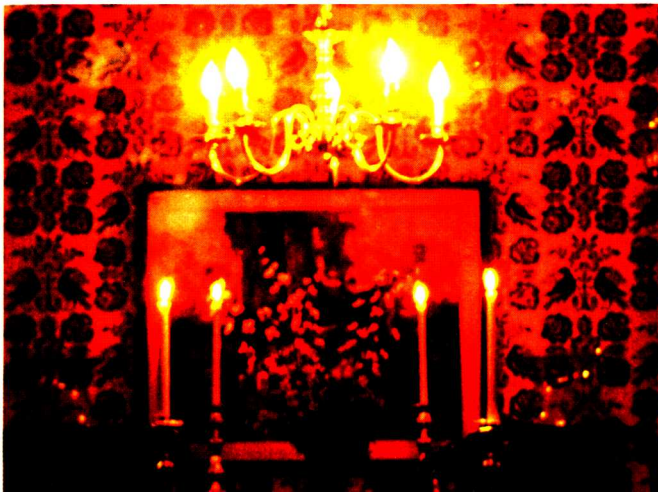


A NOVEL BY

HOWARD FAST

THE  
DINNER  
PARTY



H O W A R D F A S T

# *The Dinner Party*



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## ONE

Senator Richard Cromwell awakened, and with a sigh of resignation accepted the fact that it was five o'clock in the morning. He had not yet glanced at his music-first-tinkle-and-then-firm-alarm Japanese bedside clock, nor was it necessary. It was five o'clock. Senator Cromwell was fifty-seven years old, and ever since he had turned fifty-six he had awakened in the morning at five with a bursting bladder. He had mentioned this once to Dr. Gillespie at the club bar, and Gillespie had said, "Well, you're fifty-six, take it or leave it," whatever that meant. Stumbling sleepily into his bathroom and urinating, the senator recalled the brief passage with Gillespie and murmured, "Horse's ass." It was a cold summer morning. The senator closed the window and rolled back into bed.

The five o'clock awakening was not all negative. It gave him the right to a delicious half hour, warm and secure under the covers, with his mind free in the easy confusion of awakening. At first the senator tried to slip back into a pleasant dream he

had been having about a college play long ago, and in the dream playing the lead in some vaguely familiar plot. But the dream eluded him and faded, and the senator's thoughts returned to his present self. He began to weigh what he considered his good and bad aspects—aspects, not deeds, for where deeds were concerned he thought of himself as a pretty decent sort who did the best he could, which was not easy in these last years of the twentieth century. He would still be short of his seventy-fifth year when the century rolled to an end, and this turned his thoughts to the world that would follow, the world of the twenty-first century. Computers: he always fixed on computers when his mind wandered into the future—instruments he revered and hated. The computer world was a place where snotty kids knew everything and nothing.

In all truth, the plain fact was that he had two computers, one in his local office and another in his Washington office, neither of which ever felt the touch of his own hand. Having an army of help, any one of them only too eager to spring to the keyboard at his bidding, he simply refused to confront the machines. Not that the senator underrated the computer. The fact that within its electronic mind was stored the name and background of everyone who had ever contributed a dollar to one of his campaigns, chilled, rather than cheered, him. The computer was a part of a future cloudy, unpredictable and menacing.

Enough of such notions. The senator switched his thoughts to one Joan Herman, five feet eight inches, blue eyes, blonde hair, very nice even though her pubic hair was dark brown, one hundred and thirty pounds, and smart enough to be his personal secretary, and close-mouthed and pretty enough to be his mistress. Developing the mental image, he began to feel deliciously horny; and knowing that he faced an important and difficult day, he cut the dream short, rolled out of bed, and steeling himself with thoughts of some proud and manly

Roman senator of old, plunged into the bathroom and into a cold shower.

