THE MOLTING SEASON

By Lois Rowley

As she turned to set down her martini Marcy noticed that the hem of her skirt was turned up showing its pale green lining. With a deft flick of Pink Pearl polished fingernails she unfolded it, letting the pink skirt fall into place over the hoop and crinolines. Aware that the large woman who stood beside her was watching her gesture, Marcy winked and said, "This must mean I'll get a letter tomorrow!"

The woman smiled. "That's such a charming superstition."

Marcy was so glad she had taken time to get a manicure. "Mrs. Greene, could you tell me of a good manicurist? You know, I think I miss my manicurist more than anyone else in Atlanta. My nails are such a sight. . . ."

The larger woman stopped gazing around the crowded room and glanced at Marcy's fingernails. "Why dear, you look as if you'd just had them done! I know how it is though, when you move. I'll bet you do miss all those people. When you live in a town for any length of time you get used to going to a certain person. . . ." Her eyes were wandering again — up and down and all around.

"But I'm beginning to feel at home in Cincinnati already. Everyone has been so kind."

"Well, I'm delighted to hear that. Say, will you excuse me, dear? I think someone is leaving. It was so nice talking to you."

Marcy watched her hostess squeeze her hefty shantung-draped form between two clusters of cocktail-laden people. She was wondering just what degree of society she was immersed in. Near debutante, she surmised. It distressed Marcy that she couldn't size people up immediately with the unerring accuracy that her mother
could. Mrs. Hammond could walk into a room of total strangers and in five minutes fit each one into his proper income bracket. Marcy guessed that her mother's knack had grown out of social necessity and boredom during twenty-five transient years with Admiral Roger Hammond.

In her own nineteen years' experience as a Navy daughter, Marcy had learned the importance of making a good first impression. She unconsciously felt to see that her slip straps weren't peeping at the edge of her pink neckline, while a quick glance in the mirrored panel assured her that her ash-blonde hair was still smoothly compressed into a shining chignon. The same glance forewarned her of an approaching man.

Why did this kind always have to corner you when there were people you would like to corner? He was barely as tall as Marcy, blond and sallow, and, worse still, he looked like the type whose padded suits would conceal great hollows beneath the clavicle. At times like this Marcy could always hear her mother's reiterate warning before birthday parties, "Be nice to all the little boys, sweet, for the least promising in appearance often have the most attractive friends." She didn't want to be nice to this one, but habit compelled her to smile broadly.

"Hello, I'm Graden Edmonton and you're Marcy Hammond. You're here with a good friend of mine."

"I'm so glad to meet you, Graden. Did Dave tell you who I was?"

"Yes, I just passed him in the drawing room or whatever the hell that other room is. Excuse me. This house loses me every time. One night last year we all rounded in here after Ellie Hanover's party at Cincinnati Country Club. She made her debut last season. Anyway, we all ended up here at Bozzo Greene's at four in the morning." He was getting confidential. Marcy moved back a step on the pretense of picking up her martini. "Well, when we walked into the library what do you think?"

Marcy widened her eyes and shook her head slightly as Graden's question caught her in the middle of a sip.

"There were Mr. and Mrs. Greene, both totally bombed, sitting on the hearth in front of the fireplace in their evening clothes - roasting marshmallows!"

Marcy swallowed. "My word!" Graden was both drunk and impolite, but she could not help indulging in a mental picture, nor would she forget to describe the incident to her mother in the morning.

Graden went on. "We barged right in before we saw them, but they didn't care. Mr. Greene had picked up an issue of a -uh-not a very nice magazine somewhere, and he was getting a real charge out of one of the cartoons. Finally Mrs. Greene asked me to go into the drawing room and bring her glasses from the leathertopped table. Well, I started out through the labyrinth with no idea where the drawing room was and ... ."

Marcy began to wonder where Dave Lundstrom was and whether or not he remembered bringing her to the party.

"... When I finally found my date again she was sitting on Tyler's lap whispering that he shouldn't flick his cigarette ashes on Mrs. Greene's carpet. She'd been a pain anyway so I just let her sit there while I mixed myself a drink. Finally Jimmy had enough and - by the way - have you met Jimmy Tyler yet?"

"Wh-what? Who? Have I met who?"

