

The Lovable Rogue Mysteries

By Tux Toledo

Prologue



It was called the "decade of greed". I called it the "decade of style." It was the 1980s, a time of ugly excess and undisciplined capitalism, of avaricious acquisitions and unrepentant cupidity. But it was also a return to dressing for dinner, single-malt scotches, and a general embracing of le bon vie.

As the decade unfolded I found myself embracing le bon vie in San Francisco, then a glimmering jewel set in the cast of the Pacific Ocean, a city filled with character and characters, pretenses and pretensions, humor and humanity. Well, at times it fell short of humanity. But that's where I came in.

The Lovable Rogue



Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time. It doesn't matter what you're doing or where you are, if you have style, you have style. It's as simple as that. Take horse racing, for example. While many punters wear gym shoes and dungarees to the track, I typically attend in nothing less than an impeccably tailored double-breasted suit accented with a foulard tie made of Italian silk so smooth you could skate on it. If I'm feeling particularly sporting, I'll replace the foulard with one of Milan's more adventurous cravats. The deciding factor is always the stature of the track. The more elegant the venue the more conservative my attire.

Today I was at Golden Gate Fields and was dressed rather sportingly in a double-breasted blue blazer, off-white, cotton slacks, ultra-soft brown loafers, all topped off with a light gray fedora. That should tell you something about the stature of the track. Golden Gate Fields is not exactly the most glamorous place to view equestrian competition; it's not a dump but it's not Churchill Downs. The people are urban not urbane, the grass mowed not manicured. It's a pure venue for horse racing, an aging track next to the San Francisco Bay on a piece of land real estate developers would kill for. My bet is one day they will.

My other bet was on the long shot of the final race. She was a scraggly hag that looked like the kind of horse that was once used to pull milk carts. But I had good information that she was faster than she looked.

The class of the field was Family Affair, the sure-thing favorite that the pundits thought just might be good enough for the Kentucky Derby. High expectations, indeed! He certainly oozed the kind of arrogance that gives winning racehorses their championship looks. But oozing arrogance was not good enough for me. A good tip was much better.

From the beginning my hag ran neck and neck with Family Affair. In the end she nipped the favorite by a nose. This heart-stopping result was not met with widespread approval. The loss of a sure thing seldom is. But in horse racing

there are no sure things - only favorites and long shots. And I'll give you some valuable advice about long shots: never bet on one unless you're lucky or you know what you're doing. I may not always know what I'm doing but I'm always lucky, lucky enough to have the right information at the right time. I suppose that's why San Francisco's Upper Crust frequently call on me to get them out of trouble. There are worse occupations.

I stored my binoculars, adjusted my tie and went off to find my chauffeur, James. Do you know how hard it is to find a chauffeur named James? No, you probably don't. Well, let me tell you - it's damn difficult. It took me quite a while to find mine so I wasn't too keen on losing him. "A proper chauffeur is worth his weight in spare parts," someone once told me. My James was certainly a proper chauffeur, always wearing leather gloves and never driving with one arm on the windowsill. Very fastidious.

I had successfully kept an eye on him all day until the final furlong of the final race. The favorite's dramatic failure had diverted my attention just long enough to allow him to vanish into the mob. I waded through the drunks and discarded programs and finally spotted him collecting a tidy sum at the payoff window. I'll admit to you that I don't really like him gambling. It's not that I have anything against a good wager it's just that he was so hard to find. Do you know how hard, no, of course not. Anyway, the point is I don't want him to accumulate huge gambling debts and then have to run off to avoid paying them. He never seems to lose, though.

I was on my way to collect him and my winnings when I was intercepted by Bernie Ives, a highbrow sort of fellow with a home in San Francisco's pricey Nob Hill district, another one in Carmel, and maybe one in Palm Springs. His face was made of putty and carried a perpetual look of mild disappointment. His eyes darted like moths around a streetlight and they never focused on any one thing in particular. The wind tugged at his hair but not a strand would budge because it was held tightly in place by a beeswax type of substance. His dark blue suit was made of a fabric too heavy for the weather. That's a crime in my book.

I wasn't the only one to notice his fashion faux pas. A couple of polyester mugs also had their eyes on him. Now if you ask me, wearers of synthetic fabric garments have no right to pass sartorial judgment on anyone. But there they were looking at Bernie as if he was a criminal.

"Winnie! What a surprise meeting you here," he said.

"Bernie, it's good to see you again. And my name's Winston." I hate Winnie.

"What a coincidence running into you," he said. Nothing in Bernie's life was ever a coincidence.

"I haven't seen you in a while." I said.

"I just returned from Mexico. Thought I'd come here and watch the races." His feet shuffled like a stallion in a stall. I kept one eye on him, the other on

James.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Me? I came here to place a few wagers, of course."

He nodded and looked past me.

"Say, I'm having a party tonight," he said. "Why don't you come?"

In case you don't know, Nob Hill parties are not to be missed. A summons to the pantheon of San Francisco's self-appointed gods is indeed a remarkable event - but one that is expected to be observed with quiet smugness. Satisfaction with one's inclusion is best radiated, not shouted.

"Yes, I suppose I can do that," I yawned.

"Good." His face almost lost its look of disappointment. "I'm so glad I ran into you." He gave me one of those Hollywood handshakes and shuffled off.

James hid his winnings and strolled my way. The abnormal bulge on the left side of his chest betrayed his good fortune.

"Successful day?" I asked.

"Sir?"

I winked at him and started for my car. And what a sight it was! The magnificent bodywork sparkled in the sun and the flying lady soared on the elegant chrome grill. I slowed my walk to admire what in my opinion is the world's most beautiful automobile: a 1963 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud III. You know, I couldn't resist that car. The first time I saw it I knew I had to have it. It was a steal, really. Its previous owner ran a limousine business. When the business suddenly fell into severe financial difficulties I got the car and he got the insurance money.

James opened the rear door and I poured myself into the luscious, leather-upholstered back seat. The fine Connolly hides emitted an intoxicating aroma. Breathing it was similar to sniffing a glass of excellent single malt Scotch. James shut the door and it closed with a solid, reassuring thud. He then slid behind the steering wheel and tilted his head slightly toward the back seat.

"Home, James," I said.

I love those words! In fact, it's the only reason I wanted a chauffeur named James. I could have done a lot worse, mind you. My James, in addition to being a superb driver, can fly airplanes and knows how to handle himself in combat. Knows a thing or two about horses, too, I suspect.

We returned to San Francisco and he eased the Rolls onto Seacliff Avenue, a mansion-laden street that served as home to the City's aristocracy. Out on the bay thin lines of fog drifted under the Golden Gate Bridge like fingers stretching into too-tight gloves. I was staying, uninvited, in a very comfortable house owned

by a couple who were vacationing in Europe. You may raise your eyebrows but they should never have left the place vacant. These old architectural jewels, like Italian sports cars, require constant attention. And who better to give them that attention than me? The neighbors never bothered me. In this neighborhood no one ever bothers someone with a Rolls. There is, however, the ever-present danger of the owner's unexpected, premature return. It's worth the risk in my opinion.

With the car securely in the garage, I sauntered into the kitchen, pulled a Bass Ale from the refrigerator and sat down in front of the panoramic living room window. The chair was leather covered, had a great aroma, and was comfortably stuffed. Very much like my Rolls. The Bass Ale, however, was too cold. I suppose not everything in this world is perfect.

I turned my thoughts to Bernie Ives while I waited for the Bass to warm. What can you say about a man who made his fortune from pet mortuaries? I mean, really! Apparently there are an abundance of pet owners who are willing to pay top dollar to see their furry loved ones go out in style. It's hard to figure some people.

The thing about Bernie, though, was his lack of self-discipline. To put it bluntly, he was a sucker. Women played him like a roulette wheel and their numbers always came up. That weakness cost him quite a bit of money. Do you recall when he became mixed up with the daughter of a powerful San Francisco political figure? Perhaps not. Well, Bernie thought she was after him but she was actually after the use of his pet mortuary. She wrapped him around her finger the way butchers wrap paper around meat. Once he was properly wound she started using his mortuary for some very unpopular cult activities. The potential scandal would have not only destroyed her father's political career but also ruined Bernie's business. In the end I saved the day by employing, at Bernie's expense, a fictitious film crew to convince everyone that what was going on in the mortuary was simply the filming of a movie.