Agony and joy in his courage, as he bit his lips to keep from screaming with the shock. That was it: how many men of his age could roll out of a warm bed and into an icy shower? True that he took only thirty seconds of it, but how long is a second when you're under an icy cascade? Fine, stimulating thoughts. Although he was fifty-seven, he didn't feel it; he felt like a twenty-seven-year-old as he rubbed himself down. Life had become easier, healthier, and certainly more productive since he and his wife, Dorothy, had accepted the reality of separate bedrooms.

It was not yet six o'clock, the sun just blinking at the trees on the other side of the horse meadow as the senator finished shaving. He had decided to run, and he pulled on a comfortable old sweat suit and a pair of sneakers. He never could adapt to the new running shoes that the kids used, nor did he feel any need for them. He didn't jog; he damnwell ran, while most of his peers shuffled across the golf course.

It occurred to the senator, as he walked through the quiet house, through living room and dining room and pantry into the kitchen, and then into the garage, that when people slept, the house slept. He marked that as an interesting thought, possibly something that could be worked into a speech one day.

"At least sometimes I try to be original."

His two-door Mercedes was in the farthest stall of the four-car garage, and that was good. He could slip off without waking anyone else now at ten minutes to six, and that eased the small guilt he felt—although why he should feel guilt when all he intended was to run one mile on the high school track, was an interesting question.

He refused to probe for what else was on his mind. "Only running, nothing else," he told himself as he touched the button that raised the garage door. "Only running."

Truth was that he had almost decided to give up running. "In fact," Dr. Gillespie had warned him, "you're pitting your strength against your condition. You're a strong man, football in college and all the other memories of what your body did at that time, but now you're thirty pounds overweight and you run ten times during the summer, and sit on your ass ten months of the year."

It was six miles to the high school running track, and after the first mile the senator had done away with Gillespie, and turned his thoughts to the dinner party this evening. Tracy Youman, the third most important hostess in Washington, had once remarked to him that a proper and successful dinner party was a work of art. "It has always been that," Mrs. Youman explained, "as long as civilization has been around, but most hostesses don't give a moment's thought to the dinner party as an art form."

Richard Cromwell had tried to pass that along to his wife one day, and she had responded by snorting that the last person to offer anyone advice on any art form was that "vulgar bitch, Tracy Youman." At least "snorting" was the word the senator used when he passed Dorothy's response on to Joan, who for all her ill will toward Dorothy, could not picture her snorting. Dorothy was about five feet and five inches, round faced with gray hair and green eyes, doll-like even now in her forty-fifth year, and gentle of voice.

Well, he could be sure of one thing, the food and the service would be excellent. Dorothy would see to that.

It was ten minutes after six when the senator pulled into the parking lot at the high school. His was the only car present. There were at least a dozen early morning runners, but the earliest would not arrive before a quarter to seven, something that pleased the senator. It pleased him to be the first. It pleased him to start his run alone, and it pleased him to see the old red brick buildings of the school as his backdrop.

Beyond this, he would have been enormously pleased if the throng of boys and girls who inhabited the school during the winter months could have come pouring in, later to tell their parents that they had seen Senator Cromwell, in an old sweat shirt, just like anyone else, running the track. That would have connected. He frequently harped on the art of connection with his staff; connect, make ropes that bind you to the people. In his fantasy, he accepted the fact that he would have to begin his run about three hours later in the day. He could easily adapt to that—but since it was summer, no amount of adaptation could fill the empty high school.

He ran for fifteen minutes, at least a mile and a half as he calculated, and then breathing hoarsely and sweating, he dried himself as well as he could. A gently warming shower would have been the right thing now, but the school was closed and the town would not pay a custodian to keep the place open for those who used the track and football field. Actually, he was not much bothered by the film of perspiration that covered his body under the workout suit. The soft cotton lining reminded him of the sweat shirts that were once *de rigueur* for every kid in athletics; but that was a long time ago, and when he had tried to buy an old-fashioned sweat shirt recently, he could locate only a modern imitation, thin as paper.

