

THE HANDLER

by Damon Knight

from Rogue

In one of the two very small towns where both he and I live -Milford, Pa., a river valley resort on the edge of the Poconos-Damon Knight is known as, "You know, the one who always walks down Broad Street reading!"

Milford, with more than a thousand year-round regular residents can, and does, offer a sort of pleased, affectionate, perhaps slightly proud, understanding to its reckless-reader street-crosser. The other (and much smaller) town we both live in-the curiously close-knit community of "science-fictionists"-is less indulgent by far: not that anyone minds how much reading he does; it's what he says afterward that hurts.

When Anthony Boucher retired as reviewer for Fantasy and Science Fiction, the only logical successor to the post was Damon Knight, then already firmly established as "the other critic" in science fantasy. (I do mean "critic." Damon has been known to like a book-but rarely to say so. All in all, he has probably poured more vinegar on troubled authors than any other monthly columnist ever thought to keep in stock).

It is a double pleasure then, to an author-editor like myself, to see him turn his acerbity, auctorially, on a field once-removed from publishing-the world of entertainment.

When the big man came in, there was a movement in the room like a lot of bird dogs pointing. Piano player quits pounding, the two singing drunks shut up, all the beautiful people with cocktails in their hands stop talking and laughing.

"Pete!" the nearest women shrilled, and he walked straight into the room, arms around two girls, hugging them tight. "How's my sweetheart? Susy, you look good enough to eat, but I had it for lunch. George, you pirate"-he let go both girls, grabbed a bald blushing little man and thumped him on the arm- "you were great, sweetheart, I mean it, really great. Now HEAR THIS!" he shouted, over all the voices that were clamoring Pete this, Pete that.

Somebody put a martini in his hand and he stood holding it, bronzed and tall in his dinner jacket, teeth gleaming white as his shirt cuffs. "We had a show!" he told them.

A shriek of agreement went up, a babble of did we have a show my God Pete listen a show-

He held up his hand. "It was a good show!"

Another shriek and babble.

"The sponsor kinda liked it-he just signed for another one in the fall!"

A shriek, a roar, people clapping, jumping up and down. The big man tried to say something else, but gave up, grinning, while men and woman crowded up to him. They were all trying to shake his hand, talk in his ear, put their arms around him.

"I love ya all!" he shouted. "Now what do you say, let's live a little!"

The murmuring started again as people sorted themselves out. There was a clinking from the bar. "Jesus, Pete," a skinny pop-eyed little guy was saying, crouching in adoration, "when you dropped that fishbowl I thought I'd pee myself, honest to God-"

The big man let out a bark of happy laughter. "Yeah, I can still see the look on your face. And the fish, flopping all over the stage. So what can I do, I get down there on my knees-" The big man did so, bending over and staring at imaginary fish on the floor. "And I say, 'Well, fellows, back to the drawing board!'"

Screams of laughter as the big man stood up. The party was arranging itself around him in arcs of concentric circles, with people in the back standing on sofas and the piano bench so they could see. Somebody yelled, "Sing the goldfish song, Pete!"

Shouts of approval, please-do-Pete, the goldfish song.

"Okay, okay." Grinning, the big man sat on the arm of a chair and raised his glass. "And a vun, and a doo - vere's de moosic?" A scuffle at the piano bench. Somebody banged out a few chords. The big man made a comic face and sang, "Ohhh . . . how I wish ... I was a little fish . . . and when I want some quail ... I'd flap my little tail."

Laughter, the girls laughing louder than anybody and their red mouths farther open. One flushed blonde had her hand on the big man's knee, and another was sitting close behind him.

"But seriously-" the big man shouted. More laughter.

"No, seriously," he said, in a vibrant voice as the room quieted, "I want to tell you in all seriousness I couldn't have done it alone. And incidentally I see we have some foreigners, litvaks and other members of the press here tonight, so I want to introduce all the important people. First of all, George here, the three-fingered band leader-and there isn't a guy in the world could have done what he did this afternoon-George, I love ya." He hugged the blushing little bald man.

