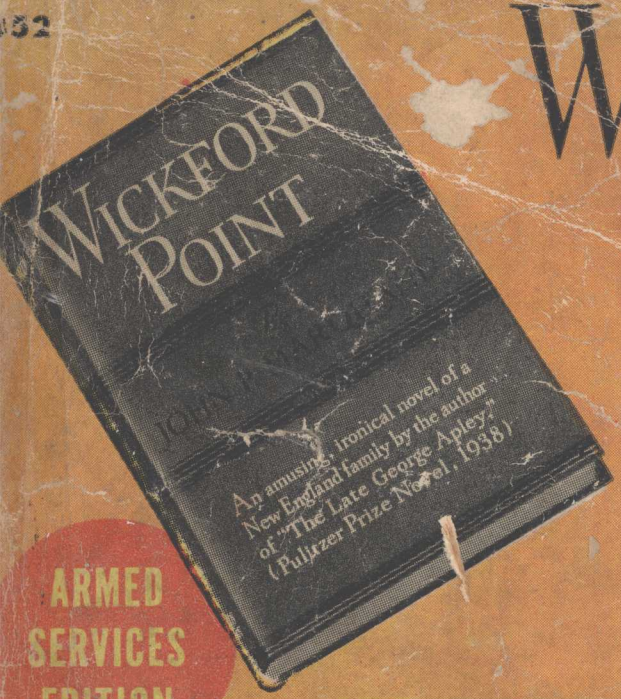

WICKFORD POINT

A novel by

JOHN P. MARQUAND

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ARMED SERVICES EDITION

THIS IS THE COMPLETE BOOK—NOT A DIGEST

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Wickford Point

by John P. Marquand

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A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION ESTABLISHED BY
THE COUNCIL ON BOOKS IN WARTIME, NEW YORK

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1. *Sid Sucks the Gasoline*

AT THE top of Allen Southby's letter was engraved MARTIN HOUSE STUDY, and to the left in smaller type DR. SOUTHBY. This reminded everyone who had known him long enough that [illegible]n had assumed this title as soon as he achieved his Ph.D. degree for studies in English and American literature. He first used it tentatively, among groups of undergraduates; later the women's clubs where he lectured had employed the prefix also; and finally, when the University Press published his volume *The Transcendent Curve*, his place in the scholastic world was irrevocably established.

That this work should have had a sale which pushed it in less than a year to well over a hundred thousand copies is a commentary on the priggishness of the book-buying public. The mass of information which Southby had gathered concerning early American literary figures was admittedly enormous, but not much of it was calculated to interest a layman. The style was difficult and turgid; even after considerable cutting the final draft ran over seven hundred and fifty pages in good solid type. Publishers have said that the bulk was what gave it its final success. When one saw it upon the parlor table in its heavy maroon binding, one could feel that here was a house of leisure and refinement, whose owner and whose family partook of The Finer Things of Life. There was, authorities explained, a "snob value" to the book, such as was

ce an attribute of Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy* and of Mr. Wells's *Outline of History.*

It possessed the same "plus quality," gave forth the mystic promise of doing good and of conveying—simply, it would seem, through its appearance—the belief that you too might hold your employer, the girl of your choice, and a dinner table spellbound, provided you took a few pleasant moments off each day to dip into the pages. You, too, might achieve that rare distinction of being the man who is just a little different, which comes from reading a thoroughly good book.

The reviewers took it up with an enthusiasm symptomatic of group hysteria, but I should like to wager that not one of them read all the way through it. Southby sometimes would quote their best remarks with a deprecating sort of humor designed to show that he knew very well that the critics had been too kind.

A glamorous panorama of the history of American thought, moving in a scintillating progress. . . . We defy the reader to put down Dr. Southby's book once he has picked it up.

There is a magic in the style which defies analysis; it flows in a trenchant stream; it is a Thames of style, moving with a deceptive tranquility past the spires of a modern Oxford.

