



CLASSICS TO GO

A MAN OBSESSED

ALAN EDWARD NOURSE

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Alan Edward Nourse

About the author:

Born in Des Moines, Iowa, and currently studying for his doctorate in medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, Alan E. Nourse has managed in between to make himself a high rating as a science-fiction author. His stories have appeared in every leading fantasy magazine and many anthologies. A MAN OBSESSED, his latest work, will be his third novel to see book publication. Concerning it, he says;

"The idea was drawn from my experience in minor grade medical guinea-pigging which I as a medical student have done from time to time. The Hoffman Medical Center, originally conceived as a likely development in the future of medical treatment and research, is not modeled on any existing organization. Medical mercenary work does, however, exist at the present time for testing new drugs, studying physiological effects, and in some cases testing rather dangerous procedures. Cash is paid for participation, and certain groups of experiments have become very popular among medical students as a source of very easy, if slightly risky, income."

HE HUNTED HORROR THROUGH A MANIAC WORLD!

Jeffrey Meyer had a killing on his mind. It meant nothing to him that his towering Twenty-first Century world was going mad. He shouldered aside the rising tide of narcotics-mania, the gambling fever, the insatiable lust for the irrational. Jeff had his own all-consuming obsession—Paul Conroe must die!

After a five-year frenzied chase, Jeff had his victim cornered; he'd driven him into the last hideaway of the world's most desperate men—the sealed vaults of the human-vivisectionists. And Jeff knew that to reach his final horrible objective, he must offer himself also as a guinea pig for the secret experiments of the world's most feared physicians!

Alan E. Nourse's new novel *A MAN OBSESSED* has the impact of Orwell's *1984* and the imaginative vigor of Huxley's *Brave New World*.

CHAPTER ONE

Jeffrey Meyer sat back in his chair and waited. He could hardly breathe in the stifling air of the place. His hand clenched his glass until the knuckles were white, and his lip curled slightly as he watched the crowd around him. His whole body was tense. His legs, knotted tightly under the seat, were ready to move in an instant, and his eyes roved from the front to the back of the place. They were pale gray eyes that were never still—moving, watching, waiting. He had waited for so long, waited and hunted with bitter patience. But now he knew the long wait was drawing to a close. He knew that Conroe was coming and the trap was set.

For the thousandth time that evening, a shiver of chilly pleasure passed through him at the thought. He squirmed in eagerness, hardly daring to breathe. With his free hand he caressed the cool plastic handle of the gun that was close to his side, and a tight smile appeared on his thin lips. Conroe was coming ... at last ... at last.... And tonight he would kill Conroe.

The place was a madhouse around him. In the front of the room, by the street door, was a long horseshoe bar. It was already crowded by the early revelers. A screechie in the corner blatted out the tinny, nervous music that had recently become so popular, and a loud, hysterical burst of feminine laughter echoed to the back of the room.

Jeff Meyer rubbed his eyes, smarting from the bluish haze filling the long, low-ceilinged room. The unhealthy laughter broke out again, and someone burst into a bellow of song, half giggle, half noise.

At the adjoining table an alky-siky stirred, muttered something unintelligible and returned his nose sadly to his glass. Jeff's eyes flicked over the man with distaste. The scrawny neck, the sagging jaw, the idiotic, almost unearthly expression of intent listening on the vapid face: a typical picture of the type. Jeff watched him for a moment in disgust, then moved his eyes on, still watching as a flicker of apprehension passed through his mind.

A girl, quite naked except for the tray slung at her waist, strolled by his table, wagging her hips and turning on her heaviest personality smile.

"Drive a nail, mister?"

"Beat it."

The smile cooled slightly on the girl's lips. "Just askin'," she whined. "You don't have to get—"

"Beat it!" Jeff shot her a venomous look, trying frantically to keep his attention from straying from the front of the room. It would be too much to slip up now, more than he could stand to make a mistake like the last time.

The trap was perfect. It *couldn't* fail this time. Each step of the way had been carefully sketched, plotted through long sleepless nights of conference and planning. They couldn't have hunted a man like Conroe all these years without learning something about him—about his personality, about the things he liked and disliked, the things he did, the places he frequented, the friends he made.

Last time, after Jeff's own blundering error had allowed him to slip through the net at the last frantic minute, there seemed to be no hope. Everything seemed all the more hopeless when the man had disappeared as completely as if he were dead. But then they had found the girl—the key to his hiding place. She had formed the top link in the long, meticulous chain which had been drawn tighter each day,

drawing Paul Conroe at last closer and closer to the hands of the man who was going to kill him. And now the trap was set; there could be no slip this time. There might never be another chance.

