FOUL PLAY & CABERNET

A MYSTERY JIGSAW THRILLER WITH A SECRET PUZZLE IMAGE

STORY BY HENRY SLESAR
Under the benevolent sun of the Napa Valley, in the tiny vineyard of BloomField, the black grapes known as Cabernet Sauvignon were growing plump and full of promise. But something else was growing in the partnership of Harry Bloom and Ernie Field, and that something was sour grapes.

Harry was a big man, built like a 60-gallon vat, and he had been dedicated to the art of viticulture since he was tall enough to reach his first cluster of grapes. He had walked these fields beside his father, Rollie Bloom, a man who had single-handedly created The Bloom Winery and made the Bloom name glow with pride on every bottle.

Then one day, the sun disappeared from Harry Bloom’s skies. An enormous tun, containing ten thousand liters of new wine, fell from a wagon and ended his father’s life. A year later, Harry’s heartbroken mother died. Harry was left alone—with his regrets and his grapes.

It was a lonely life for Harry Bloom. Loneliness put an edge on his temper, and his temper put an end to his friendships. His lack of friends led to a decline in his fortunes. And as he approached fifty, Harry Bloom faced bachelorhood, boredom, and bankruptcy.

Then Ernie Field arrived.

Harry would always remember that bright red MG convertible turning into his driveway, and the two passengers who climbed out. Both were exactly the same size, but one was a lovely woman with wild, curly, brunette hair, the other a dapper man of forty-odd with a bald head that gleamed in the afternoon sun.

“Field’s the name,” he said. “And wine is the game.”

“If you’re here to sell me something,” Harry Bloom grunted. “You’ve come to the wrong doorstep.”

“No here to sell,” the little man beamed. “I’m here to buy! And I don’t mean a few bottles. I’m talking about the whole vineyard!”

It hadn’t been the first time Harry had been solicited by a would-be purchaser. In the Valley, “heard it on the grapevine” was a literal truth—and everyone knew that Harry was struggling. He had resisted every offer, because no amount of money could compensate him for the loss of the place he called home.

But Ernie Field had a different kind of proposition.

“I don’t want to buy you out,” he said, slipping his arm around the waist of the woman he introduced as both his bookkeeper and his wife. “I want you as a partner. I don’t know the first thing about wine, except how to drink it! Can we talk?”

They talked. And three bottles later, Ernie Field cut a six-figure check that made Harry’s eyes bulge. In truth, Harry’s eyes were already bulging at the sight of Darleen Field at the other end of the kitchen table.

A week later, the Fields had moved into the main house, appropriating the best wing for themselves. That was when Harry began to have qualms. Giant-size qualms.

Despite claiming no knowledge of the winemaker’s art, Ernie Field had many “opinions.”
"In my opinion," Field said, "we should change our label to reflect the new ownership. 'Field and Bloom sounds pretty good to me."

"These wines are named after my father," Harry said stiffly. "The Bloom name stays."

"All right," his new partner smiled. "Bloom and Field, no, BloomField."

"In my opinion," he said the next day, "we're aging this stuff too long. People who buy wine in our price range aren't that smart..."

"We'll age the way we always have," Harry said, even more stiffly.

"In my opinion," Field said as they examined the property, "we ought to clean up around here. Like that old, damp cellar, for instance."

Harry glowered at this. The "old cellar" had been his father's own sanctum, a place where he could escape the world and dream of the past and future. In that cellar, Rollie Bloom had kept one of each of the original vats of his best vintage years, carefully marking each one to remind him of past glories. To this day, in his memory, Harry kept those old vats filled, decanting his finest product into each one. He knew it was the kind of shrine that would please his father the most.

"The old cellar stays just the way it is," Harry grunted.

At first, Ernie Field seemed to accept Harry's authority good-naturedly. But little by little, things began to change at the BloomField Winery.

One day, Harry learned that Ernie, without consulting him, had sold several dozen old oak casks to a neighboring vintner. When he demanded an explanation, Ernie smiled.

"They were too old Harry," he said. "We don't want our wine to have the taste of wood, do we?"

"You said you knew nothing about wine," Harry said sourly, "and you just proved it. The old casks don't add any flavor or take any away. You only get the woody taste when it's not sealed right."

"What's the difference?" Field grinned. "I bought new casks for the money and made a profit! Isn't that what we're in business for—profit?"

Suddenly, Harry wasn't sure of the answer.

The next day, Harry learned that Field had raised the price of the last shipment to their distributors. Their dismay was expressed in a letter, but Harry never got it. He found it in the wastebasket of the business office.

"Why wasn't I told about this?" he raged.

Field patted his shoulder soothingly. "They paid our price," he said smugly.