It costs five dollars, but it's worth five hundred. This means that you and I can read it. [This came from one of the lower, less literary journals, which reached the great half-tapped reservoir of the partially enlightened.]

It would be interesting, I repeat, to know just how many actually did read it. I know I never finished it, and consequently have no real right to discuss it, except in so far as *The Transcendent Curve* influenced the Doctor as an individual. It was an achievement such as that which Dr. Lowes very nearly brought off in *The Road to Xanadu:* it was a book for scholars, read by laymen.

There could be no doubt about its scholarship, since it very nearly got its author the presidency of one of the larger Western universities—very nearly, but not quite.

"My life is at Harvard," Allen told us once. "I am a Harvard man."

The Transcendent Curve did, however, get him nearly everywhere else he wanted to go, because he knew how to use that book, and its immense success in no wise turned his head from what he wanted: he wanted to be a man of letters, a figure more austere and just a trifle more formal than Professor Phelps of Yale. Yes, it got him where he wanted to go. He became a figure almost by saying nothing, but by developing instead what might be termed "an accessive inaccessibility." He never said much in public, which was just as well, but he had a way of phrasing what little he did say. He had a timing to his speech, as effective as the timing of an athlete. No idea of his was lost through haste or carelessness, nothing became pedantic through deliberation. In time his words began to possess an indefinable, adhesive, jamlike quality which gave them an importance not wholly susceptible of analysis. Allen Southby had known what he wanted, had always known what he wanted; he had that patient deliberateness of purpose which can make indifferent material travel far. Perhaps in the end the material ceases to be indifferent, but that is a debatable matter.

In time Allen even generated a sort of charm; and besides he was an eligible bachelor, the sort you think of as a bright young man, even when he has reached the age of forty. There was once a piece of gossip, for there are always those who hate success, that he practised before a mirror. At any rate he achieved his charm. He developed a way of holding a book and of marking the place with his long forefinger, carelessly but lovingly, at the same time resting his elbow upon the table and gesticulating gently with that book. It was a pose suitable for a portrait, which may have been Southby's intention originally. He also took pains with his dress. When he came to Harvard from

Minnesota he brought his trunk with him, but Allen was quick to see that the garments within it were not correct; right from the beginning he had an unfailing instinct for doing what was suitable. He ended by wearing Harris tweeds and flannel trousers and by smoking an English pipe with a special mixture—although he did not like tobacco.

He also took to drinking beer out of a pewter mug. By the time he was taken into the Berkley Club he had developed a way of banging the mug softly upon the table, informally, and without ostentation. He used to say that there was nothing like good pewter; in fact he had a fair collection of it in a Colonial pine dresser—but he never did like beer. Nevertheless he sometimes had beer nights for the undergraduates. It was something of an accolade for an adolescent to be asked to Southby's to drink beer. It was more of an honor for one of his contemporaries, and one which I regret to say I never attained, to be asked up to his rooms to give the "lads" a talk on this or that, just anything. By aloofness rather than by assiduity he cultivated excellent social contacts. He attended only small dinners where there might be general conversation, but he knew when to listen. When an interest developed in wine-tasting, after the repeal of prohibition, Allen Southby was in the pioneering group, although he always said that his old love was ale or beer. He had a pretty turn at rhyme and you could always get him to dash off the right poem for any occasion, although he published only one slender volume of verse. He had the gift of knowing when to stop. What was more, he still kept young in appearance and in enthusiasm. He was amusing when he joined the ladies after dinner, and he was the sort of bachelor who never made himself troublesome with liquor or in taxis.

There is no particular reason to set this down unless it illustrates a reaction of my own narrow and embittered mind toward a very able man, toward a contemporary who was turning, through his own efforts, into a personage. Certainly it was all to his credit, and it can only put me in an un-

favorable light to mention it—but, frankly, there were those of us who, because of our own inadequacies and sloth, jested coarsely about Allen. However, such was my own inconsistency that I was flattered when I received his letter. In fact I came close to forgetting that I actively resented the attitude he took toward me and toward my own efforts in the field of fiction.

