

The Merchant of Scarsdale

by David P. Gontar (February 2016)

There was once a successful financier of Scarsdale who had accumulated a sizable fortune in the commodities market. As his health was good and he'd avoided the pitfalls that led to degeneracy and scandal he was, despite the stresses of business, among the most contented of fellows, and would have enjoyed a rare felicity had it not been for his wife, a congenital spendthrift. Equipped with unlimited credit cards, she devoted each afternoon to marathon shopping expeditions with her well-heeled friends, and almost always arrived home with so many urgent fashions and accessories that she was obliged to let most of them age gracefully in storage in White Plains. Though the merchant loved her dearly, and never dreamed of curtailing her commercial binges, he became appalled to discover that no matter how his income soared, his wife's spending kept pace with and often exceeded his hard-won gains.

At last he was compelled to confront her and explain he wasn't the Fed, but the message was politely rebuffed. In the meantime his firm became the victim of a hostile takeover, and he decided to opt for a change of lifestyle. A clever Bronx lawyer helped him to a satisfactory divorce, and in the space of half a year he had settled his affairs and moved his now modest belongings to Fairbanks, Alaska. There, under an assumed name, he opened a small retail outlet in the auto aftermarket trade. As the petroleum industry was in those golden months booming, the merchant was able to afford some creature comforts, so that his life, while not as lavish as it had been in Scarsdale, was as pleasant and comfortable as one can be surrounded by ten foot snowdrifts and cold so relentless that when the rivers freeze over they can support three 18-wheelers fully loaded with pipe.

Now with evenings free, the merchant took a fancy to country and western tunes, and could usually be found at the Grange on Wednesday evenings experimenting with line dancing. In his tall red cowboy boots, jeans and plaid collars he was the very pith of masculine charm. One evening he was paired off with Virginia Whittaker, a blonde divorcée with spectacular legs and a good job as a loan officer at Alaska Federated Bank and Trust. Adroitly, patiently, she showed him the moves as she praised his paltry skills. They began dating, and with their

common interests and Ben Franklin *savoir faire*, became an item in suburban Fairfanks. There was no rush to intimacy on either side. They relished each other's company and felt a marvelous warmth and security in that. One evening after Virginia had made them dinner at his place, by the time they'd swallowed the last of the Bordeaux they found themselves snowed in. Outside a sudden squall was trying to shear the shingles off the roof and fairly soon the front door wouldn't budge. That pretty weather girl was showing clips of the avalanche that nearly tore a piece out of Richardson Highway. No way was tomorrow going to be a work day.

They switched on the old space heater, which hummed gratefully as they curled up on the corduroy sofa to watch an old Jimmy Stewart film noir classic complete with venetian blind shadows and rakish fedoras. When she leaned her head against his shoulder she smelled like magnolias and vanilla. He wondered if she could smell it too. She returned from the bathroom floundering in his pajamas, the wide sleeves rolled up to half their length. When the first kiss came, it caught them both off guard, as if it had a will of its own. He figured if she wasn't wearing a bra he'd give it a try, but she was, and caught him looking. They kissed again, and the power went out. It was like Hemingway's moment of truth.

"My bedroom or the guest room?" he whispered in her ear, firmly expecting to be gratified.

"Well," she sighed, "you know we're not married. You'll survive, I reckon."

"I will?"

"Sure. Look, I'll make you the best damn breakfast you ever had."

Later, after they moved to Florida with their daughter Jennifer, the merchant often thought about that evening. Then one day it hit him. He was mowing the overgrown lawn and had flipped the power mower over to scrape out the clippings around the blade. The dog ran up and licked at his neck. She was hailing him from the kitchen for eggs and bagels. And he knew then, saw it vividly, that if she'd given in and let him have his way, rolled over as expected, it never would have worked. That magic night together would have been their last.

David P. Gontar's latest book is [*Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

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