"Next my real sweetheart, Ruthie, where are ya. Honey, you were the greatest, really perfect-I mean it, baby-" He kissed a dark girl in a red dress who cried a little and hid her face on his broad shoulder. "And Frank-" He reached down and grabbed the skinny pop-eyed guy by the sleeve. "What can I tell you? A sweetheart?" The skinny guy was blinking, all choked up; the big man thumped him on the back. "Sol and Ernie and Mack, my writers, Shakespeare should have been so lucky-" One by one, they came up to shake the big man's hand as he called their names; the women kissed him and cried. "My stand-in," the big man was calling out, and "my caddy," and "now," he said, as the room quieted a little, people flushed and sore-throated with enthusiasm, "I want you to meet my handler."

The room fell silent. The big man looked thoughtful and startled, as if he had had a sudden pain. Then he stopped moving. He sat without breathing or blinking his eyes. After a moment there was a jerky motion behind him. The girl who was sitting on the arm of the chair got up and moved away. The big man's dinner jacket split open in the back, and a little man climbed out. He had a perspiring brown face under a shock of black hair. He was a very small man, almost a dwarf, stoop-shouldered and round-backed in a sweaty brown singlet and shorts. He climbed out of the cavity in the big man's body, and closed the dinner jacket carefully. The big man sat motionless and his face was doughy.

The little man got down, wetting his lips nervously. Hello, Fred, a few people said. "Hello," Fred called, waving his hand. He was about forty, with a big nose and big soft brown eyes. His voice was cracked and uncertain. "Well, we sure put on a show, didn't we?"

Sure did, Fred, they said politely. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Hot in there," he explained, with an apologetic grin. Yes, I guess it must be Fred, they said. People around the outskirts of the crowd were beginning to turn away, form conversational groups; the hum of talk rose higher. "Say, Tim, I wonder if I could have something to drink," the little man said. "I don't like to leave him-you know-" He gestured toward the silent big man.

"Sure, Fred, what'll it be?"

"Oh-you know-a glass of beer?"

Tim brought him a beer in a pilsener glass and he drank it thirstily, his brown eyes darting nervously from side to side. A lot of people were sitting down now; one or two were at the door leaving.

"Well," the little man said to a passing girl, "Ruthie, that was quite a moment there, when the fishbowl busted, wasn't it?"

"Huh? Excuse me, honey. I didn't hear you." She bent nearer.

"Oh-well, it don't matter. Nothing."

She patted him on the shoulder once, and took her hand away. "Well, excuse me, sweetie, I have to catch Robbins before he leaves." She went on toward the door.

The little man put his beer glass down and sat, twisting his knobby hands together. The bald man and the pop-eyed man were the only ones still sitting near him. An anxious smile flickered on his lips; he glanced at one face, then another. "Well," he began, "that's one show under our belts, huh, fellows, but I guess we got to start, you know, thinking about..."

"Listen, Fred," said the bald man seriously, leaning forward to touch him on the wrist, "why don't you get back inside?"

The little man looked at him for a moment with sad hound-dog eyes, then ducked his head, embarrassed. He stood up uncertainly, swallowed and said, "Well-" He climbed up on the chair behind the big man, opened the back of the dinner jacket and put his legs in one at a time. A few people were watching him, unsmiling. "Thought I'd take it easy a while," he said weakly, "but I guess-" He reached in and gripped something with both hands, then swung himself inside. His brown, uncertain face disappeared.

The big man blinked suddenly and stood up. "Well, hey there," he called, "what's a matter with this party anyway? Let's see some life, some action-" Faces were lighting up around him. People began to move in closer. "What I mean, let me hear that beat!"

The big man began clapping his hands rhythmically. The piano took it up. Other people began to clap. "What I mean, are we alive here or just waiting for the wagon to pick us up? How's that again, can't hear you!" A roar of pleasure as he cupped his hand to his ear. "Well, come on, let me hear it!" A louder roar. Pete, Pete; a gabble of voices. "I got nothing against Fred," said the bald man earnestly in the middle of the noise. "I mean for a square he's a nice guy." "Know what you mean," said the pop-eyed man, "I mean like he doesn't mean it." "Sure," said the bald man, "but, Jesus, that sweaty undershirt and all ..." Then they both burst out laughing as the big man made a comic face, tongue lolling, eyes crossed. Pete, Pete, Pete; the room was really jumping; it was a great party, and everything was all right far into the night.

END.

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