"Just for a handful of silver he left us," Allen said the last time I saw him, "just for a riband to stick in his coat."

He was referring gracefully to my occupation as a writer for money. A week before he had made a pronouncement on the subject in the pages of a literary magazine. It concerned the danger of the first large check, of the giving-away of something fine, of the striving after commercial position, of superficial brilliance and brittleness. In spite of it all, I was pleased to hear from Allen.

"Dear Jim," he wrote. "What have you been doing with yourself? If you happen to be in the vicinity of Cambridge any night next week, how about coming to Martin House and having a chat about books over a mug of beer? I still read *Collier's* and *Liberty* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. I must, you know."

My Cousin Clothilde was in the dining room just then, and I was finishing breakfast, a meal which lasted almost indefinitely at Wickford Point.

"I've had a letter from Allen Southby," I said.

"Have you?" she answered. "Who is Allen Southby?"

"A critic," I answered. "He wrote *The Transcendent Curve*."

"What is *The Transcendent Curve?*" she asked. "Is it a book on sex?"

"No," I told her, "not exactly."

She sighed and handed me a paper. "I wish you'd read this," she said. "I don't understand it. It's a letter from the bank."

"It says you've overdrawn your account again," I told her, "for the second time this month."

"Give me a match, please," she said. "Not

that box, it only has burnt matches in it. The other box, just there." She reached for a package of cigarettes beside her plate and shook it. "We never have any cigarettes in the house," she said. "Someone always takes them." I gave her one of mine and she lighted it. "The bank is wrong," she said. "I sent them a hundred dollars last week. It's stupid of them to be so annoying, but it doesn't make much difference, they always let me overdraw."

I folded Allen Southby's letter and put it in my pocket.

"Well, I'm going down to see him tonight," I said.

Cousin Clothilde sighed again. "You're always going somewhere, aren't you?" she said. "If you aren't going somewhere, you're always reading something. Why can't you stay here, now you're here? I'll send somebody downtown to get some cigarettes."

There was another letter beside me on the table, and now I reached for it with the idea of putting it unobtrusively into my pocket. It was in a heavy square Bermuda blue envelope, addressed to me in a handwriting which was boldly and carelessly feminine. It was a letter which I particularly wanted to read alone. For someone as vague as she was, Cousin Clothilde sometimes displayed an amazingly acute observation. She could nearly always see something which you did not wish her to see.

"Jim dear," she said, "whom's that other letter from? It looks so interesting. She writes the same way I do. I always did have such trouble with my writing until I just stopped trying."

I felt a momentary awkwardness for no good reason. It was as though she had surprised me in some furtive and discreditable action.

"It isn't from anyone in particular," I said, but I knew she would not believe me from the moment that I answered.

"Why, dear," she said, "it must be—from the way you put it in your pocket."

"Well," I said, "it's from a girl I know in New York. Her name's Patricia Leighton. I don't think you know her."

"Why, darling," said Cousin Clothilde, "I've never even heard you mention her."

"No," I answered, "I don't believe you have."

Her forehead wrinkled as she watched me.

"I don't think it's kind of you not to talk to me about things," she said. "I love to know whom you know and what you're doing. Sometimes you're so secretive, dear, just as though you were shy, or afraid of me."

"Well," I said, "perhaps I am."

"That's so silly, isn't it," she said, "when I always tell you everything?"

"I suppose it is, but then you don't really care much, except about what happens here."

"No," she said, "that isn't true. I always care about the children. I think about them all the time; and you're one of the children, dear."

I still do not know why it embarrassed me that she had seen Pat Leighton's letter. She would be writing me as she often did, asking me what I was doing and when I would be coming to New York. It would probably be nothing that I could not leave around, and everyone left letters everywhere at Wickford Point.

