

and returned in her eyes; and then as it picked up the pitchfork in the corner, and crept forward.

John Fowler never saw the pitchfork, but as his face took on a startled look, and then turned and rolled back, the pleading eyes he turned on the farmer standing there, were once more those of a tear-stained little boy, crying with all his heart to be loved.

The Sirloin

J. R. Nieff

JOHNNY BECKER quickly checked the orders in his hand, and with a smile of self-satisfaction stacked them neatly on the sales manager's desk. Business had been good, but the day was over and Johnny was anxious to get home, away from the office, the noisy streets, the chattering females. At the moment his mind was filled with delightful visions of the thick (and he hoped rare and juicy) sirloin he was having for his dinner.

As he was making his way out of the office the sound of feminine laughter jerked his thoughts away from the sirloin. "It must be Mary again," he thought to himself, "telling everyone she is going to marry me." He couldn't quite understand it. Mary was a cute kid and could make her choice from any guy in the office. Why did she have to pick on him? But Johnny couldn't see himself married. Marriage was for the other guys. They could have the white bungalows in the suburbs; the loving wives in their gayly checked aprons; the long drives to and from the office; the screaming, kicking kids that apparently were included in the deal. Yes sir! They could have it! All of it!

He had stopped at the meat market the night before, and old Joe the butcher had sold him just what he wanted—even told him how to broil it.

"Have you broiler good and hot, Mr. Becker," he had said, "then put him in gently and cook him for thirty minutes all over. When he's sizzling good, sprinkle a leetle salt on top and put him on a nice hot plate. That's the way my Maria do it. I watch her many time." At this point Joe's mouth had begun to water, but he continued, "But you shouldn't cook him, Johnny; thassa no man's job—you need a nicea sweeta young wife. I know; I use to cook some myself. Terrible! sometime the dog she no eat it. But my Maria—ah, she's a wonderful cook."

Johnny thanked him for the steak and for the instructions, and hoped to himself that he would do a better job with this one. The last time—but he couldn't think about it any more. It had been a horrible mess, even worse than army chow. His apartment still smelled like a smoke house in spite of everything he had done to sweeten up the place. But that was all in the past. This time would be different.

He parked his car in front of the building and proudly ascended the stairs to his apartment. He had good reason to be proud. It was a pleasant little place, but he had to admit it was a bit dull at times. Still it was his home, and a lot better than any of his married friends could afford. He unwrapped the steak with the care of a father handling his first born, and gently placed it on the broiler rack. Smiling smugly he returned to the living room to await the results. "Me—married?" He shook his head, "I'd rather eat burned steak the rest of my life."

These assaults upon his single blessedness were not new to Johnny. Old Joe gave him the same pitch every time he went in. In fact, Joe wasn't the only one. There seemed to be a conspiracy afoot. Up until two or three weeks ago Mary had always kept his desk dusted and had even changed his blotter pad for him several times. They had become quite friendly, and there had been a few times when he was almost on the verge of asking her for a date, but he had never been able to get the words out of his mouth. His knees would begin to quiver, and he would become so befuddled that all he could say was, "Thanks, Mary." Instead of improving, his condition became increasingly worse until finally to preserve his ego he had told her that he would dust his own desk. He had tried to be as polite as he knew how, but apparently he had failed. And when he tried to explain how vicious office gossip could be, she had defiantly placed her clenched fists against his chest and looked up at him with an expression he would never forget.

"Now you listen to me, you big ape!" she had said, "I've taken more nonsense from you than I'd take from any other man I know! You—you worm you! Worrying about some silly office gossip. Let me tell you this, and don't you forget it: I'm in love with you and I expect you to marry me! And I don't care if the whole world knows it, so you might as well get used to me! Now get out of here and go home where I can't corrupt your morals!" As she finished Johnny could see tears in her eyes. They made him have a peculiar quivering sensation around his heart, but she was gone before he could do anything about them—even if he had wanted to.

The blue-green wisps of smoke that came from his kitchen clearly indicated that his attention was needed by the sirloin. He didn't hurry, for it was quite evident that the damage had been done. He removed the remains from the broiler and tossed them into the kitchen sink, where they landed with a clank and bounced. He looked at the steak: this couldn't be the same one he had started with! This one was all curled up until it resembled a cereal bowl. Under ordinary circumstances he would have been worried, but not tonight; he was too preoccupied. In disgust he fixed himself a baloney sandwich and a cup of instant coffee and went to bed.

When the alarm went off the following morning Johnny was still awake. Sleeping had been out of the question, but it had been worth

it. There in the darkness and silence of the night he had reached some startling conclusions about himself, and the picture they formed was not in the least flattering. If he could only find Mary, maybe he could redeem himself.

He arrived at the office early. He wanted to be there when Mary came in. There were a few phone orders left on his desk from the night before so he wrote them up for the boss's OK. Still Mary had not arrived, which was very unusual. She was always very punctual. He finally asked one of the other girls and was told that Mary had quit the night before. She had left the office crying and muttering something about a certain stupid salesman. Then the girl looked up at him, "But I don't know any stupid salesmen; do you Johnny?"

When the boss arrived he subtly reminded Johnny that he had a job and it might be a good idea if he got at it. But it was no good; by noon he had taken one order, and the commission on it wouldn't have paid for the steak he had burned. In the afternoon he was no more successful than he had been in the morning. He didn't have the spirit—the drive was gone. Finally one of his customers said to him, "You look sick—why don't you go home?" Johnny took his advice.

On the way he stopped at the meat market, but not for steak—from now on he was strictly a hamburger and baloney man. Joe greeted him as he entered, but not with his usual good-natured smile. Johnny ordered his hamburger and baloney; told Joe about the unfortunate incident of the steak and why he had happened to burn it. As he listened the old man's eyes began to gleam. Finally he could restrain himself no longer, "My Maria, she fix a mighty good sirloin. I tell her to fix an extra one for you; you will eat with us tonight." Before Johnny could stop him he had turned towards the rear of the store and was calling her. "Maria, come here; I wanta you meet an old friend."

As the curtains parted Johnny gasped, "Maria! But I thought Maria was—"

"I know, son," Joe said. "You thought Maria was my wife, but you was wrong; she's a my daughter. And please, son, don'ta call her Mary; her name's Maria."

It took all the strength Johnny could muster, but at last he answered, "But I thought she was your wife."

Joe wasn't listening. He had already taken a steak from the case and was on his way to the rear of the store. What was happening now was none of his business.

He was sure they wouldn't be hungry—for a while anyway.