The street door opened sharply, and a short, bull-necked man with sandy hair walked in. He was followed by two other men in neat business suits. The first man stepped quickly to the bar, shouldering his way through the crowd, and stood sipping beer for several minutes. He glanced closely at the people around the bar and the surrounding tables before he walked toward the back and seated himself next to Meyer. Looking at Jeff with an indefinable expression, he finished his beer at a gulp and set the glass down on the table top with a snap.

"What's up?" Jeff said hoarsely.

"Something's funny." The sandy-haired man's voice was a smooth bass, and a frown appeared on his pink forehead. "He should have been here by now. He left the hotel over in Camden-town an hour ago, private three-wheeler, and he headed for here."

Jeff leaned forward, his face going white. "You've got somebody on him?"

"Yes, yes, of course." The man's voice was sharp, and there were tired lines around his eyes. "Take it easy, Jeff. You wouldn't be able to get him if he did come in—the way you are. He'd spot you in two seconds."

Jeff's hand trembled as he gripped his glass, and he settled tensely back in his chair. "It can't go wrong, Ted. It's got to come off."

"It should. The girl is here and she got word from him last night."

"Can she be trusted?"

The sandy-haired man shrugged. "Don't be silly. In this game, nobody can be trusted. If she's scared enough, she'll play along—okay? We've done our best to scare her. We've scared the hell out of her. Maybe she's more scared of Conroe—I don't know. But it looks cold to me. On a platter. So get a grip on yourself."

"It's got to come off." Jeff growled the words savagely, and drained his glass at a gulp. The sandy-haired man blinked, his pale little eyes curious. He leaned back thoughtfully. "Suppose it doesn't, Jeff? Suppose something goes wrong? Then what?"

Jeff's heavy hand caught the man's wrist in a grip that was like a vise. "You don't talk like that," he grated. "Your men I don't mind, but not you—understand? It can't go wrong. That's all there is to it. No if's, no maybe's. You got that now?"

Ted rubbed his wrist, his face red. "All right," he muttered. "So it can't go wrong. So I shouldn't talk, I shouldn't ask questions. But if it does go wrong, you're going to be dead. Do you know that? Because you're killing yourself with this —" He sighed, staring at Meyer. "What's it worth, Jeff? This constant tearing yourself apart? You've been obsessed with it for years. I know, I've been working with you and watching you for the last five of them—five long years of hunting. And for what? To get a man and kill him. That's all. What's it worth?"

Jeff took a deep breath and took a pack of cigarettes from his jacket. "Drive a nail," he said, offering the pack. "And don't worry about me. Worry about Conroe. He's the one who'll be dead."

Ted shrugged and took the smoke. "Okay. But if this blows up, I'm through. Because this is all I can take."

"Nothing will blow up. I'll get him. If I don't get him now, I'll get him the next time, or the next, or the next. With or without you, I'll get him." Jeff took a trembling breath, his gray eyes cold under heavy black brows. "But there hadn't better be any next time."

He sat back in his chair, his face falling into the lines so familiar to Ted Bahr. Jeff Meyer had been a handsome man, before the long years of hate had done their work on his face. He was a huge, powerfully built man, heavy-shouldered, with a strong neck and straight nose, and a shock of jet black hair, neatly clipped. Only his face showed the bitterness of the past five years—years filled with anger and hatred, and a growing savagery which had driven the man almost to the breaking point.

The lines about his eyes and mouth were cruel—heavy lines that had been carved deeply and indelibly into the strong face, giving it a harsh, almost brutal cast in the dim light of the bistro. He breathed regularly and slowly as he sat, but his pale eyes were ice-hard as they moved slowly across the little show floor. They took in every face, every movement in the growing throng.

He was out of place and he knew it. He had no use for the giddy, half-hysterical people who crowded these smoke-filled holes night after night. They came in droves from the heart of the city to drink the watery gin and puff frantically on the contraband cigarettes as they tried desperately to drive off the steam and pressure of their daily lives.