"Do you know her well, dear?" Cousin Clothilde asked.

"Pretty well," I answered.

"Well," said Cousin Clothilde, "she writes the same way I do."

And then she dropped the subject.

Tranquil, soul-satisfying apathy settled over the dining room. The sound of droning insects came through the window like the soft breath of sleep; an oriole sang a few throaty, liquid notes and stopped exhausted: the leafy shadows of elm branches scarcely moved upon the lawn. A house fly buzzed and beat its head against the window screen. The collision made a metallic sound which was followed by silence. The fly rubbed its wings with its hind legs, but did not try again. As Cousin Clothilde gazed at the smoke from her cigarette I noticed a lack of customary sound. The tall clock in the corner had stopped.

"I stopped it last night," Cousin Clothilde said. "You can hear it upstairs right through the ceiling. It sounds something like an insect. Besides I'd rather not know what time it is. Everything goes on just as well. Clocks only make you later. They're not happy things."

Inertia held me for a while. I tried to think of what to do, but there was nothing much to do down there. It became an effort to do anything, but I struggled against surrender out of habit.

"I might as well go and see Southby," I said. "I may as well go now. There are some things I want to do in Boston."

"Why don't you ask him down here?" Cousin Clothilde said. "It's easier. He can spend the week end."

"The house is always full over the week end," I said. "There won't be any room for him."

"There must be somewhere. It's a big house," said Cousin Clothilde. "The girls can sleep together, and we can send someone downtown before then to get some gin."

"No," I said. "You wouldn't like him."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Cousin Clothilde. "I like nearly everyone except queer foreigners." She paused and flipped her cigarette ashes into her empty coffee cup. "And after all," she added, "I like a great many foreigners. I've always loved Mirabel Steiner. She'll be dropping in before long, just for a day or two."

"When she does," I said, "you'd better send me my food upstairs on a tray."

"You shouldn't be so intolerant," she said. "You know that Mirabel has always been devoted to you. She admires you. Just last winter she wanted to borrow one of your books. There weren't any in the apartment. Has Mr. Northby got something queer about him?"

"Southby," I said. "No, he hasn't."

"Then why don't we have him come Saturday night?"

"No," I said. "He wouldn't understand it here."

"Nonsense," she said. "Everybody always likes it here."

There is a phrase used by certain fiction writers which had always puzzled me. Mr. E. Phillips Oppenheim, for example, ends an interview by the curt sentence: "He rose to his feet." It had seemed difficult to understand what else a character could rise to, but in the dining room, while Cousin Clothilde watched me, that expression acquired a definite meaning. Halfway out of my chair, I had a desire to relapse again: it was an effort to rise to my feet, and when I was on them, they moved dreamily. I leaned over and kissed her. She was my father's cousin, but she looked amazingly young.

"I wish you wouldn't go away and leave me," she said. "I won't have anyone to talk to until someone else wakes up. If you're going upstairs, wake someone up. I can't sit here all alone. You're not really going away now, are you?"

"Yes," I said. "I may as well."

"I wish that people would look after me," she said. "No one ever seems to take care of me, and I take care of everyone, and I get tired of it sometimes."

My car was in a shed beside the barn. A heat wave shimmered from the twisted shingles of the barn roof and the building needed a coat of paint. A pair of swallows darted from the shed with low, resentful squeaks. They must have felt that the car would be there all day, presumably for their personal use. When I pressed the starter the engine turned, but nothing happened. A glance at the gasoline gauge told me why.

Out on the lawn near the garden a faint breeze, which passed through the trees, did not dispel the sultriness. Everything was very green—monotonously, luxuriantly green; everything stood in a gentle, reminiscent silence that rebuked me when I raised my voice and called for the boy who worked around the house in summer.

"Earle," I shouted, "Earle!"

