

New York / Siena

Two Short Novels

by Steven Key Meyers

The Man Who Owned New York.....2

Springtime in Siena.....6

THE MAN WHO OWNED NEW YORK

The Man Who Owned *New York*

A Novel by Steven Key Meyers

© Copyright 2012 All Rights Reserved

1

EDITH WHARTON DIED the other day.

I always wondered what she made of him the Press thirty years ago dubbed *The Man Who Owns New York*, and regretted that she never treated of his sensational story in her incomparably nuanced fiction. Now she never will. But an outlander (and one with a beautiful daughter) fighting for the colossal fortune in Manhattan real estate stolen from his forebears, the sanctimonious occupiers wheeling up battalions of legal artillery, while the city's social bastions rock in resistance and capitulation—Wharton would have made a great thing of it. Even Henry James might have found sufficiently evocative the return to New York of a lordly Tory family, exiled since the Revolutionary War, in the person of a rangy Kansas farmer.

Now James and Wharton both have gone without making use of him or his story. If it is not to be forgotten, it seems left to me. I was there, a figure on the periphery but placed so as to see the whole, and it happened that I—or rather, my crime (*oh, my gaudy crime!*)—resolved the episode. An account might also serve as my spiritual autobiography, for without *The Man Who Owned New York* I might never have found my own true path.

2

THE MAN WHO OWNED NEW YORK

* *

It was, then, a pull at the doorbell that precipitated me into the affair.

The doorbell in question belonged to the rectory of All Angels, the old church that stoppers the maw of Wall Street at Broadway. At eleven o'clock of the forenoon, on Wednesday, November 6, 1907, in only the second month of my first, and decidedly plum, parish assignment, I was at my desk outside Father Day's office. Supposedly I was double-checking his calculations for a Greenwich Street store lease, but in truth I was admiring how fallen leaves complement crumbling grave markers, the soft, sodden colors melting into the half-dissolved stone. Perhaps I was also daydreaming about my future; five weeks in it proved New York the loneliest place I'd ever known.

Then the doorbell rang. Usually Mrs. Brown or one of her maids answered it, but for some reason *I* bounded downstairs. Through the etched glass I saw the silhouette of a man wearing a homburg hat. I opened the door, prepared to send him round to the tradesmen's entrance in back, when from the side came a frightening white flash: *Floomp!* Startled and half-blind, I saw a photographer retreating down the steps with his three-legged contraption, while the man in the homburg said, "Father Day?"

"What is this? Who are you? Did that man take my *photograph?*"

"Hopkins of the *World,*" he replied, naming the city's most scurrilous newspaper. "May I come in, Father Day?"

"The rector is busy," I said. "I'm Father Stackpole, his secretary, and *no*, you certainly may *not* come in."

"All right, Rover Boy, all right," said Hopkins. "Keep your shirt on."

My voice shook as I repeated my name, for his spontaneous appellation infuriated me.

Heroes of a popular series of boys' books, the Rover Boys were the epitome of clean-cut, blue-eyed, manly all-American youth, resourceful foes of wrongdoers and miscreants. And *Dick Rover*

THE MAN WHO OWNED NEW YORK

happened to have been my nickname at Groton, Yale, even Divinity. In my schooldays I took it in good part—behind the mockery lay envy, especially of my playing-field exploits—but as an ordained minister of the cloth I thought it impertinent coming from a stranger.

“Well, Reverend, Mr. Denton Slaughter of Ellinwood, Kansas came by the *World* this morning to tell us how All Angels Church stole his family’s farm in lower Manhattan more than a hundred years ago. According to him, everything your church says it owns really belongs to him, and he’s here to collect.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” I snapped with utter disdain. *Floomp!* “Good *day*, gentlemen.”

“Thanks, Dick,” Hopkins said flippantly as I slammed the door shut.

I returned upstairs and reported the incident to Father Day, ending by asking, “Can there be any truth to such a claim?”