It is this kind of quick thinking that encourages Bernie to call on me to help him get out of girl trouble. The party invitation was, no doubt, a summons to duty. So what had he gotten himself into this time?

* * *

The bay was smothered in fog when James rolled the Rolls out of the garage. A strong breeze blew the fluffy gray stuff over the Presidio and over the links at Lincoln Park. The sun was setting somewhere and it was getting dark. James flipped on the headlights and we were off to the exhilarating heights of Nob Hill.

In case you don't know, Nob Hill is all high-rent townhouses and haughty hotels. The lights in the splendid homes glittered like candles on an altar.

James guided the Rolls onto California Street and stopped at 1001. I emerged from the Rolls. A brass railing rose from the center of the concrete

steps. It glistened even in the fog. I climbed five steps to the entrance of the somewhat ordinary but tasteful building. A Chinese man in a semi-tux greeted me at the door. His thin hair was matted to his head with a shiny varnish. We fondly referred to him as the Peking Penguin although he had been born in San Francisco and had never been anywhere near Peking (I know, it's called something else now but I don't remember what). He was a real good man, someone you could depend on.

"Good evening, Mr. Churchill," he said with his usual tight smile.

"Good evening. Has Bernie remembered to put my name on the guest list?"

"It's all right if he hasn't. You're always welcome here, Mr. Churchill."

"Thanks." Fine man, the Penguin. I pulled a few Cubans from my vest pocket and gave them to him.

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Churchill. You're a real good man."

"Smoke them in good health," I said. I turned away and walked to the elevator. My footsteps were absorbed by a red oriental rug that clung to an aging but highly polished marble floor. The elevator was already on the ground floor so I didn't have to wait.

"Have a nice time, Mr. Churchill," the Penguin said.

"Thanks."

"Hey, wait a minute!" he yelled.

I held the door open and peered into the lobby. A petite blonde stood in front of him.

"Another guest, Mr. Churchill. You wouldn't want her to have to wait for the elevator, would you?"

"Of course not." A true gentleman would never make a woman wait. I smiled and waited for her to enter.

"Thank you," she said in a voice as dry as the Sahara.

Elevators tell a lot about people. Most try to find something to read until they reach their floor. An elevator safety certificate must be the most widely read piece of paper in the world. Others try to make idle conversation. I prefer the readers. This woman was neither. She stared at me the way a viper stares at its prey. If she wasn't the cause of Bernie's troubles she ought to have been. Her hair was a bit too blonde, her eyes a bit too deep, and her gait a bit too thoroughbred.

"Friend of Bernie Ives?" she asked as the doors opened. It was a disappointedly uninspired first line.

"Yes. And who are you?"

She flashed an evil grin and disappeared into the party without answering. I

shrugged, searched for a glass of bubbly and waited for Bernie to find me. He did.

"Winnie!" his voice roared across his living room like a 747 at takeoff. And it was a big living room.

He still had beeswax in his hair and he wore the same suit he had worn to the races. Quite inappropriate sartorial behavior. Have you noticed how so few people dress for the occasion these days? I have. And it has nothing to do with money. It's all about style. If you have it, well, you know the rest.

Bernie slid past his quests and tramped across the room with the petite blonde firmly glued to his side. Her face puckered into a cynical grin at the mention of my name.

"Winnie, so glad you could make it," he said with more relief than joy.

"The name's Winston," I said.

"Winston?" the blonde chuckled. "Winston Churchill?"

"No relation," I muttered.

"Oh, this is Jill," Bernie nodded toward his companion.

"We met in the elevator," I said.

"Yes, he was a perfect gentleman." A sarcastic grin marred her pretty face. Bernie smiled even though he didn't feel like smiling.

"I need to talk to you," he said. He glanced at Jill.

"I can take a hint," she growled. More like an angry purr, actually. She tossed her head back and sulked off to wherever it is that women sulk off to when they sulk.

"Come on, let's go over here." Bernie led me to a small balcony overlooking the Mark Hopkins hotel.

"In some trouble?" I asked.

"You can always tell, can't you?" he snickered.

I didn't have to answer.

"It all started with Jill," he said, staring at the street below. "She's beautiful, don't you think?"

I shrugged. She wasn't ugly.

"Well, I got so involved with her that I would have done just about anything to impress her."

"And you did?" It was the typical scenario.

"And I did," he nodded.

"What have you gotten yourself into this time?" I asked.

"Well..." Something inside of him held his voice back. His words were on a leash and they wouldn't come out.

"What is it, Bernie?"

"This girl Jill," he said. "She's a real high roller. I didn't know it when I met her but she has family ties."

"Nothing wrong with good breeding," I said.

"Family as in mafia," Bernie said.

"What?" A pair of pliers gripped my stomach. Bernie had really done it this time.

"And that's the good part," he rolled his eyes. "You see, Jill knows I've got a plane, the one I use to spread a pet's ashes over the ocean."

"You use an airplane for that? Are you serious?"

"Yes. I cremate the pet and after the funeral I put its ashes into an urn and dump them over the ocean."

"Why don't you use a boat?"

"I enjoy flying," he shrugged.

"Oh." I guess I'll never understand some things. "So what about Jill?"

"Well, she arranged for me to fly to Mexico, meet this man, and bring back some cocaine."

"What!"

"I wanted to impress her."

"Bernie..."

"So I did it."

"How in the world did you get away with it?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "There's a legitimate organization that arranges group flying trips to Mexico. I was part of the group. The man I met in Mexico said it would be all right and it was."

"So where does the bad part come in?"

"Well, I've since learned that the Feds are on to Jill and they're just waiting for her to make her move. If I deliver the cocaine to her I'll be arrested, too."

"That's how you got away with it," I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The Feds let you get away with it. It's a setup, Bernie. Don't deliver the

cocaine."

"But if I don't deliver it to her by tomorrow her mob friends are going to kill me."

"Doesn't Jill know the Feds are on to her?"

"I've told her but she doesn't believe me. She thinks I'm stalling, that I'm trying to sell the cocaine myself."

"What kind of mob girl doesn't know when the Feds are on to her?"

He shrugged and then turned his stare back to the street. San Francisco's summer fog had chilled the sidewalks and the natives who walked below walked in heavy coats; the tourists shivered like oysters on a bed of ice. Several minutes passed before he spoke again.

"So, what should I do?" he pleaded.

"Where's the cocaine?"

"It's hidden in my mortuary," Bernie shivered. Poor lad.

Bernie ran his hands over his beeswax until a guest spotted him and started toward us. He made a gesture toward her that was intended to be a wave but looked more like the hand movements of a pantomime.

"Will you help me?" he finally asked.

"I'll see what I can do."

Our conversation was cut off by the arrival of an aging femme fatale dressed in a metallic gown that looked as if it had been assembled from spare airplane parts.

"Bernie, how are you?" she asked, her intrusion made more irritating by a squeaky voice that sounded the way her clothes looked.

"I'm fine," Bernie said to her. Then he glanced at me. "This is my friend, Winnie."

I cringed. If he expects me to continue helping him he's going to have to get my name right.

"Nice to meet you," she said in a strained monotone. She then ignored me and turned to Bernie.

"Guess what?" she said. "I received a call today from the Chestermans. They're in Belgium and they don't like it. Can you believe that? A call all the way from Belgium. I've never had a call from Belgium before. Anyway, they've decided to come home early. I'm having my man pick them up at the airport tomorrow."

I was jolted by the news. The Chestermans owned the house I was staying in.

"I've got to go, Bernie. I've got to pack."

He looked at me funny.

"And my name is Winston!"

* * *

Okay, so this time Bernie had gotten himself in a little bit deeper than usual. But I figured it would be fairly easy to get him out of it. I figured that Jill, although she roared like a lion, was actually just a pussycat. She didn't seem like much of a mob girl to me. It was even possible that she was bluffing about that. I figured all I had to do was tell her about the Feds and exercise my powers of persuasion and the incident would be over. Clean and simple. I figured wrong.