Meyer hated the smell and stuffiness of the place; he hated the loud screams of laughter, the idiotic giggles; he hated the blubbering alky-sikys who crowded the bars with their whisky and their strange, unearthly dream-worlds. Above all, he hated the horrible, resounding artificiality, the brassiness and clanging noise of the crowd. His skin crawled. He knew that he couldn't possibly disappear into

such a crowd, that he was as obvious, sitting there, as if he had been painted with red polka dots. And he knew that if Conroe spotted him a second before he spotted Conroe—He eased back in the chair and fought for control of his trembling hands.

The lights dimmed suddenly and a huge red spotlight caught the curtain at the back of the show floor. Jeff heard Bahr catch his breath for a moment, then let out a small, uneasy sigh. The crowd hushed as the girl parted the curtains and stepped out onto the middle of the floor, to a fanfare of tinny music. Jeff's eyes widened as they followed her to the center of the red light.

"That's her."

Jeff glanced sharply at Bahr. "The girl? She's the one?"

Bahr nodded. "Conroe knows how to pick them. He's supposed to meet her later. This is her first show for the evening. Then she has another at ten and another at two. He's supposed to take her home." He glanced around the room carefully. "Watch yourself," he muttered, and silently slipped away from the table.

The girl was nervous. Jeff sat close enough to see the fear in her face as she whirled around the floor. The music had shifted into a slow throbbing undertone, as she started to dance. She moved slowly, circling the floor. Her hair was long and black, flowing around her shoulders, and her body moved with carefully calculated grace to the music. But there was fear in her face as she whirled, and her eyes sought the faces on the fringe of the circle.

The music quickened imperceptibly and Jeff felt a chill run up his spine. The upper part of the shimmering gown slipped from the girl's shoulders, and slowly the tempo of the dance began to change from the stately rhythm it had a moment before. The throb of the music became hypnotic,

moving faster and faster. Jeff's hands trembled as he tried to draw his eyes away from the undulating figure. There had been nothing to mark the change, but suddenly the dance had become obscene as the music rose—so viciously obscene that Jeff nearly gagged.

He felt the tension in the crowd around him. He heard their breathing rise, felt the desperate eagerness in their hard, bright eyes as they watched. The nervousness had left the girl's face. She had forgotten her fear, and a little smile appeared on her face as her body moved in abandon to the quickening beat.

Slowly she moved toward the tables, and the spotlight followed her, playing tricks with her hair and gown, concealing and revealing, twisting and swaying.... Jeff felt his body freeze. He fought to move, fought to take his eyes from the writhing figure as she drew closer and closer—

And then she was among the people, moving from table to table, never slowing her motion, graceful as a cat, twisting and twirling in the flickering red light. In and out she moved until she reached Jeff's table, her face inscrutable—a peacefully smiling mask. With amazing grace she leaped up on the table top and gave Jeff's glass a kick that sent it spinning onto the floor with a crash. And then the red light hit him full in the face—

"Get out of the light!"

Like a cat he threw his chair back and struck the girl, knocking her from the table. Someone screamed and the light swung to the girl, then back to him. The table went over. He rolled out of the light, twisting and fighting through the stunned and screaming crowd. His gun was in his hand, and he frantically searched the shouting room with his eyes.

"Get him! There he goes!"

He heard Bahr's voice roar from the side of the room. Jeff swung sharply to the sound of the voice. He saw the tall, slender figure crouched with his back to the bar, eyes wide with fear and desperation. There was no mistaking the face, the hollow cheeks and the high forehead, the graying hair. It was the face he had seen in his dreams, the twisted lips, the evil, ghoulish face of the man he had hunted to the ends of the earth. For a fraction of a second he saw Paul Conroe, crouched at bay, and then the figure was gone, twisting through the crowd toward the door—

"Stop him!" Jeff swung savagely into the crowd, screaming at Bahr across the room. "He's heading for the street! Get him!" The gun kicked sharply against his hand as he fired at the moving head. Rising for an instant, it disappeared again into the sea of heads. A scream rose at the shot. Women dropped to the floor, glasses crashed, tables went over. Someone clawed ineffectually for Jeff's leg. Then, abruptly, the lights went out and there was another scream.

"The door, the door—Don't let him get out—"

Jeff plunged to the side of the room, wrenched open the emergency exit and plunged down the dark, narrow walkway to the street. He heard shots as he ran. Turning the corner of the building, he saw the tall figure running pell-mell down the wet street.

"There he goes! Get him!"