"Jimmy Tyler. He lives here in Cincinnati, in Hyde Park. He's a real character. As I was saying, my date was sitting on his lap telling him not to flick his ashes on the carpet until finally he just shouted in her ear, 'Quiet, woman! or I'll drop this cigarette down the back of your dress!' You'd have to meet Tyler to appreciate it. He's a character."

"Where does he live in Hyde Park?"

"Beverley Hills Drive."

That was it. Marcy had thought that the name was familiar. The day before while she and her mother had been driving around Hyde Park with some friends, one of the women had pointed out a house on Beverley Hills Drive, mentioning that a prominent Cincinnati lawyer named Tyler lived there. "Well, isn't that strange! He must be a neighbor of mine. We just bought the house on the corner of Beverley Hills and Riverview."

"Oh, so your family bought the Blakely house? Well, Jimmy Tyler lives two blocks away from you. Say, you'll have to meet him. Where's Dave? We were thinking about dropping in on Jimmy after this is over, and I'm about ready to go now. These cocktail parties are only about half anyway. I'd really like you to meet Jimmy."

"Does he know you might come?"
"Oh, hell, we drop in on Tyler anytime. No women there to worry about. His dad’s in Europe now. Great set-up. Lots of free food and alcoholic refreshment. To tell the truth I’m flat this weekend. I had to make some major repairs on my boat. We smashed it up cutting the wake of a barge on the river last Saturday. Where’s Dave? Look, you wait here while I find your date and we’ll move the group to Tyler’s for a few laughs."

"Fine," Marcy said. "I’ll just finish this martini." Marcy set her empty glass containing the smooth unruptured olive on an ornate silver tray and began to visually browse among the faces of the young people in the room. So far, Dave’s crowd seemed like a pretty good starting point. It was fortunate that her mother had had the connection.

Marcy caught sight of Dave’s stocky figure and big red bull neck. He was talking to someone in blue lace. Marcy thought that he might have stayed with her a little more, but then, she didn’t really care. She had met plenty of people and besides she felt a little better about drinking martinis when she wasn’t being watched over by the son of a family friend.

Dave turned around and started across the room toward Marcy. His square face had grown ruddier and he flushed still more when she met his gaze. They had played together many years before, when both families had lived near each other in Westport. It was strange to be thrown back together in the middle of their college days. He grasped her elbow. "I’m sorry to have left you like this, Marce. I got involved with Graden’s date." Dave was steering her toward Mrs. Greene.

As she passed through the bright maze of men and women, Marcy thought how much the room resembled a jungle full of brilliantly feathered tropical birds and tall loose-jointed apes all of which chattered, cheeped, and guffawed incessantly. Not that Marcy didn’t enjoy the vibrant atmosphere. As she brushed skirts and arms gently in passing, she thought how well she felt there.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Greene," Dave was saying. The hostess put out both plump soft hands and Marcy grasped them in her long slender ones. Just like holding warm dough rolled in flour, she thought. "It’s been a lovely party, Mrs. Greene. A perfect introduction to Cincinnati. I’ve been telling everyone how charming you’ve made my first week-end here."

Mrs. Greene’s big bosom heaved with a deep breath that seemed to refresh her wilting smile. "I think it’s dear of you to say that.

Really, I’m just delighted to have had the opportunity. I love your mother, Dear. I met her this afternoon, you know. Do say hello for me and tell her that I’ll be hurt if both she and her beautiful daughter don’t pay me a visit some afternoon. Tell her I’ll call her, Dear."

"I know she’ll be most happy, Mrs. Greene."

"Come again, both of you."

The air was cool when the young couples walked outside. It was a fresh spring night, black and sprinkled with clean bright stars. At first it was hard for Marcy to see and she let Dave hold her arm going down the stony driveway past the line of parked cars. That was another nice thing about Dave. His parents had given him a yellow Lincoln Capri for graduation. It was a year old now, but still sleek and luxurious.

Dave opened her door and Marcy gave him a flash of lime-colored lining as she stepped into the car. Mother had always believed that when a lady got into a car she should divert a gentleman’s attention from the ungraceful motion of leg-swinging and seat-sliding by some small ruse like making a witty remark, or perhaps just smiling up at him. Marcy had developed several variations on the theme.