Jill was a high roller all right, the kind of woman you see attached to the arm of a prominent politician or clinging to the coat of a compulsive gambler on a Las Vegas winning streak. You don't find women like that at the Laundromat or in line at the local super market. You find them at places like the Starlight Room at the top of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel.

And that is where I found her, holding court with a small cadre of gadflies whose only goal in life was to be seen in the company of the right people at the right time in the right place. She wore a slinky, sparkling silver smock cut low at both ends - a very dramatic effect spoiled somewhat by a hairstyle more suitable to a dance club than a night club. The dress shimmered when she moved and when she moved she moved in all the right places.

"Hello," I said.

She turned and stared at me the way she had stared at me in the elevator.

"Remember me?" I asked.

"Of course I remember you," she replied. Her voice had not left the desert. "You're Bernie's friend, the one with the funny name."

"I see nothing humorous about Winston," I mumbled.

"Oh, yes, that's it, Winston Churchill," she laughed. "You're Winston Churchill."

One of her companions turned and faced me with a semi-sneer.

"And I'm the Duke of Earl", he drived. Drink had severely impaired his motor skills. "But I'm a friendly Duke." He held out an unsteady hand and the shift in balance nearly tossed him from his stool. "Nice to meet you."

Jill shoved him aside with a deep-freeze shoulder and gave me her undivided attention.

"Well now, is this a chance meeting or were you looking for me?" she asked. Her moist lips made it obvious which answer she preferred.

"Actually, I was looking for you."

"Now that's exactly what I wanted to hear," she purred. Her eyes blinked

slowly.

"Hey," the drunkard on the stool slobbered. "Are you trying to steal my girl?" The act of speaking was enough to once again disrupt his equilibrium. He steadied himself against the bar. Jill's gaze pinned him there. "Okay, I guess you can borrow her." Another drink pushed him deeper into his stupor and a tiny Martini river trickled down his cheek on to his shirt. "I'm a good Duke..."

"Come on, let's go where we can talk," she said. She took my arm and led me to a table by a window. Outside, the City was once again being eaten by fog. Inside, I was determined not be eaten by Jill.

"Now, Winston Churchill," she said in that way she had of saying my name as if it was a punch line. "Why were you looking for me?"

"Bernie told me about your little secret."

Her reaction made me wonder how many other secrets she had.

"Little secret? Just what do you mean?"

"I mean his little excursion into Mexico and the 'gift' he brought back to you."

She was startled for just a second.

"Bernie's got a big mouth," she said. "If he's not careful someday someone's going to close it permanently."

I snickered to myself. She was a tough-talking temptress, just the kind of woman Bernie always fell for.

"So why did he tell you and why are you telling me he told you?" she said. "No, let me guess. You're going to reason with me and explain why I should let Bernie out of his commitment. You're going to explain how much trouble we're in."

She laughed a cheeky laugh and I'll admit that it was not the response I had expected. Still, it takes more than that to throw me off my game.

"You do know that the Feds are on to you, don't you? You're being set up."

"Ha, Bernie's told me that joke before." She threw in another cheeky laugh.

"What if it's not a joke?"

"How could someone like Bernie know what the Feds are up to? He's way too innocent. Poor little man."

I have to admit that for a moment she made sense but there was no other explanation for Bernie's escape from Mexico.

"But I had my people check it out anyway," she said. "And it's not true."

"Maybe your people are setting you up."

"Hah!" She hurled another scoff at me. "Another comedian."

"I am very disappointed in you," I sighed.

"Disappointed?" Her blush was genuine. "What do you mean?" She would have lit a cigarette if her diamond and silver cigarette case hadn't been empty. I wasn't going to fill it for her.

"If Bernie was going to get himself mixed up with a mob girl at least he could have gotten mixed up with one who knew the score."

She looked at me that special way that mob-girls-in-the-making look at men they don't like.

"I was beginning to like you," she said. "Now you're just boring me." She rose from her chair.

"I'd double check on the Feds if I were you," I said

"I'd mind my own business if I were you, Winston Churchill. I am not impressed by your fancy clothes and eloquent talk. Because to me it's simply talk." She slithered back toward the bar stopping once to flash me a final look of disdain. "And be careful," she purred. "Whatever happens to Bernie could also happen to you." She winked and returned to humoring the Duke of Earl.

This was not going to be as easy as I figured.

* * *

I spent my last evening in the Seacliff Avenue mansion sitting in front of a well-stoked fire thinking of ways to get Bernie out of his delicate situation. A plan didn't come easily but when it came it came to me as quickly as an ember snapping off a burning log. I immediately called Bernie.

"Winnie, do you know what to do?"

"Yes," I said. "You're going to have to deliver the cocaine to Jill."

"What! But you told me not to."

"I've changed my mind."

"What about the Feds?" Bernie gasped.

"Don't worry about the Feds. I'll take care of them."

"You will? How?"

"Don't worry about it. Can you cremate a dog tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Good. Tell Jill you'll deliver the cocaine to her tomorrow and have her meet you at your plane at eleven."

"Okay."

"And my name's Winston!"

* * *

The fog broke early the next morning. It was one of those days where nothing could possibly go wrong.

"James," I said. "This is one of those days where nothing can possibly go wrong."

"Yes, sir." His voice was a bit hollow but that's how he is sometimes.

"Bernie told Jill to be at the airport at eleven. So if you are there by ten we should be fine."

"Are you sure you do not need my assistance at the mortuary?" James asked.

"Positive. You go along to the airport, I can take care of things with Bernie."

"As you wish, sir." Sometimes that hollowness of his can be a bit annoying. But with the fog burning off and a toasty morning sun baking the City nothing could dim my spirits. There's nothing quite like the thrill of the hunt to get the old juices flowing.

I finished packing and helped James load the Rolls.

"To the mortuary, James." Those words had no charm at all. Despite the absence of charm he did an expert job of easing the Rolls into the traffic.

Bernie's pet mortuary was located in a typically foggy neighborhood of small homes and ordinary shops. Even here the fog was burning off.

James stopped the Rolls a block away from Bernie's.

"Good luck, sir."

"Thank you, James"

He left for the airport and I walked to Bernie's mortuary. It was a white, church-like structure with a chapel in front and a workroom in back. Bernie emerged from his workroom with a cremation urn.

"All set?" I asked.

Bernie nodded. His eyes were moist and his face was long.

"What's wrong?"

"I always get emotional at times like this. It was a fine little mutt. I knew him personally. It makes me sad."

"If it's any consolation, that fine little mutt is going to save your fine little life."

"I know, but it still makes me sad."

"What was its name?"

"Fifi."

"Fifi?"

“Yes.”

I followed him to the small chapel. A real minister waited behind the altar. Fifi’s owners sat in the front pew. The wife wore a flowing, flowery dress totally inappropriate for a funeral even if it was a pet funeral. The husband wore a suit that, from its poor fit, had apparently been purchased at a time of slimmer anatomical proportions. And near the door were the two polyester suits from the racetrack. Odd that.

The minister started the ceremony. Latin incantations echoed off the walls. When the echoes ceased the ceremony was over. The minister tended to Fifi’s owners while Bernie took the urn back to his work area. I followed and locked the door behind us. I had a feeling that proved to be right.

The door handle turned and when the door wouldn’t open the pounding started. It was, no doubt, the polyester suits.

“Who’s that?” Bernie asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Shouldn’t we let them in?”

“Not if you want to remain a free man.”

“What?” His voice had more cracks than the Black Rock Desert.

“Get the cocaine,” I said.

Bernie took another cremation urn from the top of a high shelf.

“Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“You hid it in a cremation urn?”

“Yes.”

“Why Bernie, I’m impressed.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But is that all there is?”

“Yes.”

I shook my head.

“What kind of mob girl is this Jill?” I muttered. I mean, really. Why take such a big risk for so little cocaine?

Bernie shrugged.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said. I grabbed Fifi and started for the back door. Bernie reached for the knob but I had to stop him.

“Hold it,” I said.

"What is it?"