The gangling form of Earle Caraway appeared. Earle was using part of his high school vacation to mow the lawns. The rest of his time was spent in studying dramatics from a correspondence course.

"What's happened to the gas in my car?" I asked. "It was half-full last night."

"Mr. Brill borrowed it," Earle said. "Say, Mr. Calder—"

"What?" I said. "The gas?"

"If you're going uptown, could you get me a copy of *True Romances,* Mr. Calder, and a chocolate nut bar?"

"How the hell can I get you a nut bar," I said, "when there isn't any gas?"

"Ain't there *any* gas?" said Earle. "Ain't there any gas at all? Mr. Sidney said he was leaving a little. He had a rubber tube in his car. He sucked it out. He got up early. He said he was going to lay on the beach."

"Oh, was he?" I said. "Well, how am I going to get out of here?"

"I guess you got to wait till Mr. Sidney gets back," said Earle. "I can't think of any way unless you want to walk two miles up to Kennedy's stand. Say, Mr. Calder—"

"What?" I said.

"Nobody's paid me yet."

"You ask Mrs. Wright about it," I said. Sometimes I almost forgot that Cousin Clothilde's second husband was Archie Wright, and that she was not still Mrs. Brill. Although she had married Archie Wright twenty years before, three years after Hugh Brill's death, it still did not seem like a definite marriage.

"I asked her," Earle said. "She just says to wait."

Josie was in the kitchen peeling potatoes. Josie and her daughter were our domestic staff. A large tortoise-shell cat, that looked as though a squash pie had splashed upon her, was nursing six kittens under the stove. An old setter was searching himself for fleas under the kitchen table.

"That poor boy, Mr. Calder!" Josie said. "He's been asking and asking for his money. He wants to go with Frieda to the beach. He asked Frieda last night to go to the

beach. I know he's been wanting to for weeks and weeks, Mr. Calder—and the Caraways are the nicest people. Earle's mother is a lovely lady. She's a member of the Woman's Club. Now I know dear Mrs. Wright has so many troubles, what with all the children here and everything, that she just doesn't think. I told Earle that he shouldn't pester dear Mrs. Wright. I'd be glad to give Earle something myself, but I spent it at the grocer's when we went downtown yesterday. Miss Brill—that is, Miss Bella—forgot her pocketbook."

Cousin Clothilde had moved to the back parlor. She was seated looking at a bunch of laurel leaves in the empty fireplace.

"So you're back," she said.

"Sid sucked all the gas out of my car," I said. "Why can't anybody buy gas except me?"

"He must have meant to leave *some*," Cousin Clothilde said. "Don't worry about it, dear. Sidney will be back with lots of gas. He asked me for my pocketbook before he went."

"Earle wants some money," I said. "He says he hasn't been paid for two weeks."

"I wish Earle wouldn't be a nuisance," Cousin Clothilde said. "Besides he doesn't do anything to deserve his wages. He just stands around looking at Josie's daughter, and he isn't very attractive. Do you think so?"

"I hadn't thought," I said.

"Darling," Cousin Clothilde said, "I'm so glad you don't have to go for a little while. Sit down and let me have a cigarette. Sidney will be back for lunch unless someone asks him to stay, and I depend on you so much. You're so much more reliable than all the others. Everybody seems to think that I have nothing to do but look after them. You're the only one who's ever looked after me. Have you a cigarette?"

"All right," I said, "I'll wait awhile, but I'm going to see Southby."

2. *"Fair Harvard, Thy Sons . . ."*

THE family had always gone to Harvard. Once when Sidney's older brother Harry was on the verge of being fired on account of his low marks, he wrote a letter to the Dean which began: "As one of the fifth generation of my family to have attended Harvard . . ." It was his conviction, shared by his mother. my Cousin Clothilde, that this reminder was all that had been necessary to permit him to remain. There was a definite belief in the Brill family that this accumulation of generations at Harvard had an automatic scholastic merit. It was as though the conscience-ridden shades of their ancestors could prod them onward without their own added effort, and this engendered a comfortable feeling that some ancestor would always do something around midyears to provide a flash of intuition in the purgatory of the examination room. That accumulation of scholastic forebears had been useful in later life, in that it gave them a sense of intellectual competence. With their attitude, and the help of conversation, they developed an atmosphere of erudition and of inherited intellectual gift.