Dave closed her door leaving Marcy in that temporary vacuous solitude which always lent itself to a quick evaluation of the date. He was nice, she decided, for her purpose, but definitely not the type that attracted her. As Dave slammed his door shut and slid the key into the ignition, Marcy decided that she certainly couldn’t stand too many evenings watching his neck get redder and redder like a big alcohol barometer.

Marcy had decided something else during the evening. She might as well meet this neighbor boy and find out early in the game whether he was obnoxious or interesting. "I understand we’re going to visit one Jimmy Tyler now."

"Oh, did Graden mention it? Yes, we thought that might be a good move at this point. You’ll get a charge out of Jimmy. I don’t know why he wasn’t at the cocktail party. You can never tell about him though. Sometimes he’s all for a party and other times he gets on a big intellectual kick and doesn’t talk to a girl for months. Just shuts himself up in the house and reads or listens to records. He has shelves covering half of the living room wall just to hold his record collection; it’s worth a small fortune. He has everything
from Mozart to Louis Armstrong. Those early Armstrong records are jazz collector’s items now, you know. Well, he has all of them, and when his parties really get going, he puts on these fabulous LP’s of authentic African congo drums that his dad recorded while he was on a safari last year. “The stuff drives you wild.”

“Maybe he’ll play them tonight if we ask him,” Marcy said.

“Better watch it! After about four of Tyler’s highballs they start plying on your animal instinct,” Dave grinned at her quickly as he turned down a winding street. The houses were sumptuous, solid and austere, each set apart from the others by wide rolling lawns. “Look, Marcy, I don’t know how you’ll like Jimmy and I can’t be sure who we’ll find there. He has all kinds of friends. Ah, I hardly think you’ll find anyone offensive, but sometimes — well, to be quite frank it wasn’t my idea to bring you here. If my finances were in better shape I’d like to show you the skyline from the cocktail lounge in the Terrace Plaza, or take in a show at a night club in Newport, but as it is —”

“Ah, Dave, that’s perfectly all right. Since you’ve all been describing Jimmy Tyler so vividly, I just have to meet him and see if he’s really so unusual.”

Dave pulled into a long driveway. “Well, I’m glad to see you’re game.”

The grey stone house was old and even in the dark exuded an air of spacious solidity. Dave pulled on the emergency brake and walked around the car to open Marcy’s door. “It hardly looks as if a party’s in progress!” She noted the single light shining in the right wing. Marcy knew he was looking at her foot as she set her pink silk pump down on the cement of the driveway. Her ankles had a nice curve when she wore spike heels, but as she stood up next to Dave she wished that he were a little taller. “What do you suppose he’s doing in there? Reading up on savage lore in National Geographic?”

Dave laughed. “You never know. That light looks as if its coming from the dining room. He’s probably eating mangoes over the New Yorker.”

As they reached the stone steps leading up to the front walk from the driveway, two more cars pulled in behind the Lincoln. Car doors slammed and several couples emerged into the night behind Marcy and Dave. They all trounced up the steps double file and someone near the back shouted, “Open up, Tyler, or you’re under siege!”

Dave need not have bothered pressing the bell. Graden was serenading the entire neighborhood with a lusty baritone version of an unidentifiable drinking song. No sooner had they all had attained the porch than a light illuminated them and the door opened revealing Jimmy Tyler. He was tall, good-looking with a square jaw covered by a blue shadow of beard. Arrayed in baggy grey slacks and a white T shirt, he stood at the door jingling the ice cubes in the tall drink which he held in one hand, and lowered his eyebrows at the group. “I might have known. God damn it, get in here, all of you! You can help my date dry dishes.”

Marcy hesitated. She hardly knew whether to act as surprised as she was or toss off a sophisticated laugh. As it was, she had no time to do either before she felt herself being literally lifted over the threshold by the elbow. When Jimmy Tyler released her arm he herded her to one side, “Don’t stand there blocking the parade... just stand over here next to me and watch them pour in.”

Dave was slightly annoyed. “James, this young lady has just moved into the Blakely house. She’s my guest for this evening and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t make yourself obnoxious to her until she gets used to your sense of humor.”

Jimmy leveled a piercing gaze at his friend. “Did you come over here to pay me the $200 you owe me, David?”