I peeked through a window near the door and saw two human bulldogs, much too conspicuous in their attempt to be inconspicuous.

"Do you know those canines?" I asked.

"No. Who are they?"

"I don't know but it could be trouble. Jill probably sent them here to make sure we don't double-cross her."

Bernie shivered then jumped when the polyester suits increased their effort to knock down the door. Bulldogs outside, polyester suits inside. Quite a fix. So much for nothing going wrong. So what would James do in such a situation? I had an idea.

"Where's your car?" I asked.

"In the alley, about a half a block away."

"Give me the keys."

"What for?"

I gave him Fifi.

"Hang onto the urns and when you see me drive up run to the car."

A terrified look crossed his face. The poor boy didn't have the stomach for this kind of stuff. Maybe the next time he'll choose his women more discreetly.

"What are you driving these days?" I asked.

"A Mercedes." The words barely left his lips.

"What color?"

"Green."

"One of those sick, pea green ones?"

"Yes."

"I thought so." People who do not dress for the occasion cannot be expected to drive properly colored automobiles. "All right," I said. "Wait here. I won't be long."

I opened the door quickly. The sound jolted the bulldogs into action. I ran for the alley and they pursued me. Fortunately, they ran more like bulldogs than greyhounds and I was able to get a lead on them. A quick glance behind: the men were out of breath but giving it the old college try. I reached the Mercedes, opened the door, jumped in, locked the door and put the key in the ignition.

"It's a diesel!" I cried out loud. And an old one at that. I'd have to wait for the glow plug to warm before I could start the engine! I adjusted the rear view mirror so I could watch the progress of my pursuers. They were nearly to the bumper.

The Mercedes was finally ready. I started it, rammed the gearshift into reverse and backed into one of the men. He screamed and held his thigh. His partner, showing no compassion for his injured colleague, kept after me. He gripped the locked passenger door and tried to pull it open. I hit the gas and left him struggling for balance.

I drove down the alley then punched the brakes with my left foot. The Mercedes slid to a halt in front of the mortuary. I unlocked the passenger door and waited for Bernie. He didn't come out. I honked the horn. Jill's men limped toward the car. They were hobbled by bruised bones but were not yet ready to give up the chase. Then the polyester suits appeared around the other corner. I honked the horn again. Finally, Bernie timidly came through the door.

"Come on!" I yelled.

He ran and nearly dropped the urns. I couldn't watch. He opened the passenger door and got in. I mashed the accelerator to the floor and left the polyester suits and bulldogs behind. James would have been proud of me. However, I didn't have long to gloat. The car in the rearview mirror was following us.

"Must be the Feds," I said to myself. The polyester suits. I kept a steady pace for the airport and was able to keep them at bay.

Bernie's plane was at a small airport south of San Francisco on the Bay side of the peninsula. Jill was there tugging on the plane's door. James was in the pilot's seat and was preventing her from entering the plane.

"Hey, that's Jill!" Bernie said. "She can't get into the plane. Say, who's in my plane? Who's not letting her in?"

"It's James. He'll be flying today."

"What?" Bernie disapproved but he had little room to complain and he knew it.

Jill saw Bernie and ran up to the car.

"There's a man in your plane and he won't let me in!" she howled. Then she noticed me. "You!"

"Me," I smiled.

"What's going on here?" she screamed.

"Just relax and do as I say."

"Why should I do anything you say?" Then she noticed the urns.

"Is that the cocaine?" she asked.

"You'll find out later," I said.

"Winnie, don't be so tough," Bernie said. He was beginning to soften. Jill

could turn him into melting ice cream with one look from her torrid eyes.

"Let's go," I said, opening the door. "And for the last time my name's Winston."

"I'm not going anywhere!" Jill screamed. "Give me the cocaine!"

"Look," I pointed toward the car speeding toward us. "Those are the Feds and they're coming to get you. Now get in the plane."

Jill's eyes narrowed then widened until they became the size of silver dollars. Then she did as she was told.

I grabbed Bernie and she followed us to the plane. It was a nice, four-seat Cessna 175 Skyhawk. James opened the door. I climbed in and sat in the front next to James. Bernie and Jill squeezed into the back seats. I placed my urn on the floor, and took the one from Bernie and placed it on the floor next to mine.

James received clearance, started the engine and taxied the plane to the runway.

"Why are there two urns?" Jill asked.

"As you can see, the FBI really is on to you. If Bernie had simply handed over the cocaine you both would have been arrested. I don't really care about you but I'd rather keep Bernie out of jail."

"So why two urns?" Jill growled.

"To decoy the Feds," I said. "We're going to have to pull a switcheroo and outsmart them."

"Which urn has the cocaine?" she asked.

"This one." I pointed to the one next to my left foot.

"What's in other one?"

"Fifi."

"Fifi?"

"Doggie ashes."

"Oh, God!" She shook her head and gave Bernie a look of complete, utter, total disgust. She crossed her arms and stared out the window.

James was able to take off before the Feds could interfere. We flew West and were soon over the mountains.

"When do I get the cocaine?" Jill asked. The girl did have a one-track mind.

"After we put Fifi to rest."

The plane crossed the coastline and when we were out over the ocean James put the plane into a long circle.

"Is this all right, Bernie?" I asked.

"Yeah, fine," he replied. He wasn't enjoying himself. Poor Bernie. Jill had insulted him and he was sulking.

I nodded to James. He pulled his window open and reached for an urn. He quickly tossed it out the window.

"Hey!" Jill screamed. "Was that the right one?"

"Of course it was," I said.

She reached into the front of the plane and grabbed the remaining urn, opened it, and stared at the powder. It wasn't quite white enough. She frowned until her face contained more furrows than a newly plowed cornfield. She wet her index finger, dipped it into the powder and brought it to her lips. Her face turned crimson and her eyes nearly exploded.

"You're dead, Bernie," she shouted.

"What?" Bernie gasped. His voice creaked like old, wooden stairs. Then he looked at me. "Winnie!"

I ignored him. He's just going to have to learn to get my name right.

Bernie moaned and buried his head in his hands. Jill fumed all the way back to the airport. James landed the plane and when he brought it to a stop she immediately opened the door and jumped out. She was still holding the urn.

Quicker than charging polo ponies a half dozen men surrounded the plane.

"FBI!" one of them shouted.

"Oh, no!" Bernie stepped from the plane and fell to his knees.

Jill scowled.

"What do you have there?" the FBI agent asked. He was a sardonic little man, pudgy at the waist and gray on the head.

Jill kept quiet. The FBI agent stepped forward and looked into the urn.

"Cocaine?" A smug grin formed around his mouth.

I stepped from the plane and stood next to Jill. The FBI agent dipped his fingers into Fifi and tasted the powder.

"Poor Fifi," I said.

The agent got a strange look on his face.

"Hey, this isn't cocaine," he said. "What is it?"

"It's Fifi," I said.

"Fifi? What the hell's Fifi?"

"A dog. My friend down there runs a pet mortuary," I nodded toward Bernie.

"He cremated the dog this morning. We were supposed to dump the little guy's ashes over the Pacific but the wind wasn't right."

The agent turned pale. I don't think he was very happy at having put dog ashes into his mouth.

"Let's get out of here," he barked. He took his men and went home.

"I think you owe me a debt of gratitude," I said to Jill.

She stared at me, viciously at first, then with some small degree of admiration as she realized I had saved her from jail.

"Leave Bernie alone," I said. "He's not worth the effort."

She looked down at Bernie. He was indeed a pathetic sight.

"You're right, he isn't," she said. Then she gave me a luscious look. "But what about you? Are you worth it?"

I grinned and shook my head.

"No, I'm not a family man."

I lifted Bernie by his collar.

"Home, James."

The Rogue Goes Into A COMA



Critics will tell you that abstract art is simply an exploration of space, form, and color, that it's a mirror into our soul and intellect meant to make us question our perceptions and beliefs. But I don't buy it. I just can't shake the feeling that abstract art is simply a scam meant to separate the gullible from their cash. It was a feeling that would serve me well.

* * *

"No, those are not artists," Mary Bain snapped. "They're construction workers building the new exhibit salon."