Ted Bahr hung from the door. He gasped as he held his side, his face twisted in pain. "He hit me," he panted. "He's broken away—" A jet car slid from the curb and whined down the street toward the fleeing figure. "He can't make it—I've got men on every corner in cars. They'll get him, drive him back—"

"But where's he going?" A sob of rage choked Jeff's voice. "She sold us out, the bitch. She fingered me when she saw

him come in—" His whole body trembled and the words tumbled out, almost incoherent. "But he must know the streets are blocked. Where's he running?"

"You think I'm a mind reader? I don't know. There are no open buildings in the whole block but this place and the Hoffman Center. He can't go anywhere else and he can't get out of the block. We've got every escapeway sewed up tight. He'll have to come back here or be shot down out there."

They watched the gloomy street, tears of rage in Jeff's eyes. His hands shook uncontrollably and his shoulders sagged in exhaustion and defeat. The tavern door had burst open and people were crowding out. Jeff and Ted Bahr moved back into the shadows of the alleyway and waited and listened.

"There's got to be a shot!" Jeff burst out. "He couldn't have slipped through." He turned to Bahr frantically. "Could he have gone into the Center?"

"On what pretense? They'd throw him to the Mercy Men—or the booby hatch, one or the other. He'd know better than to try." The sandy-haired man sank down on his haunches and gripped his side tightly. "He'll be back or we'll hear the shooting. He couldn't have slipped through."

A three-wheeled jet car slid in to the curb, and a man came up to them, eyes wide. "Get him?"

Bahr scowled. "No sign. How about the other boys?"

The man blinked. "Not a whisper. He never reached the end of the block."

"Did you check with Klett and Barker?"

"They haven't seen a soul down here."

Bahr glanced at Jeff sharply. "How about the streets behind? Any chance of a breakthrough there?"

The man's voice was matter-of-fact. "It's airtight. He couldn't get through without somebody seeing him." He stepped back to the car and spoke rapidly into the talker for a moment or two. "Nothing yet."

"Damn. How about Howie and the boys inside the place?"

"Nothing from them either."

Jeff's face darkened. "The Hoffman Center," he said slowly. "He got into the Center, somehow. He must have."

"He'd have to have gilt-edged medical credentials to get in after hours. They don't mess around over there. And what would it gain him?"

Jeff peered at Bahr in the darkness. "Maybe he wanted to be thrown to the Mercy Men. Maybe he's figured that as a last resort, he'll go in and volunteer, make a stab at the Big Cash."

Bahr stared at the big man in horror. "Look—Conroe may be desperate, but he hasn't lost his mind. My God, man! He isn't crazy."

"But he's scared."

"Of course he's scared, but—"

"How scared?"

Bahr shrugged angrily. "He'd have to be on his last legs to take a gamble like that."

"But they'd take him. They wouldn't ask any questions. They'd swallow him up; *they'd hide him*, whether they knew it or not." Jeff's voice rose in excitement. "Look. We've hunted him down for years. We've never rested; we've never quit. He knows that and he knows why. He knows me. He knows I'm not going to quit until I get him. And he knows I will get him, sooner or later. I'm cutting too close; I'm undermining his friends; I'm always moving closer.

Everywhere he goes, everything he does, I'm onto him. And he knows when I do get him, he's going to die. What does that add up to?"

Bahr blinked in silence. Jeff's face hardened. "Well, I'll tell you what it adds up to. A man can take just so much. He can slide and twist and hide and keep moving just so long. Then he finds there aren't any more hiding places. But there's one last place a man can go to hide—if he's really at the end of his tether—and that's the Mercy Men. Because there he could vanish as though he'd never existed."

Ted Bahr carefully lit a smoke. "If that's where he went, we're through, Jeff. We'll never get him. We don't even need to worry about trying. Because if he's gone there, he'll never come out again."

"Some of them do."

Bahr grunted. "One in a million, maybe. The odds are so heavy that there's no sense thinking about it. If Paul Conroe has gone to the Mercy Men, then he's dead. And that is that."

Jeff returned his weapon to his pocket sharply and walked out to the car at the curb. "Keep your men where they are," he said to Bahr. "Keep them there for the rest of the night. If he's found a loophole, I want to know it. If he's hidden in the buildings, he'll have to come out sometime. Get some men to search the roofs, and you and I can start on the alleyways. If he's out there, we'll get him." He straightened his shoulders and the sullen fire was back in his eyes—an angry, bitter fire. "And if he's gone into the Center, we'll still get him."

Bahr's eyes were wide. "He'll never come out if he's gone where you think, Jeff. We could wait weeks or months, even years, and we still wouldn't know. Even if he did come out, we might never recognize him."