“Hell, no! I came for a drink!”

They both laughed and Dave said, “Marcy, this is Jimmy Stuart Tyler, Jr. Jimmy, this is Marcy Hammond, the Rear Admiral’s daughter. Her father is retiring here in Cincinnati.”

“Well, it’s nice to have you aboard. I hope the skipper doesn’t mind a little amplified jazz in the night. Every once in a while I really get a bird and pipe the Hi-Fi out in the garden for an all-night party. No one comes right out and says it, but I think that’s why the Blakely’s struck out for the quiet prairie.”

Marcy was attracted to men like Jimmy Tyler. She beamed up at him. “I’m sure Daddy won’t mind. He likes a party as well as anyone. But, tell me, did you say you were — ah — entertaining a date? We didn’t know —”

Jimmy laughed. “Yes, we just polished off a couple of T-bones. She’s out in the kitchen scouring pans. My father and I affect women that way. They love to clean us up.”

Marcy was curious to see what type of girl appealed to Jimmy Tyler, but she controlled her eagerness. Everyone else had already
began pulling record albums out of the wall, and Dave had busied 
himself with swinging the phonograph out of its gleaming console. 
Jimmy's offer, "What can I fix you all to drink?" went unheard by 
the group with the exception of Marcy, who stood apart from the 
others not quite sure whether to join them or pursue her conversa-
tion with Jimmy.

He quickly solved her dilemma. "Well, pink lady," he grinned, 
allowing himself to be impressed with the total effect of her outfit 
from earrings to shoes, "if you will follow me into the kitchen, I'll 
introduce you to my industrious date and mix you your choice of 
my cocktail recipes."

The route led through the dining room. Although poorly lit 
by a dusty crystal chandelier which hung over the heavy rectangular 
table, the room clearly bespoke the masculine utilitarianism of the 
bachelor life it served. Marcy's eye lingered on the silver service, 
the only feminine object in the room; it reigned amid dinner crumbs 
on the white damask cloth. As they approached the kitchen, Marcy 
began to wonder just what sort of an evening she and her new 
friends had interrupted.

The girl looked up when Marcy and Jimmy entered the room, 
but continued to dry a large pan with a damp blue sponge as she 
returned Marcy's stare wordlessly.

Jimmy took the pan out of her hands and set it down. "Stella, 
this is Marcy Hammond. Marcy, this is Stella Gerscheski."

Marcy winced under her breath. The smile she forced belied 
her thoughts. This was the least of her expectations. Marcy's eye lingered on the silver service, 
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her thoughts. This was the least of her expectations. Stella looked 
more Italian than Slavic. She was short and small-boned with thick 
dark hair that reached her shoulders. Her olive skin was smooth 
and seemed almost transparent where it stretched over the bony 
hump of her sharp nose. Grey eyes continued to stare expression-
lessly at Marcy, giving her whole face the stony visage of one who 
realized that she should be impressed, but wasn't.

Marcy could not help staring at Stella's tight black corduroy 
toreador pants and black and white striped shirt with the tails tied 
in a snug knot around her tiny waist. "Why she's cheap," thought 
Marcy, "and she's out of place in this house." It irritated some basic 
instinct within her to see this girl who was so obviously the type 
you saw in the half-light of morning waiting at bus-stops—clutching 
her plastic purse in one hand and her cheap flowered silk head-
kerchief under her chin with the other — to see that girl being the 
woman in the Tyler house.

"Marcy, what would you like?" Jimmy held open the door to 
the liquor cabinet.

His question snapped her back. "Oh—uh—bourbon is fine."

Jimmy extracted four bottles, setting them one by one beside 
each other on the bar that split the large kitchen into two areas.

Stella opened the drain letting the greasy water gurgle out of 
the sink. As she wiped the porcelain, Jimmy reached over the 
bottles and, grasping her suddenly about the waist, boosted her up 
onto the bar. He startled her so that she dropped the sponge, but 
she caught it on one petite ballerina slipped foot where she bal-
anced it long enough to bend down and retrieve it. "And what 
can I brew for you in my big rusty cauldron?" she murmured in her 
ear. "Perhaps some toad warts and the juice of a juniper berry."