"Oh," I said. I honestly couldn't tell. The works on display at the San Francisco museum named the Collection of Modern Art, COMA for short, were barely distinguishable from the materials the workers were using to build the new room, I mean salon. Besides, have you ever seen a modern artist, particularly a sculptor, at work? If you haven't, then trust me. You would have a hard time distinguishing them from construction workers.

"Come this way," Mary said. She was still smarting from my uncultured mistake. These art types have a very sensitive nature. "I'll show you where the sculpture was." I followed her to a space near the new exhibit room, I mean salon. Her blond hair brushed across the shoulders of a flowing, red Versace dress. The dress swished as she walked and it reminded me of the broad stroke of a wide paintbrush. The small blue and green paint stains on her thumb and index finger did, however, clash with her deep red nail polish. Not very artistic if you ask me.

I was at the COMA to investigate the disappearance of an expensive piece of abstract sculpture. Yes, I know, the race track one day, an art museum the next. A true gentleman must be able to effortlessly and elegantly operate within diverse environments - which means one must have a diverse wardrobe. And if you know me you know my closet holds something for every occasion. An occasion such as a visit to an art gallery demands absolutely impeccable attire. Therefore, I was impeccably attired in an exquisitely tailored gray flannel suit with a traditional English cut augmented by a perfectly starched white shirt and a tie bluer than the waters of Lake Tahoe on an absolutely sunny day.

I was operating in the modern art milieu at the request of Lars Stinquist. Lars was a good friend of mine and a great patron of the arts. He was also the president of COMA's board of directors. He seemed to believe that the missing sculpture was a serious matter. Obviously, I was in no position to disagree.

According to Lars the theft was a complete mystery. One day the piece was there, the next day it was not. The museum's security system was adequate, with video cameras on all of the doors, but the tapes revealed nothing. The piece had been taken by very good professionals or it had been an inside job. Lars was hoping it was the former.

"It was right there," Mary said, pointing to a gray, wooden platform about three inches high.

"I see," I said, though I saw nothing. "What did it look like?" I asked.

"Here's a photograph." She held an eight-by-ten up to my face. "This is what it looked like."

I gazed at the photo of an L-shaped hunk of concrete, wood, and metal cable.

"I hope you can solve this mystery before the public learns of the work's disappearance. We can't afford to have their confidence in us shaken. We're supported almost entirely by their donations. Any bad publicity would be disastrous."

"I understand." I began to turn away.

She sighed deeply before she spoke.

"I don't want to tell you how to do your job, Mr. Churchill, but don't you think you'd better keep this photo?"

I stared at her the way a jockey stares at a meddling owner who offers too much advice.

"Yes, I suppose I do," I said, although I didn't see what good it would do me.

She glared at me and stuffed the photo into my left pocket. I'll have to admit that she was quite attractive when she glared. Actually, she was quite attractive when she didn't glare. She was of a nearly imperceptible age with every line and wrinkle expertly covered up to the point where it gave her face the dignity of a Dutch portrait. Pity about those paint stains on her fingers.

"Mr. Stinquist has great faith in you, Mr. Churchill," she said. "I hope his faith is not misplaced."

"I always do my best," I said.

"Let's hope your best is good enough." She turned to leave.

"Oh, by the way," I said to her. "Do you think it could have been stolen during the day?"

"I doubt it," she said. "The security cameras are on all day."

"What about the construction crew? They're here during the day. There's lots of activity going on."

"What on earth would the construction crew want with a work of art?" she asked. "They couldn't distinguish art from their building materials!" She shook her head. "No, Mr. Churchill, I doubt that any of them took it." Her chuckle was sarcastic.

"I wasn't implying that they did. Isn't the back entrance open while they work? Couldn't someone have slipped in and taken the piece?"

"No. The door is always closed and locked. The temperature in the building must be carefully controlled to protect some of our more delicate pieces. We make the workers bring in whatever they need at the start of the day so they won't have to go in and out. Besides, either myself or Fred Nilless is here at all times. We would have noticed if someone had come in and taken the sculpture. The piece is very heavy."

"Who's Fred Nilless?"

Mary couldn't believe my question.

"He's the museum's director," she said. "You didn't know that?"

"No," I said.

"He's an important figure in the art world. Anyone who knows anything about art knows Fred Nilless. He was very successful in New York before joining us. We are very privileged to have him."

"I guess I'm not too up on the art world," I said.

"So I gathered." She reached into her inventory of looks and looked at me the way a landowner looks at a serf who unexpectedly appears at the manor door.

Fortunately, James appeared and got me off the hook. Mary stared at him, her eyes a churning mixture of attraction and repulsion.

"Any luck, sir?" he asked me.

"No, James. It's quite a mystery. Where have you been?"

"Looking around."

"See anything?"

"Nothing worth seeing."

Mary continued to stare at James while she spoke to me.

"I have work to do, Mr. Churchill," she said. "If you need me, I'll be around." She slithered off to wherever it is these art types slither off to.

"You know, James," I said. "If Lars wasn't such a good friend of mine I don't think I would be here."

"Miss Bain is rather snooty, sir."

"She is indeed, James." I pulled the photo from my pocket and handed it to him.

"This is the missing piece?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It's off the wall if you ask me."

* * *

Fortunately, the house I was staying in was devoid of modern art. One day at the COMA was enough for me. I had managed to find my way into a temporarily vacant Presidio Heights home and I was enjoying its antique splendor tremendously. Presidio Heights, by the way, is one of those old San Francisco neighborhoods that oozes 1890's charm.

I settled into a comfortable chair in front of a comfortable fire and sipped Bass Ale until it was time to dress for dinner - you know how I feel about dressing for the occasion. Lars had invited me to dine with him at the Pacific Union Club, a stuffy club of stifling proportions patronized by washed-up near movers and shakers. Such a venue called for the utmost in conservative attire. I eventually decided to wear a dark blue suit with widely spaced, pale gray stripes, and a predominately silver checked tie. Very sensible, very suave, very Savile Row.

"The Rolls is ready, sir," James said.

"Very good."

We settled into the Silver Cloud III and he set a course for Nob Hill. He deposited me at the Pacific Union Club then went off to wherever it is he goes off to after dropping me off.

Lars had already arrived at the club and he rescued me from the stuffed doorman who, despite my impeccable attire, was unconvinced of my worthiness to enter the Club.

"What do you think, Winston?" Lars asked after we had been seated. His perfectly sculpted silver hair adorned the top of his head like a flag on a mast pole. He dressed the part of a patriarch with a conservative blue suit, probably Brooks Brothers, penetratingly white shirt with a tasteful foulard print tie sitting symmetrically between a starched straight collar.

"I do not have any ideas yet," I said. "But I wouldn't be surprised if it turns out to be an inside job."

"Lord, I hope not. That would be very bad. That would be the worst scenario. What makes you think it might be?"

"There's no sign of a break-in."

"What about professional thieves? Wouldn't they be extremely careful and leave no trace?"

"I doubt that they would have been perfect. And it looks perfect. Still, with all of the construction going on I suppose it's possible that someone slipped in during the day and stole the sculpture."

"Yes, perhaps someone disguised as a workman or delivery person," Lars said.

"Perhaps. Mary Bain doesn't think so."

"Mary Bain knows about art, but not much else," Lars said. He brought his napkin to his mouth and looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"And who's this Fred Nilless fellow?" I asked.

"He's the director of the museum. He handles administrative matters, arranges acquisitions, sets up special exhibits, that sort of thing."

"Has he been with the museum long?"

"Five years. That's nearly as long as the museum has been open."

"How are things financially?" I asked.

"Getting by. We have a tight budget, but Fred does a good job. You don't suspect him, do you?"

"I don't think we can afford to overlook anyone," I said. "Maybe you should report this robbery to the police."

"No, not yet, Winston. We've got to avoid the bad publicity if we can."

"I'll do my best," I said.

"I know you will. I appreciate your efforts."

"I'm always willing to do my part for the arts." I lifted my glass of 1982 Chateau Pavie. The wine needed more aging but it is rude to criticize your host's choice. After all, Lars was a man who sometimes rushed things.