"Isn't that all that matters? And I've got another idea about making more money. Let's raise the proof!"

"Never!" Harry raged.

"It won't cost us much," Field said. "I've been reading about something called chaptalization. You add sugar to the stuff before it ferments, and that raises the alcohol content."

"It also raises the possibility of going to jail! It's illegal in California!"

"Okay, okay," Field said, lifting his small hands in front of him. "We can do the same with grape concentrate. Come on, Harry, lighten up! Higher proof, higher prices. Ask Darleen—she's got it all on a spreadsheet!"
He led Harry to the business office, where Darleen was pecking away at a computer keyboard. As always, Harry was tongue-tied in front of the lovely brunette woman. “Take a look,” the bookkeeper said invitingly.

Harry bent over the keyboard, a position that afforded him a look not only at the spreadsheet, but at other dizzying aspects of Darleen Field.

It was only a month later that Harry realized he had lost all control over the winery. His once loyal staff—a dozen people who usually accepted his orders as sacred writ—now “double-checked” with Mr. Field before performing the smallest task. If there was a problem, they went to Mr. Field. If there was a decision to make, it was made by Mr. Field. Harry was becoming the worst thing in the world: unnecessary.

Like his father before him, Harry Bloom liked to brood in solitude. Like his father, he retreated into the old cellar. He sat in a rickety old chair and stared at the vats that commemorated his father’s best production years. He remembered how proud Rollie Bloom had been when his ‘81 vintage took first prize in a statewide competition. Suddenly, he realized that there would be no more glory days. He knew that Ernie Field had ended all hope of any reward but money.

“Anybody home?”

When he heard the light trilling voice of Darleen Field, Harry almost tipped over the unstable chair. He saw her in the doorway of the cellar, silhouetted against the strong afternoon sunlight. Hers was a shape that made his pulse pound.

“Billy Foster said you might be here.” She walked in smiling. “My, what a wonderful smell. That’s the best thing about a winery, isn’t it? The aroma!”

“Yes,” Harry said nervously. “It almost becomes part of your soul.”

“What a lovely way to put it! Oh—the reason I’m bothering you is that I need a signature on this letter to Harris Distributors.” She handed it to him and then went to look at the old casks with the painted numbers. “What are these?” she said.

“Some special wines?”

“The casks are special,” Harry said. “They represent our best years, but I’m sure there won’t be any more.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Never mind,” Harry said gloomily. He signed the letter and handed it to her. Their fingertips touched. And something changed in Darleen’s lovely face.

“I think I understand. You don’t think Ernie will let you produce quality wine. You think he’s too greedy. Well, let me tell you something about Ernie Field. The reason he’s so greedy is because it’s in his nature. All pigs are greedy. And that’s what Ernie is. A pig.”

Darleen’s limpid blue eyes suddenly blurred with tears, and she hurried out. Harry was shocked at hearing an opinion that paralleled his own. But he was even more intrigued that it came from Field’s wife. And suddenly, Harry Bloom had something new to brood about... the emptiness of his love life.

At dinner that evening, Harry came to the conclusion that Darleen’s love life must be empty, too.

Ernie Field was in his customary form. Three glasses of wine before the meal. A bottle during the meal. Four glasses following the meal. When they moved out to the veranda, Ernie was barely able to remember his wife’s name.
"You're disgusting," Darleen said. "I think the real reason you went into this business was to have a ready supply of the stuff."

Field laughed and then waxed poetic.

"I sometimes wonder what the vintner buys one half so precious as the stuff he sells'... Homer Khayyam. The Ruby—Ruby—Ruby something."

"Better be careful," Harry said pleasantly—he was feeling light-hearted for the first time in weeks—"or you might end up like Wino Joe."

"Who's Wino Joe?"

"He's an old tramp who hangs around the local vineyards. Always claims to be looking for odd jobs. What he's really after is to boost some free wine."

"Don't need no free wine," Field said thickly. "I pay for what I get. I mean everything I get!" He snickered, and touched the diamond bracelet that glittered on Darleen's wrist.

Harry knew then that he hated Ernie Field.

Two nights later, almost everyone in the Valley knew it, too.

It had been Darleen's idea that they drive into town to a popular new restaurant called Vines. It was a balmy night, lush with stars. Harry had been reluctant, muttering about his inappropriate wardrobe, but Darleen returned from town with a new blazer, shirt, and tie that fit him to perfection. He saw a changed man in his mirror—as big and barrel-chested as ever, but definitely presentable. Despite Ernie Field's natty attire, he looked small and insignificant besides his two dinner companions.