Stella interrupted him with a wry smile, "Easy, Helios, or you'll 
turn me into an ugly monster with long hair all wound around a 
telephone pole."

"Exactly! And then I'll kiss you like this —" 
"And transform me? Thank you just the same. I'm happy the 
way I am, Sir Knight." Stella slid down from her perch and turned 
abruptly to face Marcy.

Caught staring by the object of her interest, Marcy quickly 
looked away and moved around the end of the bar. As she brushed 
past a drawer, her hoop caught on the knob, tilting it at an unseemly 
angle. Marcy was humiliated. Her fingers trembled as she tried 
to release it, but finally Stella kneeled down and after examining 
the situation, lifted the wire frame off the knob. Jimmy broke the 
uncomfortable silence with a deep peal of laughter. "God, girl, 
what have you on under that? An umbrella? I can see that a 
knife made me into an ugly monster with long hair all wound around a 
telephone pole." 

"Marcy was at a loss for witty repartee for the first time in her 
life. She just wanted to leave the room by the most expedient 
means. She laughed and murmured a thank you before she turned 
and walked gracefully out of the kitchen into the dining room.

Marcy paused to breathe deeply and to lean over the polished 
buffet for a peek in the decorative mirror which hung above it on 
the wall. Smiling a winning smile at the image before her, she 
smoothed her hair and stroked the fine arch of her eyebrow with a 
fingertip. She wished that this embarrassing incident hadn't oc-
curred in front of Jimmy Tyler, and even more that his little Italian
hadn't witnessed the whole affair. Oh, but why worry about it? Marcy had read at the age of twelve that the first sign of a woman's character were her hands and her eyes. Since then, with the gifts of nature and the aid of manicurists and an eye-lash curler, Marcy had made quite a success of her character. She certainly could out-charm, outwit, and generally out-maneuver any Stella Ger-what-ski. Marcy supposed that she should pity the girl. Perhaps she would have, had Stella shown a little humility. As it was, she had simply stood there and looked at Marcy with that grey level stare. Marcy and moved back to her former position.

"Please try to be nice to them, Stella. I didn't invite them, and I guess they've ruined a quiet evening, but they're here. And they are my friends."

"Friends, hell. They come over here and drink your liquor and break your records and amuse themselves with your wit — for what? Jimmy, I told you I'd come and have dinner with you tonight on one condition. That I wouldn't have to put up with this gang of—of—"

"I know, I know, but what do you want me to do? Throw them out? I can't—"

"Oh, Jimmy, I understand that; you're your father's son and—"

"When you turn your face up like that I could be tempted to forget that—and all the rest."

"Why don't you? None of it's worth a whole lot. What you need more than anything in the world is—"

"What I need is a wife and to get the hell away from here. But I can't afford it. If I'm ever going to set up a law practice in Cincinnati, it won't be entirely on my father's name. I need Graden and his family and—well, you've got to be practical. This is a realistic world."

"All right. I'm no idealist. Do you think climbing out of bed at 5:30 every morning to catch a bus to a sticky office where I break my nails on a typewriter for $55 a week is the kind of life that makes you believe in good fairies? Well, it doesn't. It makes a stupid person into a machine and an intelligent person into a cynic."

"But Stella."

"Let me finish. You see, what's important to me is that I don't have to be nice to anybody for the $55. I'm the mistress of my typewriter and if it upsets me I can damned well spit on the space bar if I feel like it."

"Well, I'm not asking—"

"Look, Jimmy, I don't get a chance to relax and have a good think all week long. Why should I purposely go into a room full of drunks on a Saturday night and sit and talk to some little fraud in hoop-skirts pretending either that I'm something I'm not or that I'm ashamed of what I am?"

Marcy gripped the edge of the buffet until she realized that she was digging her nails into the lustrous mahogany finish.

"Stella, I don't know what to say. If it wouldn't hurt anybody but me I'd marry you and take off for some little town in Utah where nobody knew me."

Stella interrupted. "No, Jimmy. You wouldn't be happy."

"Oh, I know it." Jimmy's voice cracked. "Stella, I love you. I love you enough to say to hell with Cincinnati's debutante crowd and to hell with pull and to hell with almost everything. It won't be easy, Stella, but we could work it out if only you'd give a little."