* * *

Early the next morning a perfectly good night's sleep was cut short by a telephone call from Lars. Another piece of sculpture had vanished. James quickly readied the Rolls and we returned to the COMA.

"Mr. Churchill," Mary said as if I had something to do with the latest theft. "I can't believe this." There were almost tears in her eyes. Lars consoled her with a soft pat on the shoulder.

"Show me the scene of the crime," I said.

Mary led us to another empty gray platform not far from the one that had once displayed the other piece.

"It's terrible, simply terrible," she said. She shook her head and stared at the platforms. "How could this happen?"

I joined in the headshaking.

"Perhaps now it's time for the police," I suggested. "I'm not a detective, you know."

"Police?" Mary looked faint. Have you ever noticed how the mere thought of the police sends some people into a tizzy? Maybe you have. Well, Mary Bain was one of those people. I'm sure there's some clinical explanation why perfectly innocent people have such a police phobia but I've never heard it. Apparently it's contagious because Lars also developed the symptoms.

"No," he said. "I told you, Winston, no police. We can't have that. Not until you've done all you can."

"What more can I do?" I asked.

"Investigate," Mary said. "Snoop around. Do something. I've heard you're a very resourceful man."

I gently nodded. She was right, I am a resourceful man. But there were no suspects, no clues, no fun.

I wasn't too keen on getting further involved, but Lars looked so sad that I had to do it for him. One should never let a friend down, especially when he looks like a sad-eyed puppy.

"What did this piece look like?" I asked.

Mary handed me a photo.

"This is the same one you gave me yesterday," I said. I handed the photo back to her.

"It is not," Mary snapped. She shoved the photo back at me. "The two pieces evoke totally different emotions."

I looked at it again. It still looked like a heap of twisted wreckage to me.

"I see." I said, although I didn't. "Well, I guess I had better snoop around." I leaned toward James. "Off the wall if you ask me," I whispered to him.

He nodded discreetly and I followed him to the back door. The rear entrance seemed the most likely place through which the sculpture would have been removed and was therefore the best place to start snooping around, although the idea of snooping struck me as a bit undignified. Still, I suppose one must make sacrifices for the sake of art.

We examined the door and the surrounding area. The construction workers were making good progress on the new salon (you see, I got it right). The walls were finished, except for painting, and the lights were nearly installed.

"We'd better check the alley," I said to James.

He reached for the doorknob. It turned freely. He raised his eyebrows.

"This is supposed to be locked," I said.

The door led to a small alley and an even smaller parking lot. A large trash bin took up one of the parking spaces. I looked at James.

"It may be worth a look," he said.

"Go to it."

He frowned in that way he has of frowning without letting on that he's frowning, climbed up onto the bin, and peered inside.

"Is the sculpture in there?" I asked.

"I do not think I could tell, sir. There is a large amount of trash in here."

"It was worth a look," I said.

James dismounted and wiped the dust off his uniform. I felt as if I should look for tire tracks or use a magnifying glass to search for incriminating threads, but it seemed silly, really.

"There's nothing here," I said. "Let's go back in."

We turned but were stopped by a growl that sounded like a snorting bull. A red Lamborghini stormed down the alley toward us. The car slid to a halt and a well-dressed man quickly emerged. He wasn't smiling.

"Who are you?" he yelled. "And what are you doing here?"

"Who are you?" I asked back. "And what are you doing here?" Sometimes you've just got to take a stand with these self-important types.

He cocked his neck.

"All right, if that's the game you're going to play then I'm going to call the police," he said.

"I've already suggested that," I countered.

"What?" His demeanor flashed from bewilderment to consternation. "Who are you?" he again demanded.

"Winston Churchill," I said, extending my hand.

"Churchill?" He tentatively shook my hand.

"Yes."

"Oh, you're the man Lars has asked to investigate the missing sculpture."

"Yes. And who are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Fred Nilless." He shook my hand again.

So this was Fred Nilless.

"Sorry about being so aggressive just now, but with these robberies, well, you know."

"I understand," I said.

"Do you have any clues?" he asked.

"None."

Fred shook his head.

"This is terrible," he said. "How could it have happened again?"

"Seems to me more and more like an inside job."

"No, that can't be," Nilless said.

"Why not?"

"Mary and I are the only insiders."

"And you didn't take the sculpture?"

"Of course not! I'm the director of this museum!"

"What about Mary Bain?" I asked.

"You can't suspect her. She is an outstanding judge of artistic talent, and a fine artist herself. She's also my right hand man, er, woman. Without her help there would be no museum."

"Maybe she could use some extra cash?"

"I told you, she is above suspicion!" Nilless turned red and charged toward me like one of Senor Romeros' finest Miuras. I eluded him with a perfectly executed *chicuelina*. James stepped between us just in case.

"All right, all right," I said. "I had to ask. I'm just doing my job."

Nilless calmed down and straightened his tie.

"Yes, well, I'm sorry," he said. "Shall we go inside?"

We followed him into the museum. Lars stopped pacing long enough to greet us.

"Hello, Fred," Lars said. "I'm glad you're here. Winston, did you find anything?"

"Only Fred," I said.

"I'm going to see Mary," Nilless said. His Allen-Edmunds clicked on the shiny floor as he walked away.

"This Nilless fellow," I said to Lars. "There are no scandals or anything like that in his past, are there?"

"Heavens no," Lars said. "He has perfect credentials."

We were momentarily distracted by raised voices.

"Fred and Mary don't always see eye-to-eye about certain works but that's what makes them such a good team." Lars winked at me.

I nodded. The argument sounded more like a lover's scrap than artistic disagreement but what do I know? I had already revealed my ignorance of modern art.

"Fred has been here for five years?" I continued.

"Yes," Lars said. "But Winston, you surely don't suspect him, do you?"

"As I told you before, we can't afford to overlook anyone."

"But he has an impeccable record with the museum."

"Does he make enough money to drive a Lamborghini?"

"Mr. Nilless has business interests outside the museum. He must subsidize his income because we certainly cannot afford to pay him what he's worth. His work here is a labor of love."

"Oh, I see."

"Well, I've got to go," Lars said. "I'll be at my office if you need to reach me."

* * *

Several visitors arrived shortly after Lars departed. I followed the voices and found two Asian men talking to Fred.

"It's good to see you again," Fred said to them. He said something else but I couldn't hear it over the noise of the construction crew.

"Yes, we like the Prixley very much," one of the men said.

"I'm glad you like it," Fred said. "Perhaps you would like to see some of our new works?"

The men nodded. Fred led them to a painting that looked like a burnt pizza. He started to explain it but stopped when he noticed me. He smiled but he didn't seem very happy.

"Please continue," I said. The Asian men politely bowed and smiled.

"I was just finishing," Fred said.

"Enjoying the museum?" I asked the visitors.

"Yes, we always enjoy it," one of them said.

"Do you come here often?"

"Yes. We come here very often."

Fred was perspiring for some reason. It certainly wasn't hot in the climate-

controlled museum. Not yet, at least.

"Let me introduce you," Fred said. "This is Mr. Chiu and Mr. Chou. They're from Hong Kong."

"Hong Kong?" I said.

They nodded in tandem and smiled.

"Long way to come to look at pictures," I said.

They looked puzzled and turned to Fred.

"Language barrier," he whispered to me. He then ushered them into another room.

I could tell I wasn't wanted so I stayed behind. Then another man entered the museum. He was dressed as if he hated fashion and his thinning gray hair was combed back in such a haphazard manner that it made him look like a billy goat. A pair of dirty rimless glasses clung precariously to the tip of his puffy nose. He looked over his nose and raised his eyebrows then looked at all of the pictures in the main room. He showed special interest in one that was a tangled mass of turquoise. He removed his glasses and used them as a magnifying glass. I stood next to him, hoping to learn a little something about abstract art.

"This is a fraud," he said.

"Really?" I looked more closely at the painting. "How can you tell?" I continued. I anticipated an in-depth treatise on forgery but that is not what I received.

"Because I painted the original."

"What?" Art can be dizzying at times. "Who are you?"