He climbed into his two-seater and relaxed gratefully. Gillespie be damned; the senator felt good, and relaxing now in his car, he saw the first of the runners drive in, park, and climb out to begin the run. Johnny-come-lately. He was beginning to feel a subtle warmth of horniness again, and he picked up his car phone and called Joan. She answered fuzzily: "My God, Senator, do you know what time it is?" She always called him "Senator." That had been agreed upon, even when they were alone, so that there could be no slip into overheard intimacy.

"Six-forty," he said cheerfully.

"I watched a damn late show. I didn't fall asleep until one."

Her voice came alive as she spoke. She had a rich, low voice, one of the things he liked about her. Whoever called, her voice on the phone mollified and soothed. This is no cheap fling, the senator had told himself, not once but fifty times. This is a damn wonderful woman.

"Well, I'm up," she said. "Where are you—in bed?"

"No way, Miss Herman. I am not in bed. I have shaved, showered, and run my mile and a half, and right now I'm sitting in the two-seater at the high school parking lot. How about that?"

"It sounds dreadful, so it must be virtuous. Come on over."

"Oh, how I would love to. Can't. This is a difficult day, and I must show for breakfast."

"Ah, well, so it goes. Anyway, the place is a mess and I don't think there's an egg in the fridge. I hate this apartment." Her home place was in Washington. Her father had been a rather highly placed bureaucrat in the Treasury Department, and she had been born and raised in Georgetown. This small apartment in the senator's home town was a necessary convenience, both for business and pleasure. Miss Herman, who was thirty-three years old, had been married and divorced twice, and both the senator and Miss Herman knew that she would not marry again unless it was to become Mrs. Richard Cromwell.

The barrier to that end was not Dorothy Cromwell, but the senator. He dreamed dreams. "Do you know," he said to Joan once, "no one wanted a divorce more than Jack Kennedy. It might have given him the kind of contentment that never existed in his life, but the way I hear it, Pope John said to him, you will not divorce and you will be president."

But today, driving back to his home, the recollection was of small comfort to Richard Cromwell. He drove slowly, pas-

sion and zest melted, leaving him with a small stinging pain in his chest, which he brushed aside as morning gas. He worked on his recollection, justifying himself with memories of Kennedy. God, he had loved Jack Kennedy, and now the bastards were hanging the Vietnam War on him. *Instead of a cross, the albatross about his neck was hung*, instead of a cross, Vietnam about his neck was hung—but he couldn't think of the title. Scraps and bits of poetry floated through his mind. It was more than thirty years since he had opened a book of poetry. Dorothy reacted to poetry. *Leave thy father, leave thy mother, leave the black tents of thy tribe apart? Am I not thy father and thy mother, and what need bath thou of their black tents who bath the red pavilion of my heart?* How would Joan react to that? Dumb astonishment, probably. "Senator, are you feeling well?" She'd be justified. Why on earth had he resurrected that sophomoric chant? The red pavilion of my heart. Oh, Jesus, he was doing the mental handsprings of some thirty-year-old yuppie sex jockey, and it was not him. He didn't sleep around, and alongside some of his colleagues he was close to being a monk, so why was he engaging in this mental guilt whipping?

He was home now, around on the driveway to the rear of the house, where the four-car garage bordered on Dorothy's vegetable garden. A month or so ago, an interviewer had scratched around among the local real estate people and learned that the senator had refused an offer of two and a half million dollars for his house and the five acres of lawn and plantings and swimming pool and tennis court that went with it; and as a result of this, Cromwell had spent an extra hour talking the magazine writer out of printing it. He pleaded that when his mother-in-law built the house, or rebuilt it more properly, it had cost less than fifty thousand dollars, and that it was really his wife's house, not his, and that he was not to blame for the years of inflation that fol-

lowed, and that he actually did not live in a two-million-dollar house. He won his point and the worth of his house remained unrevealed, and in any case, the man who had made the offer to buy had been a Texan, which put the price in a special category.