Father Day rocked his chair back and removed the green eyeshade he customarily wore at his desk. Stroking the fading black eye thus revealed (suffered kneeling in private devotions), he sought the answer in the opulence of his office, which like the rest of the rectory resembled one of the more exclusive men’s clubs. Its walls were paneled in walnut, Tiffany windows muffled Broadway’s noise and colored the vista of graves, there was a Saint-Gaudens overmantel of bronze, a choice Burne-Jones *Holy Family*, and a suite of gleaming mahogany furniture made by the Herter Brothers.

Sighing, he joined his palms in a steeple atop the dome of his stomach.

“Exactly *how* All Angels came to be so richly endowed, we cannot know with certainty, Albert,” he pronounced. “Tradition tells us it is to Queen Anne’s munificence we are beholden, but the exact truth seems lost to the mists of time. We must simply be humbly grateful that it is so.”

“Yes, Father, but—”

“Never mind that we work like slaves to make proper

THE MAN WHO OWNED NEW YORK

eleemosynary use of it, naturally our property makes us a target for every kind of sharper. It is self-evident that the person you speak of is one of them. Unless, indeed, he is only the dupe of a larger conspiracy."

"Yes, but if—"

"Money and property go, in the end, to the virtuous. That is the truth on which our country was founded, Albert, and why America comes every day closer to being the earthly paradise."

"But—"

The steeple collapsed and Father Day's manner took on the austerity that reminded me he would one day be a bishop. He rocked his stocky body forward, clapped the eyeshade back to his brow, and reached for the ground lease he had been marking up when I interrupted.

"Father Stackpole, we have work to do!"

Springtime In *Siena*

A Novel by Steven Key Meyers

© Copyright 2012 All Rights Reserved

1.

STUDYING MY YOUNG SELF as I might any artifact from a curious era (and we're talking Seventies!), I observe that although not bad to look at, even handsome, it is of its time: slender, hirsute, given to queasy color combinations, eager to build a better world. So eager, in fact, that it pursues a teaching career straight into the heart of futility, from which it looks for consolation to, in the lingo of the day, "lifestyle." Hoping to glimpse a spark of promise, I place it under different lights and compare it to other exemplars; but I can only shake my head. Ruefully but honestly, I am forced to conclude: Not only is this person not *destined*, he is not even *eligible* for the future he covets; the future that in fact has turned out to be his – that is, mine.

Because in 1974 I managed to turn things around. Strange to find myself more than twice the age I was in that crucial year! At twenty-eight, I didn't matter. I was a very junior member of the art history faculty at Adams U. in Washington, D.C., feeling already distinctly talked-out, ready to vary my routine by heading up a semester's study abroad with seventeen undergrads.

It was during that sojourn in Siena, Italy, in the verdant springtime of my youth, that I decided I would count in the affairs

SPRINGTIME IN SIENA

of the world, be someone who mattered. Under the tutelage first of a disastrous affair, and then by falling in love, I began to focus, to bend the scattered strands of self in one coherent direction. I exerted my will, at a time, in the kingdom of peace and love, when that index of one's love of life was suspect. Through *will* I abandoned the lifestyle that debarred me from the world's respect. Through *will* I achieved the critical mass that has carried me through to where I am at the present day, pretty well known, I think, throughout the museum world.

This, then, is my memoir of how I grew up. I mean it as neither how-to guide nor celebration of ego; if it is frank, it has to be.

Rest assured, no one was hurt in the writing of it.

2.

On a January Sunday I rode a charter bus in solitary splendor from Siena, the city of 50,000 in central Tuscany where I had established myself days earlier, to Florence to meet my *Springtime in Siena* group.

Before going to the train station I dashed through an exhibition at the Uffizi of Doré's illustrations to Dante. An Englishwoman was going round the walls with a younger man. She wondered aloud whether the voluptuous *Paolo and Francesca*—lovers condemned to circle each other eternally, unable to touch—illustrated *l'Inferno* or the *Paradiso*.

