's alert shy mind, honed to razor sharpness by youth and study and deep interest. Twice, Dr. Sanders took him to a concert across the bay; and once to the theatre. There were a few pleasant dinners together, always upon the neutral ground of a good restaurant. And Dr. Sanders could not remember at what point he stopped calling Danny «Mr. di Bella» in favor of his first name. But Danny always remained at his respectful student's distance, and never called him 'John'.

«Damn it!» John Sanders swore to himself one evening, after they had parted in front of a restaurant. It was a nasty little martyrdom that his life had forced upon him, a really ascetic existence, filled with delicate tortures that could have been devised by no lesser demon than Lucifer himself.

Take the particular hell of springtime, for example. For most people it was a season of delight, of filling the lungs with new fresh air, of walking hand in hand and being in love. For Doctor Sanders it was the season of torment. As the weather warmed, and jackets were left at home and shirt sleeves were turned up and collars opened at the neck, he watched the first faint tan begin to appear upon the arms and throats and faces of the young men before him. Out came the tight chino pants, the near-white blue-jeans clutching the strong young thighs. Thin sweaters stretched across magnificent chests with downward pointing nipples—and Doctor John suffered.

And Danny—«Damned young devil! He knows what he's doing!» grated across John Sanders' mind, when he saw him on the first warm day—and yet he filled his eyes. Danny wore a thin sweater, evidently of nylon, stretched so tight that it was another skin—and of a red bright enough to blind the eye. The white of his forearms was still untanned and creamy, and his shoulders and pectorals swollen with power. As he turned his hand first one way and then the other, an excited pattern of muscles, small ones, flicked and flickered under his perfect skin. He wore black slacks, an echo of his midnight hair—and when John Sanders recovered from the near-physical blow of the sight of him, he began to blush, almost, at the quizzical line of Danny's half-smile, turned upon him. That day the lecture came out with difficulty, for the flame burning in the third row dazzled his eyes. And somehow, from that moment on, Doctor Sanders knew that there was no escape.

But he delayed the execution until nearly the end of the semester. And then Danny came to his office late one afternoon. The sun was lying golden across the desk and papers; the office smelled hot and stuffy and dusty. Danny sat in an office chair, one leg easily up over its arm. This afternoon he had on a white sweater, and by now his skin had claimed its heritage—the sun had left a lot of itself beneath, and Danny's color was a russet bronze in which his teeth flashed like a small ivory scimitar.

For a moment Doctor Sanders toyed with the motion of going for a swim with him, and then decided against it. There was the possibility of running into other students at the beaches or pools, and there was an even more subtle danger—the loss of dignity. He did not want to undress in front of a student, although he was obscurely ashamed of the necessity to maintain his aloofness. And Danny's body was so superb that his own must suffer, placed beside it. It was curiously difficult to maintain that vague 'superiority' or 'authority' with a body too thin, or too fat in the wrong places, or simply unclothed, or wearing trunks.

The professor looked at Danny, offering himself provocatively in the chair. «What do you say, fella,» he said, looking at his watch. «It's four o'clock. How about a trip to the grocery, and then—my apartment for a steak and a salad? We can relax a little there. And come to think of it—you've not yet seen my apartment, have you?» He knew damned well he hadn't.

Danny swung his leg down from the chair-arm. «No, I haven't,» he said, with a carefully controlled enthusiasm. «And the steak sounds like a good idea to me.»

*

Later, the dishes done and put away, they sat by the tall opened windows, sipping benedictine, and watched the evening dusk creep over the bay. The smoke from their cigarettes drifted slowly out the window into the purple air. The trees turned gradually black as the light faded, and the brilliant pinpoints of the city across the bay began to wink and sparkle. In the sky, the ashes of the splendor of rose and gold drifted slowly down behind the horizon. A Mozart concerto tinkled faintly on the phonograph.

«And what are you going to do, Danny, when you graduate?» he asked.

Danny motioned with his cigarette. «I honestly don't know, Doc. A job of some sort, I guess.»

«Teaching?»