Nevertheless, he lived well. The car alongside of his in the garage was a chauffeur Cadillac; and on the other side of the Cadillac, a Buick Executive station wagon; and after that, Dorothy's four-door Volvo. Outside the garage, three more cars, a Datsun pickup, which Baron MacKenzie, chauffeur, gardener, and man about the place, drove; an ancient Volkswagen which his son, Leonard, would not part with; and the old Ford driven by his daughter, Elizabeth. Seven cars in all, and if another nosy newspaper man had scratched around the way the magazine writer did, he might have wondered how a United States senator could run the place on a salary of seventy-five thousand dollars a year. Strangely, for reasons the senator did not fully understand, nobody ever remarked on this; and even if they had, the senator bore no guilt. He had married a very wealthy woman. Others had done the same. It was respectable and even admirable in his circles, since more and more men in politics were not of the old Eastern establishment and thus faced the necessity of building their own class position in a society where rich was admirable and poor was unenviable. Still and all, most voters were far from rich, and a senator needed voters. Wealth would not make them mistrustful, only envious, and envy was not the best vote-getter.

The senator sighed, accepted the fleet of cars without further mental demur or internal conversation, and walked into his house.



## T W O

**B**aron MacKenzie set his alarm for half past six each morning, but this time he was awake a few minutes before the alarm sounded, and he reached out and turned it off.

"You don't have to do that," his wife, Ellen, said. "I'm awake."

"The best few minutes are right now," MacKenzie said, pressing his face into his wife's warm bosom. He was a big man, and the only way he could keep all of him in the bed was to sleep on the bias.

"I'll be on the floor in two minutes," his wife complained. "I am not a linebacker."

"You want to be rid of me, presto, you are rid of me." He rolled out of bed and made his way into the bathroom. The servants' quarters were pleasant enough, including their own bath and shower and a small sitting room, which contained armchairs, couch and television, as well as a wall of shelves for their and their kids' books. They used to have a

second bedroom, where their daughter, Abbey, slept. Their son, Mason, had slept in the sitting room, where the couch opened into a bed. But now both kids were gone, and Nellie Clough, the white housemaid, slept in what had been Abbey's room.

The MacKenzies' quarters were comfortable enough, certainly miles better than the bedbug-infested flat in East Harlem where they had spent the first five years of their marriage before they gave up the struggle to raise two kids in New York, bought a stack of out-of-town papers, and eventually answered Dorothy Cromwell's ad. That was twenty-three years ago. "Nevertheless," MacKenzie said, coming out of the bathroom, "it gets to me. We are servants. We have spent our lives as servants. Every time I stand in front of the mirror and shave this ugly face of mine, it gets to me. I am no goddamn cotton-picking sharecropper. I am a high school graduate and a trade school graduate. I am a first-rate mechanic and machinist—"

"Stop it!" Ellen snapped at him. "I been hearing that sad litany too damn long. I tell myself he's a nigger and he got the right to sing the blues. But enough is enough."

"Now don't you ever use that word 'nigger' at me. Never. Never. Never."

"I will use what I want to use. Tell you something, Mac, and this is the last time I got to squeeze it into your dumb black head. We busted the system, busted it wide open. We got us a job where we could put away better than half of what we earned, and that's the only job that could do it for us, and we got a daughter who is a pharmacist and who is married to a pharmacist, and they got their own store, and we got a son who is interning in one of the best hospitals in this state, and that, you poor dumbbell, is revenge enough to cover at least a dozen of them nigger-hating Dixie states—"

He fell into bed and put his arms around her. "Shut up. You

are too smart. I should have never married a smartass fox like you."

"I can just imagine what you would have married if I hadn't got there first." She pushed him away. "Just stop that. I am not going to drag my ass around all day."

"I got a date for tonight?"

"Nighttime is a proper time. You're too old to be so horny."

"Oh? It's supposed to wear off?"

"Come on, Mac. We got us a large day. We got that big dinner party tonight. You got to pick up her folks at the airport, and then you got to do the silver, and I still have three meals to get out. So just pick yourself up out of this bed and get dressed."

MacKenzie sighed, rolled out of bed, pulled off his pajama top and then peered out of the window as the two-seater drove into the garage.