"I am Lucius Prixley." He pronounced his last name "pree-lee". "I painted that picture. Well, the real one, not that phony." He pointed at the messy painting with his glasses.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so," Prixley growled. "Where's Mr. Nilless? I wonder what's happened to the original?"

"Why would Mr. Nilless know that?" I asked.

"Because I donated it to him personally so he could display it here at the museum."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so," Prixley snapped. He reminded me of a dog going after an annoying flea. He looked at me and frowned. When he frowned his face looked like one of those masks used to denote tragic drama.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Do you work here?"

"Just helping out," I said. I took another close look at the painting. The unmistakable aroma of a scam filled the air. Stolen sculpture, forged paintings, foreign visitors - it all began to make sense.

"Say, how fast can you turn one of these out?" I asked Prixley, nodding at the copy of his painting.

"I don't know," he fidgeted. "Good art cannot be rushed."

"Could you finish one by tomorrow morning?"

Prixley shrugged.

"Why, do you want to buy one?" he asked.

"I know somebody who does."

"In that case..."

I arranged to meet Prixley the next morning, shuffled him out the back door, and went for James.

"Any progress, sir?" he asked.

"Yes. These thefts have something to do with forged paintings and those Hong Kong visitors," I said.

"Sir?"

I told him of my encounter with Lucius Prixley.

"I've got it all figured out," I said. "And I'm setting a trap. You see, those Hong Kong visitors are not here to look at art, they're here to buy it! Nilless must be selling them forgeries," I concluded.

"But sir, the forgeries are hanging on the museum walls!"

Okay, so I may have gotten a few of the details wrong but I was still convinced Nilless was up to some hanky panky. My theory was that he was trying to impress Mary Bain and Mary Bain appeared to be the kind of woman who had a finely developed appreciation for wealth.

* * *

The next morning we called for Prixley at his studio. He stumbled down the stairs and stared at my Rolls Royce. Even a abstract artist can appreciate a Silver Cloud III.

"Is that your new painting?" I asked.

"Yes. I stayed up all night painting it."

"Let me see," I said.

He held up the canvas.

"Very nice," I said. "Despite the coffee stains."

"I don't drink coffee," he growled.

"Oh. Anyway, I want you to offer this painting to Fred Nilless," I said to Prixley. When he accepts it, leave."

"Will Mr. Nilless pay me?" Prixely asked.

"No, I'll pay you."

"When?"

"After you deliver the painting. I'll wait for you outside."

"Fine."

Prixley enjoyed his ride in the Rolls. He sat pompously in the back seat, looking out of the windows through the corners of his eyes. He was visibly disappointed when the ride came to an end.

"Here we are," I said.

"Already?" Prixley asked.

James parked the Rolls around the corner from the COMA. Prixley reluctantly climbed out and carried his painting into the museum. Several minutes later he returned empty-handed.

"Did he accept it?" I asked.

"Of course. They think very highly of me there."

"Is Mary Bain in the museum?"

"Yes, I think so. I didn't see her, but I smelled her perfume on Mr. Nilless's coat."

"I see." I slyly grinned at James.

"When do I get paid?"

"Very soon."

James restarted the Rolls and drove to an alley about a block away from the COMA. The Peking Penguin was there waiting for us.

"Hello, Mr. Churchill," he said.

"Hello," I said. "Glad you could make it. I appreciate your help."

"When you say it's important, Mr. Churchill, I believe you."

"You're a good man," I said.

James hid a small radio transmitter in the Penguin's tie clasp and gave me the receiver.

"Say something," I said to the Penguin.

"Hello, Mr. Churchill," he said.

"It's working fine," I nodded.

"What's that?" Prixley asked.

"Bait," I said.

"Oh." He put on his smudged glasses and stared at the transmitter.

Lars arrived and parked his Lincoln behind my Rolls.

"I'm glad you could make it on such short notice," I said to him.

"What's this all about, Winston?" he asked.

"The mystery of the lost sculpture will soon be revealed," I said.

Lars stared at me. Then he noticed Prixley.

"Lucius Prixley, what are you doing here?" Lars asked.

"He's helping us out," I said. "Would you mind writing him a check for a few thousand dollars?"

"Why?"

"Trust me. It's for a good cause."

Lars scribbled a check and gave it to Prixley. Prixley brought the check to within an inch of his glasses, grinned, and stuffed the check into his jacket.

"And who is that man?" Lars asked, pointing at the Penguin.

"He's a good man. He's also helping us out." I nodded to the Penguin and he started for the COMA.

"Listen to this receiver," I said to Lars. I ushered him into the back seat of the Rolls. James took his station behind the wheel.

"I'm almost there," the Penguin said. His voice came through the receiver strong and clear.

"Winston, what's going on?" Lars asked. "Is this some kind of a gag? I appreciate a good joke but I'm very busy today."

"Just listen," I said. "All will soon be revealed."

We heard the Penguin open the door and walk into the museum. His heels clicked on the floor. The clicking occasionally stopped and when it did I assumed he had stopped to look at a painting. I think I heard him gasp once or twice but that could have been my imagination. Then we heard another set of footsteps.

"Those sound like Allen-Edmunds to me," I said.

"Who?" Lars asked.

"Hello," someone said over the receiver.

"That's not Allen Edmunds," Lars said. "That's Fred Nilless!"

"Hello," the Penguin answered.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in the museum before," Fred said.

"No, this is my first time. My friends told me about it. You know, perhaps, Mr. Chiu and Mr. Chou?"

"Why, yes." Fred became excited. "Are you a collector also?"

"Yes." The Penguin was nervous.

"Do you wish to add to your collection?"

The Penguin didn't speak. He must have nodded.

"Good," Fred said. "Your friends have just purchased some fine works from us. They were here yesterday, but you probably know that."

"Yes. I am interested in purchasing a Prixley."

"You are? Well, you're in luck. We have just received one this morning. It is his latest work. It will make an outstanding addition to your collection."

Lars turned to me. He didn't look very well.

"He's selling my painting!" Prixley said.

"That's it," I said. "Tally ho, James!"

James immediately started the Rolls and drove briskly to the COMA. He brought the Silver Cloud to a quick but dignified stop in front of the museum. We poured out of the Rolls and stormed into the COMA.

"What's going on here, Fred?" Lars demanded.

"Nice job," I said to the Penguin. I stuffed a few Cubans into his pocket and pulled the tiny transmitter from his tie clasp.

"We heard the entire conversation," I said to Fred.

"What do you think you heard?"

"I heard a scam." I also heard noise from behind an office door. We all looked at each other. James silently went to the door.

"Don't open that!" Fred said. "That's a private office."

James opened the door and exposed Mary Bain putting the finishing touches on a copy of Prixley's latest painting.

"So you're in on it, too?" I said.

"What are you talking about?" I gave her credit for playing it cool in the face of such incriminating circumstances.

"Is that another Prixley you're forging?" I asked. "Let's take a look." The easel contained a nearly complete forgery of Prixley's latest work. Makes you wonder why it took so long to paint the Sistine Chapel.

"What?"

"We know all about the forgeries," I said. "We caught Fred in the act."

Mary's eyes widened until they looked like golf balls. Then she drove them at Fred.

"I knew you'd be the one to do us in," she screamed. "I knew you'd crack."

"They tricked me!" he pleaded.

"An ass could trick you!" Mary yelled.

"Mary..." Poor Fred's feelings were hurt.

"I suppose you're responsible for this," Mary said to me. "I knew you were going to be trouble. You can't trust people who know nothing about art."

"You shouldn't have stolen those pieces of sculpture," Lars said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have called on Winston for help. I would never have found out about this."

"We didn't steal them," Fred said. "Unless Mary did it on her own."

"I wouldn't touch those pieces of trash. You're the one who acquired them for the museum. You never did have any taste."

Lars turned to me.

"Then what happened to the sculpture?" he asked.

"They really must have been stolen," I said.

"The works were not stolen, sir," James discreetly interrupted.

"What?"

Everyone turned to James.

"I found them in the new salon," he said.

"What?"

We followed him to the new salon where he directed us to the far corner of the room. And there they were: the missing sculpture. The pieces were neatly embedded in the wall. The construction workers had obviously mistaken the sculpture for building material and had used it to build the wall!