"It's sexual," her companion learnedly lisped. "Must be the *Paradiso*."

Wrong.

Still laughing, I got to the *Stazione Termini* scant moments before my group's scheduled two o'clock arrival. The board in the lofty waiting room told me at which *binario* its train was expected.

SPRINGTIME IN SIENA

In the clangorous, glass-roofed shed I found the platform, but no sign of the train. Plenty of people were waiting, many evidently intending to take it on to Rome. I stood at the tracks' end, where gigantic steel springs introduced an antic possibility of disaster. Forty paces off stood a young man with the contrapposto stance, the compressed energy, of Michelangelo's *David*. Hips cocked, he peered down the tracks alert and ready, a day-pack slung at his shoulder, a bag leaning against his shin like Goliath's head. He wore, and wore well, Levis and a jeans jacket.

Without willing it, I walked closer to this kid. Had nothing in mind save a vague desire to see if his face could be as sexy as the rest of him. I didn't know of any place we could go; I never patronized men's rooms. Possibly the station chapel? Except that in Italy a species of black-veiled widow infests them. Besides, the train was due any moment.

Still, I was curious what he would do if I made my intentions—however fallacious—clear. So ten feet behind him I took up my stance, Goliath stalking his David, and stared at his shaggy dark head.

The crowd milled, the pushcart vendor of *affreschi* bawled for trade, P.A. announcements overlaid one another incomprehensibly, on other tracks trains pulled in and pulled out—and within a minute Einstein's "spooky action at a distance" happened: My kid scratched at his ear, swung around flipping hair off his handsome features, and drilled fine brown eyes straight into mine.

My crotch knotted. I could see that he knew exactly what he wanted. In response I beetled my brow, thrust out my lip—glowered at him with that seeming disgust men use to signal interest in one another—and nodded crisply toward the chapel. He lightly let down his pack—disarmed himself, as it were—showed his teeth and *laughed*.

My nod went spastic, and probably fear swamped my face, for only then did I recognize him.

This was no willing pickup in that glorious dawn of gay self-respect, when youth joyously gave itself away. No, this was *Jack*—

SPRINGTIME IN SIENA

Jack somebody, an Adams U. junior who, I remembered too late, had planned to tour the Continent on his own before joining up with the group.

Jack laughed again, I'm sure at the effort of lock-down that doubtless bulged my jaws and reddened my cheeks. I hate to be seen at a loss. We shook hands.

"Ciao, Jack." Fortunately my voice had its usual crust of authority. "Or should I call you *Giacomo? Benvenuto in Italia.*"

"Hey, *professore.*"

"How were your travels?"

"Pretty hot," he started with a malicious grin.

Told him to hold the fort while I went to find a magazine.

I had a rule against sleeping with my students. It was a rule honored more in the breach than in the observance (no pun intended), since while I avoided those enrolled in my courses I made hay elsewhere in the student body. Not that my own students lost out: Though my performances in bed were generally congratulated, I know I was really at my best in the classroom.

In the waiting room light washed off the travertine walls with fatuous transcendence. I surveyed a magazine rack with the posture of someone looking over a used car, interested but entirely dissociating himself. For, shrouded in the chiaroscuro of a Caravaggio martyr, Richard Milhous Nixon peered out from the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *L'Espresso*, *Der Stern*, *The Economist*. He had the long nose of a liar and furtive eyes which sincerely wished to duck the issue. Watergate was more than six months away from working itself out, but its awesome end – *his* end – was inevitable. I was half sorry to find myself posted so far away as the moment of the kill approached, for I sensed that it would end that dark period which began the afternoon Kennedy died and lasted through the corrosive adventure known as Viet Nam and would give rise to new energies and opportunities.

Jack touched my shoulder.

"It's here."

SPRINGTIME IN SIENA

“Super,” I said. “Let’s go face the music.”

I bought *Time* and *Newsweek*, rolled them into a baton, and marched to the platform—briskly, lest Jack say anything else.