"Who is that at this hour?" Ellen wondered.

"The senator. Been out running, I suppose."



### THREE

**D**olly," they called her, everyone, and that was possibly because she had never liked the name Dorothy. Dolly suited her. She weighed only a hundred and twenty-two pounds, yet she gave the impression of being plump, perhaps because of her broad hips and round face. Since college, Sarah Lawrence in her case, she had worn her hair in a pageboy bob with bangs across the front. A very small nose made her face quite pretty, and her hair, which had once been black, was now at age forty-five iron gray, contrasting pleasantly with her pretty and unwrinkled face. She was one of those women who expressed authority without irritation, and who appeared usually to be poised and content.

On this morning, Dolly had set her alarm for six forty-five, and she had already showered when the senator drove in. Her bathroom faced the front of the house, and she saw his sleek little Mercedes swoop down the driveway and around to the back. She guessed that he had been out running, and as always

his energy and determination amazed her. His determination was like his ambition, boundless—as, for example, in his approach to baldness. He had begun to lose his hair in his late forties, and he immediately started the process of having patches from various hairy parts of his body surgically transferred to his scalp. It had worked quite well, and now he had a proper head of white hair, befitting a United States Senator. Perhaps she was amazed because she had so little of what she thought of as ambition. She had never considered her fight to exist as a woman a manifestation of ambition.

She almost never wore make-up during the day, thankful that her skin remained good and healthy, and even more grateful for the fact that she could put herself together in a few minutes. On this day a shower, a toothbrush, and a comb through her hair did it. She then slipped into a blouse and skirt, and ran down the steps and outside to get a breath of the cool morning air before it turned warm, or hot and muggy if this were to be an uncomfortable summer day. But it had begun as a glorious morning. Dolly took such weather as a gift, and she whispered aloud, “Oh, I do feel enriched—so enriched.” She walked the length of the long driveway and back, not as exercise but because she had no appetite for breakfast unless she had used her body first.

Ellen MacKenzie had put up the coffee pot, and the aromatic smell filled the big kitchen. She was cutting bread for toast; Dolly would have no presliced bread in her house.

“I’ll set the table on the terrace,” Ellen said. “It’s warm enough, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, just right. And don’t let the kids drive you crazy.”

“No, ma’am. No way.”

“Did the meat come?”

“Yesterday. I put it in the big fridge in the pantry.”

Turning to the pantry, Dolly said, “I do hope he sent us four small legs, properly filleted and dressed.” Ellen stared

after her, puzzled, as Dolly opened a door of the big refrigerator, bent down, and confronted an enormous fresh ham.

"Mistake," she said. "Ellen, he sent us the wrong meat. Did you tell him exactly what I wanted, four small legs of lamb, filleted and dressed?"

Ellen sighed and shook her head. "I do hate to get into the middle of things and I should have asked you; but the senator said that you knew about the fresh pork."

Damn liar, she left unsaid. You did not call your husband a liar in front of your housekeeper. "He asked for it?"

"Yes—yes, he did. Do you want me to call the butcher?"

"No, he won't deliver today. I'll run over there myself. Just pour me a cup of coffee. That's all I want, and find a big bag or something that we can put the ham in."

The ham was heavy, at least fourteen pounds, and as she stepped out of the back door, MacKenzie appeared and took her package.

"It weighs like a sack of potatoes."

"It's a fresh ham."

"Don't see many of those these days. I do love fresh ham."

"It's going back."

"Oh? Do you want me to take it to town."

"No, I'll do that myself."

Dolly took the Buick station wagon. The senator made few public appearances in the Mercedes; his public image sat better in the Buick though he would not have complained had Dolly taken the two-seater. She had no feelings about a German car, but her father, who had been an infantry officer in the Seventh Army in World War II, detested the car enough for her to shy away from it. She never understood why she had to please her father when he was not there to be pleased, she simply accepted it as one of her minor quirks. Anyway, the fact that it was so definitely the senator's car and not the family's made her uneasy the few times she had driven it.