It may have been the contrast that made Field particularly nasty that night. He ordered the most expensive wine on the restaurant's list, and gulped down almost two bottles on his own. His voice grew louder and more raucous with every glass. He decided to give Harry a lecture about wine, expressing his contempt for everything Harry believed, for Harry's stupid, almost mystical attitude towards his profession. Every patron at Vines marveled at Harry Bloom's restraint as Ernie Field raved on, expressing his famous "opinions." They didn't know what was keeping Harry so calm. They didn't know that it was the tender hand of Darleen Field holding his under the table.

That night, Harry had difficulty falling asleep. His bed suddenly seemed emptier than it had ever been before. He went to the window that faced the long rows of heavy-laden vines. They were a beautiful sight in the moonlight. But there was something nearby that rivaled their beauty—the figure of a woman in a long white gown, leaning against a column of the veranda.

Harry didn't think twice. He pulled on a robe and went downstairs. Darleen wasn't surprised at his appearance; it was as if they had made an assignation. She turned to look at him, and her eyes sent him a wordless message. He took her in his arms.

It was some time later that they spoke, and their words weren't happy ones.

"I don't suppose there's anything we can do," Darleen said. "Is there?"

"He's my partner," Harry said. "He owns half of the winery. If I can sell him my half..."

"Forget that," Darleen said bitterly. "Ernie talks a lot, but he's scared to death about running the place. He needs you, Harry, a lot more than you need him... a lot more than I need him!"
"Then there's only one other answer. We've got to make him see reason. We've got to make him sell his shares back to me. Yes," Harry said, with wonderful calm. "That's what Ernie has to do."

It didn't take long before the working staff of BloomField noted the absence of Ernie Field. Ernie was an early riser, always hurrying out to the fields and cellars to harass the staff as soon as the sun rose.

Billy Foster, the head gardener, commented first. He casually mentioned Field's absence to Joey Munson, who was busy decanting wines into the new oak casks Field had purchased. Joey mentioned it to his wife Louise, who worked in the kitchen. Louise remarked on it to Harry Bloom, who said: "I was going to make a kind of formal announcement, Louise. But Mr. Field left the winery last night. For good."

Louise almost dropped the dish she was wiping. "But—his wife is still here. I saw her in the office this morning."

"She didn't want to give up her job," Harry said easily. "Even after her husband decided to sell his shares back to me. Listen, how about a nice lamb shank for dinner tonight?"

Before the lamb shank was in the oven, everyone at Bloom and Field knew the story. By the time the meal was served, half the neighbors knew it, too. Ernie Field was gone! There were no expressions of regret.

The next morning, Ed Lowry, the bank president, called Harry and asked if the rumor was true. Harry told him it was; he had a signed bill of sale. Harry assured Ed that he needn't worry about the small loan that was still outstanding. He would be paying off his ex-partner in easy installments. There wouldn't be any default.

Ed thought Harry sounded very happy. For that matter, Harry's happiness was evident to everyone who knew him. What was also evident was that Ernie Field's newly-liberated wife was partly responsible for his mood.

Maybe the rumors were inevitable. Maybe there was no way to stop the speculation that settled over the Valley like a fine mist. But people were talking, and questions were being asked. What made Ernie Field give up a business that gave him so much satisfaction? Why did he vanish from the scene so quietly? Where did Harry Bloom get the money to buy out his partner? And why did Field's wife remain behind?

For the next twenty-four hours, there were only questions. Then there was a surprising answer from an unexpected source.

His name had once been Martin Joseph Muller, but everyone called him Wino Joe. The vintners didn't like having Wino Joe around, especially when he turned larcenous. Most of the time, he was tolerated. It had been their product, after all, which had turned Martin Joseph Muller into a derelict.

Oddly enough, it was Wino Joe's sudden absence which aroused their curiosity. Wino Joe was always around somewhere in the vineyards, but now he was invisible. Then someone realized that his disappearance coincided with the vanishing of Ernie Field.

Ed Lowry dropped the hint to Sheriff Jackson Berry. Berry, a young man, had become increasingly bored with the low crime rate of the Valley. Even the slight hint
of foul play managed to start his adrenaline flowing, and he ordered his deputy to bring Wino Joe in for questioning. Ed Lowry made a point of being there.

The first thing Sheriff Berry observed was that Wino Joe was scared. It may have been nothing more than anxiety about confronting the Sheriff's badge. But Berry was persistent. And to his surprise, the vagrant blurted out a stunning confession.

"I saw the whole thing," he said. "I wish I hadn't seen it! I got so scared I almost ran all the way into Oakville!"

"When?" Berry said. "Was it Tuesday night?"

"Yes," Wino Joe said miserably. "I pinched a bottle from BloomField's cellar. It's never locked. I usually warm myself up under the stairs. I was sleeping real comfortable, when all of a sudden I heard talking."