He could barely see Danny's wry grimace in the gloom. «Hardly,» he said. «Not after the things I've heard from you about it. Although—» he went on, and hesitated a moment; «although if I thought I could ever bring to the profession the lustre and the perfection that you have, I'd be tempted to go on to train for it.»

«You flatter me.»

«No, not really.» The red point of the cigarette was almost all that Doctor Sanders could see,—that, and the white sweater blurred into the deep chair. «You are the only one at this university—really, the only one—from whom I have ever got a thing. The rest—nothing but mediocrities, industrious or lazy according to their ambitions, but mediocrities just the same. Parrots, delivering word for word whole pages of textbooks as their own. Yours is the only thinking mind I have ever met while I've been here.»

«Oh, Danny, that's nonsense. There are many good minds here, creative ones . . .»

Danny was obstinate. «Then I've not met 'em,» he said from the dark. «But I've learned from you. You've taught me to think. You've taught me that a man can sit alone in his room, quietly, anywhere—and still engage in the most

passionate activity in the world—thinking. You've done more than teach me to think—you've formed my mind and personality. You've given me what savoir-faire and sophistication I have. I've—I've inhaled you. I'll never have any thoughts from now on that won't be traceable—in some way—back to you and your classes.»

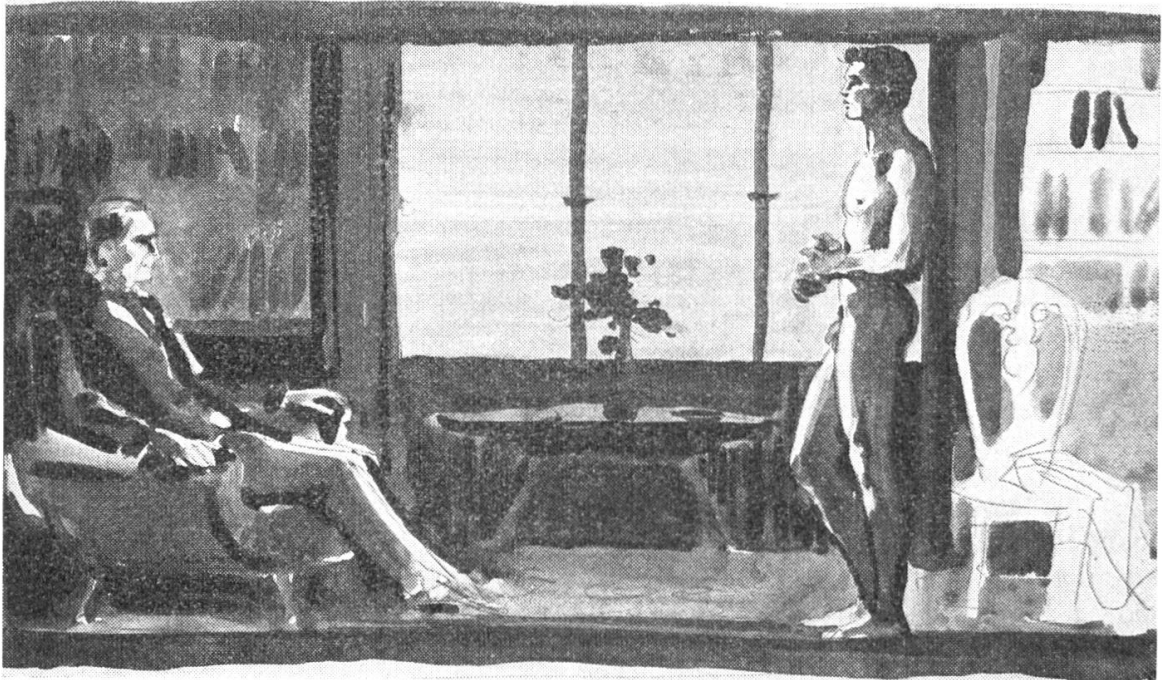
«Danny, really—this is flattery beyond all reality.»