She spoke softly. "Give a little, Jimmy? I guess you don't realize how much you're asking. You know, it's really for the better that this happened tonight. If we had spent one more evening sitting out on the terrace in the dark, talking, laughing — Jimmy, when I'm leaning my head on your arm and listening to the things you believe, I can't see things the way they really are. It's been such a wonderful winter."

"Look, Stella, you're getting a little ahead of me. It's been a great winter and a great spring and as far as I'm concerned it's a great life all the way around. I'm certainly not going to let a thing like this break me up completely. So it ruined an evening. Maybe it's ruined a couple before. I'm sorry. I'll tell the gang next time not to drop in."

"Jimmy, this one instance wouldn't make that much difference in itself. It's just that it's made me see us the way we are altogether. What I mean is, you can't divorce a man's thoughts from his way of life. And even if you could — Jimmy, my things are beautiful to me and your things are beautiful to you."

"And you're beautiful to me because I love you. I love you because you're different from all these—"

"That's just it, Jimmy. This evening has made me see it. You may love me a little for myself, but I think you love me mostly be-
cause I'm different, because I have something that neither you nor your friends can ever have."

"Stella, don't—"

"You'll understand tomorrow. In the meantime, do you know what I'm going to do right now?"

There was a shuffling sound like the gathering up of things.

Stella spoke again. "I'm going to go out the back door and walk down to the corner and catch a bus home. When I get there I'm going to write a long letter to that Italian soldier you met last fall. He's in Austria right now running around with women, but he wants to marry me when he gets home. He's Catholic but he promised he wouldn't have me pregnant every ten months, and I'd just as soon raise my brood Catholic as anything else. I know how it is not to have any religion and I want my children to believe in some sort of God."

"Stella—"

"And do you know what you're going to do? You're going to kiss me good-by and open this door for me. And then you're going to close it and take those drinks into the living room and make your friends feel at home. And why don't you ask that charming blond for a date? She's not really bad underneath the top layer. She'll jump at the chance because she walked in here beaming like Cleopatra rowing down the River Cydnus."

"Wait, Stella, wait until I can think! I—"

"Good night, Jimmy."

There was a silence and the opening and the shutting of the door. Marcy leaned against the wall as if she were a part of the wallpaper. She listened to the unscrewing of a bottle and the glug-splash of liquor being poured out of a bottle into a glass. At the sound of the empty glass being placed on the bar, Marcy tore herself away from the wall and ran into the living room toward the safety of the colorful cluster of chattering forms sorting black discs around the console. She stood on the periphery, pressing her hands against her head. Her brain felt as if it had been rudely upended, spilling a tumbling jumble of thoughts into a cavity, like chicken noodle soup into a bowl.

Jimmy confronted them all quietly, but something in his posture made the talking stop. "Would you all please leave?"

Silence followed, but soon a voice shaky with alcohol broke in, "Hell, Tyler, we came for a party! Never saw you throw out a friend before he's had a drink!" The girl in blue lace put her hand on Graden's arm, but before she could speak, Marcy felt herself step forward. "I really think we should call it a night. It's getting late."

Driving along in the car beside Dave, Marcy was still in a daze.

She arranged her skirt unconsciously. Suddenly they passed under a street light and something about the way the beam of light shone on her hands caused her to look at her nails more closely; to clench them tightly in folds of her skirt that glowed equally grey under light that shone brighter than day.

Graduating senior Nancy McBride records in free verse a college . . .

HOLIDAY

BY NANCY McBRIDE

Ding dong, over the world we go—
Off to somewhere, no where, anyhow,
Steel wheels grind out
Rickety rhythms on the rail.
What a noise we make—
Faster, takes your breath away;
Hurry up.

There's not much time to get away,
Good food—sharpen up the appetite—
Ski and skate on a mountain top,
Private sunsets on the snow,
Cheap at thrice the price.
Come all, pay out, join the fun:
Somehow.

Ding dong, cocktails in the lounge car—
Luxury (it's reasonable).
You need a rest to set the world up-right;
Look—the sun, it disappears;
The fire is out—but here, have one,
And pull the shade;
The new moon stares at me tonight:
We'll be there—somewhere—in the morning . . .
Hurry up, somehow.
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