"What time was this?"

"I don't own a watch, but it was late. I mean, it was the middle of the night, and these two men were talking, real loud! I peeked out from under the stairs to see what was going on."

"Who were the men? Did you recognize them?"

"Yes," Wino Joe said. "One was Mr. Field, that little mean guy. The other was Harry Bloom. He was the one with the shotgun."

"The what?"

"He was holding this big old shotgun to Field's head! Mr. Field was on his knees, and there was this piece of paper on the ground in front of him! Bloom was prodding him with the gun, and saying this word over and over..."

"What word?"

"Sign!" said Wino Joe. "That's all he said! Sign! And then he cocked that old gun, and Field started to shake so much he could hardly hold the pen Harry shoved into his hand. Then Field bent down and... I guess he signed that old piece of paper."


"That wasn't the bad part. The bad part came after. When I saw what Harry did with that gun."

"Do you mean he shot Ernie Field?" None of the winery employees questioned had heard a noise the night of Field's disappearance.

"No," Wino Joe said. "He reared back with that old gun and clubbed the little guy in the back of the head! I almost got sick. No, it was worse than that. I almost got sober!"

The mention of sobriety troubled Sheriff Berry. How reliable was the testimony of a drunk?

"Was he dead?" Ed Lowry asked. "Could you tell?"

"I don't know! I was afraid to look! But then I heard that horrible sound!"

"What sound?"

"Like a jigsaw or something! I didn't see what he was doing with it, but I could imagine!"

"Good Lord," Ed Lowery said. 

"Then I heard an engine start, but I just couldn't look!" sobbed Wino Joe.

Sheriff Berry and Ed Lowry returned to the winery to discuss these revelations with Harry Bloom.

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"Are you guys crazy?" Bloom asked. "Don't you know the guy is an alcoholic? He has hallucinations all the time! He's seen pink elephants, blue giraffes, and yellow rhinos! He's been dried out in the hospital half a dozen times!"

"We know that," Sheriff Berry said, with a touch of embarrassment. "But if you can tell us how to get in touch with Mr. Field—"

"How should I know where he went? When he and his wife broke up, all he cared about was getting some money and clearing out! That's what he did," Harry stammered.

Berry twirled his cap. "Then you won't mind if we just have a look in the cellar?"

"You can look all you want," Harry said grumpily. "But you won't find a thing!"

When they entered the cellar, Sheriff Berry looked around at the clutter of objects until his eyes picked out the old shotgun leaning against the barrels. He picked it up and examined the butt for telltale signs. There were none.

"Would you mind opening these?" he asked, pointing to the barrels.

He wasn't prepared for the explosion his words would produce.

"Mind?" Harry Bloom roared. "These barrels are all sealed! If you think I'll ruin hundreds of gallons of good wine, you're as crazy as Wino Joe!"

Berry looked miserable. "But it's the only way to disprove his story!" the Sheriff pleaded. "Don't you want to have your name cleared? Don't you want to stop all these rumors?"

"What I want is for you to get out of here! If you want these barrels opened, Sheriff, you'll have to get yourself a court order!"

There was nothing more the young lawman could do. He left the cellar and slowly walked back to his car with the banker following gloomily.

"It'll take at least a week to get a court order," Berry said, "assuming we can get one! By that time, Bloom would have plenty of opportunity to get rid of the body—if there is one."

"This is wine country," Ed Lowry shrugged. "Nobody likes to see good wine ruined."

"And nobody likes to see someone get away with murder!"

Suddenly, the Sheriff stopped in his tracks.

"Wait a minute! Maybe there's another way to prove that Wino Joe was telling the truth!"

He wheeled about, and trotted back so hastily that the older man had a hard time keeping up with him. When Berry burst into the cellar, Harry Bloom was no longer alone. Darleen Field was there, too, and the couple sprung apart guilty from an embrace.

"Excuse me," the Sheriff said. "But I just thought of something Wino Joe said—about what he saw you do. I won't have to open every barrel. I know exactly which one has the body of Ernie Field!"

Do you? Assemble the jigsaw puzzle and see if you can solve the mystery of the missing body.
The Solution:

"That sound was from the engine, not the cork...." The cork was inside the cork of the cork. "And you think you know which cork?"

"Yes—you said to put the cork inside to conceal the opening." You must have done that...."

Ig Looyv searched his desk. "But all the cases are right side up!"

"We're moving out of the upstairs room," the agent said.

"1001 is a year that starts with the same right side up or upside down", he said.

"Let's get that cork and take a look.

Twenty minutes later, they removed the wine-soaked cork of Elsie's cork. Then a search wort.