«Please, Doc.» He heard the desperateness in Danny's tone. «Don't interrupt me just yet. I've got to say it.» He paused, and John Sanders heard him draw a deep ragged breath. Then he went on. «I've wanted to say these things to you for a long time,» he said, «and I couldn't. If I don't say them now, I won't ever. And I wouldn't be able to now, if it weren't dark.»

In the silence, Doctor Sanders felt the thudding of his own heart. A premonition swept over him, at once heating and chilling him.

Danny went on. «I owe you a debt that could never be repaid in money. And if I tried to use another coin, I might offend you.»

He was silent again for almost a minute. The Mozart came to a rippling end behind them, and the faint sounds of the water and the city rose from the darkness outside. A fresh smell of greenery crept in from the outer air. Against the lesser blackness of the opened window, the professor saw Danny stand up from the chair. He saw him put out his cigarette in the ashtray, and then watched the silhouette of his arms raise the white sweater slowly over his head, remove it, and throw it into the chair. He heard the faint sound of the belt unbuckled, and saw the shadow step out of its trousers. And then Danny stood motionless, with folded arms, a darker body against the pale black of the night sky.



Finally he spoke. His words were hardly to be heard above the rushing blood in John Sanders' ears. «Please . . . please don't misunderstand me, Doc. I only hope the—the coin I offer is as genuine as the one I got from you.» He laughed a little, low, nervous. «It's just returning oneself, after all—in gratitude, or tribute—to the god who did the work of creation.»

In the tense magic of that moment, there flicked into the mind of John Sanders the picture of the clean-limbed Greek youths at Eleusis, offering them—

selves—soul and body—to the earth-spirit, and the cold light issuing from the pit of wheat . . .

«Danny,» he said, and could trust his voice no farther.

From somewhere below them, in the vast blackness of the bay, a tugboat whistled twice.

*

John Sanders sighed again, and adjusted the folds of his black and silver dressing gown. It had been six years since that night, a long time. His own black hair had a threading of silver in it, a very little, at the temple.

There was the small grating sound of a key in the door, and John did not look up. Danny came in, and deposited a sack of things on the chair by the telephone. He took off his coat and hung it in the closet. And still John Sanders did not look up.

Danny walked to his chair, and rested easily on the arm of it. «Dreaming again?» he said. With the thumb and forefinger of his hand he kneaded the back of John's neck, and John made a little sound of pleasure, twisting his head.

«Just thinking,» he said. «Where shall we go this summer? Scandinavia? Africa? Italy? France?»

«Anywhere you want,» said Danny, and took a small bite at his ear.

«They will play the full *Oresteia* in Sicily, at Syracuse in August, in the open air of the handsomest Greek theatre in all the world. Shall we be there?»

«Let's,» said Danny.

(Drawings by Rico)

Book Review

A Minority. By Gordon Westwood, London, Longmans, 30 sh.

This is the report of a research into the life of the male homosexual in Great Britain. It was carried out on behalf of the British Social Biology Council. As Sir John Wolfenden points out in his foreword, it is excellent within its deliberate limits. These are due to the sociological austerity with which it has been compiled.

The material consists mostly of answers to questions put to 127 self-confessed homosexuals. This is a small sample compared with the estimated total of three-quarters of a million homosexuals in Great Britain; but it is spread over a wide variety of classes and occupations and there seems no reason to suppose that it is not representative, even if some of the tabulated deductions may not be altogether relevant.

The strict sociologist approach often makes it difficult to see the wood for the trees, and the first impression which the book makes is a slightly confusing one. The frequent snatches of recorded dialogue and personal confessions are often extremely vivid and characterful, but they are nearly all short. There are almost no full length portraits or complete case histories.

The questioning was thorough. A Kinsey report in miniature on the sexual practices of homosexuals is included. There is plenty of information, though few new or surprising facts emerge. One possibly less expected conclusion is that it is not possible to make a clear division between active and passive homosexuality. Among some of the important findings are the limited proportion of paedophiliacs among adult homosexuals so that 'the dangers of child molestation are small but not negligible.' Promiscuity was widespread among two-thirds of the sample, 19 per cent of whom had prose-