There was our great-aunt Georgianna, who learned Greek at eighty and milked cows in the socialistic experiment at Brook Farm. The Brills' own great-grandfather had written a volume of reflections on his travels through Europe, which no one had ever read. And then of course there was their grandfather, the poet known as "the Wick-

ford Sage." Other members of the family also had been friends of intellectual figures in their different generations. In the suspicious environs of a town like Boston, where everyone is anxious to check on antecedents, it was commonly said that the Brills were interesting, that it was no wonder that they were brilliant. It made matters sensibly easier, even for me, although I was not a Brill. At any rate the family had gone to Harvard for five generations, and some of my own ancestors were in that company.

In spite of common sense, I leaned upon this thought, while I motored toward the residence of the Head of Martin House. Fiye generations of Southbys had not gone to Harvard and I am certain that Allen was aware of it.

When I was at Harvard it had been the fashion to live in ugly frame houses which lined the streets off Massachusetts Avenue, unless one had the money to live in a dormitory like Claverly. Some of us in our freshman year ate at Memorial Hall. We used to bang our glasses when visitors came to look at us from the balcony, and sometimes we had bread fights. Others preferred to eat in small cubbyholes in cellars that stayed open until all hours, like Butler's, and Jimmy's, and John's under the Lampoon building. It had not been healthy or desirable, but now that the entire academic scene had changed I did not feel at home. In the heat of the early summer evening the new buildings along the Charles were neither familiar nor sentimental objects. I had never understood why they were jammed so closely together, or why they had so many chimneys. The entries were like passages to a rabbit warren, but except for them everything was on a large scale. There was an effort to give the dignity of age to the woodwork. By a skillful treatment of the floors and walls clever decorators had simulated the imprint of centuries, but the illusion was incomplete. Somehow nothing is quite right when one suddenly spends ten million dollars.

The hallway of the Master's house looked to me so like something on the stage that

I should not have been surprised if a maid in a mobcap had let me in. In the study, where I saw Allen Southby, everything was pine, fine old pine which had come from all sorts of walls and attics fixed with hand-wrought nails. The trestle table had a top of fine old pine, but the legs were palpable fakes. The mantelpiece was fine old pine from Maine, scraped and oiled—"from the fine old Custer house at Wiscasset," Southby said.

The walls of that perfectly proportioned study were lined with books, old leather volumes, carefully oiled. In a corner was the dresser containing Allen's pewter. It displayed nearly all the implements of an antique household, except those of a more intimate nature. There was even a pewter candle-mold by the fireplace. I wondered how many times some caller had asked what it might be for, and I could hear Southby begging him to guess.

Allen Southby was in slacks and a silk shirt. He had discarded a greenish Harris tweed coat, because the weather was hot, but that informal attire gave an added impression of industry. His graying hair was just sufficiently rumpled; his tanned face had just the proper lines of frowning concentration. It was a fine face that went exactly with the room.

"You haven't seen it, have you, Jim?" Southby asked.

"Seen what?" I inquired.

"The room," Allen Southby said. "I think it's amusing, don't you? It's given me a lot of fun." He added that the superintendent of buildings and his sister Martha, who had come from Minnesota to keep house for him, had let him fix it up exactly as he wanted.

"You ought to have a spinning wheel," I said, "just over by the fire, so the flickering from the backlog would strike its spokes on a long winter evening."

"You really mean," said Allen, "that I ought to have a spinning wheel? Or are you simply trying to be funny?"

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Oh," said Allen, "you're trying to be