Lars' mouth hung open and he couldn't close it. Pity, his astonished look did not go well with his Brioni double-breasted suit.

"What have they done to those priceless works of art?" Fred cried.

"Put them to good use," I said. "It looks as if they weren't so off the wall after all. Home, James."

The Rogue's Gambit



"Pull!"

The clay pigeon sailed across the sky like a shooting star. Ted Nance followed its trajectory with his 12-gauge and pulled the trigger when the target reached its apogee. His shot splattered the little black and orange disk into hundreds of pieces.

"Good shot!" his wife, Nancy, said. She loaded her gun and tested its balance before bringing it to her shoulder.

"Pull!" she yelled.

Another clay pigeon flew across the sky. She tracked it with the barrel of her gun then fired. Her substantial body silently absorbed the shotgun's recoil. Her figure may not have been perfect but her shot was. The clay pigeon returned to earth in pieces.

"Good shot, Nance," Ted said.

She grinned, lowered her gun and turned to me. "Your turn, Winston."

I hadn't done any shooting in quite a while and even though my Barbour Penine shooting jacket had padded shoulders I knew I would be sore in the morning. But that was no cause for complaint. It was good to be out in the country under a sparkling sky breathing invigoratingly crisp air. Saving Bernie from his "mob girl" and uncovering an art scam had proved to be a bit tiring and this day of shooting was doing me good.

"Pull!" I said.

James launched the target from a small shack to our right. The clay bird sailed across the sky in front of me. I followed its path with my barrel, leading it slightly, then squeezed the trigger. The shotgun kicked me in the shoulder like a backfiring Ford, but my shot hit the target dead center.

"Good shooting, Winston," Ted said.

"Thanks."

"Have you been practicing?" Nancy asked.

"No."

"Come, now, Winston," Ted said as he readied his gun. "James must be giving you lessons."

"Nothing of the sort," I said. "It was a lucky shot."

Nancy gave me that skeptical look that schoolteachers give schoolboys with poor excuses. James then took six more clay birds from a straw-lined wooden box and reloaded the launcher.

"What do you think of these clay pigeons?" Ted asked. "I got them from Mexico. Their balance is superb."

I took one of the clay pigeons from the box and examined it. It was nicely molded with "Made in Mexico" stamped into the clay along the edge.

"Yes, very good birds," I said. True skeet shooters are as picky about their clay pigeons as fanatical golfers are about their golf balls.

"I'm importing a shipment of them to use in the sporting clays tournament my hunting club is sponsoring next week," he said.

Now I supposed I should explain a few things. First, sporting clays. Sporting clays is a game, invented by the British of course, that combines skeet shooting and hunting. But instead of hunting real game, clay birds are used. Contestants move from station to station along a woodland course like golfers moving from hole to hole. The clay birds are launched and made to duplicate the movement of various game such as pheasant, quail, and rabbit. One point is given for each target hit. It's not as easy as it sounds.

And now about Ted Nance. Ted owned a small, but successful, import/export business in San Francisco. He shipped mainly to and from Latin America. He also owned the beautiful piece of land we were shooting on: fifty acres nestled against the mountains separating the Napa and Sonoma valleys. He was an avid sportsman and adequate businessman. He wasn't perfect but he was a good man.

"You will be a member of my team, won't you?" he asked.

"Of course," I said. "Who else is on it?"

"Nance, of course, and a fellow named Richard Rigger. He's a banker."

Nancy's face momentarily clouded over even though the sky was clear. That should have given me my first clue but I was enjoying the shooting too much to notice.

"Richard Rigger?" I said. "I don't know him."

"He's throwing a party next Saturday. You can meet him there. You're free next Saturday, aren't you?"

"Come on, Ted, it's your turn to shoot," Nancy growled.

"Pull!" Ted yelled.

Another clay pigeon crossed the sky. Ted raised his gun to his shoulder, aimed, shot, and hit the target just before it hit the ground. He turned toward us with a giant grin on his face.

"See if you can top that shot, Nance," he said to his wife.

"I've had enough shooting for today," she replied.

"Oh." Ted's giant grin dissolved into giant disappointment. "If that's the way you feel", he shrugged. You could always tell when Ted was disappointed. It was the way his eyebrows appeared to melt and drip into his eyes.

"You can stay here and shoot for as long as you like," Nancy said. "I'm going back to the house. Coming, Winston?" It was more of a command than a question.

"Sure," I said.

"You don't mind if James stays with me, do you Winston?" Ted asked. "I would like to get in a bit more practice."

"Have at it," I said.

"We'll have coffee waiting for you," Nancy said.

* * *

"Winston, something's wrong," Nancy said as we approached the house.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Ted hasn't been himself. Something's troubling him. A wife can always tell. I don't know for sure, but I think it has something to do with this Rigger fellow. My intuition tells me he's getting Ted into trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry I can't be more specific, but Ted definitely hasn't been himself since he started doing business with Rigger."

I looked at Nancy.

"These days he's always nervous," she continued. "And he seems shifty. We both know that's not Ted. I just know this Rigger fellow is behind it all. Now there's a shifty one for you. I just don't trust him."

"Ted thinks highly enough of him to have invited him to be a member of his sporting clays team." I said. "There must be some trust there."

"There's something fishy about that, too" Nancy said. "I don't think it was all Ted's idea."

"You think Rigger muscled his way in?"

Nancy shrugged. "I suggested James. He's the logical choice. But no, Ted picked Rigger."

"Well, you know how businessmen like to stick together."

"There's more to it than that. I know there is."

"Would you like me to pursue it?" I asked.

Nancy stopped and touched my arm. "Would you, Winston?" she said. "It would make me feel so much better."

"Sure."

"Be discreet, though, would you? Don't let Ted know I suspect anything."

"You know me," I said. "I am always the epitome of discretion.

"And always the perfect gentleman," she said.

* * *

Ted and James returned after the sun had turned the sky purple. Ted led me into his living room where an entire wall was covered by shelves holding knick-knacks from around the world. I examined a few pieces while Ted pulled some cigars out of a wooden box.

"I've got something for you," he said. "Cubans, of course."

"Of, course." I stuffed them into my pocket.

"Don't see why you want them, though. You don't smoke."

"Gifts," I said, thinking of the Penguin.

Ted nodded.

"Oh, and wait until you see this." He went to a handsome walnut gun case, unlocked it, removed one of the shotguns and carefully carried it to me.

"Nice," I said.

"It's an AAHE-grade Parker. I paid \$38,000 for it."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Yes," Ted continued. "It was a real bargain. I've see them go for as much as 45k."

It was a beautiful shotgun all right. Not too much engraving but meticulously crafted. It oozed precision.

"Oh, he's showing you **that**," Nancy said, bringing in four steaming mugs of coffee. "Give me a gun I can take out in the wilds and shoot with. All that one is good for is sitting in the case."

"Don't you use it?" I asked.

"No, it's a work of art," Ted said. "No true collector or lover of shotguns would ever take one of these out into the wilds. The risk of scratching it or damaging it is too great." He returned the gun to the case.

"It's a waste if you ask me," Nancy said. "Give me a gun I can shoot."

I smiled. Ted locked the gun case and joined us on the sofa.

"Now, Ted," Nancy said. "Tell us what kind of trouble Rigger's gotten you into."

So much for discretion. So much for not letting Ted know she was suspicious.

"What?" Ted said. He fumbled for a Cuban.

"There's something fishy going on, Ted. And don't deny it. A wife can always tell. I've asked Winston to look into it."

"Fishy?" Ted asked. He looked like a golden retriever who had failed to retrieve.

"Yes," Nancy said. "Now tell us about it."

"There's nothing to tell," Ted said, lighting his cigar. It took him three tries before it finally caught. He inhaled, filled his lungs with pungent smoke, then exhaled, clouding the air around us.

"Nonsense," Nancy scoffed. Her eyes shot at him like the barrels of a Purdey side-by-side.

"Oh, Nance," Ted grumbled. "It's a business matter, nothing important. And it has nothing to do with you."

Nancy continued to stare at him with her loaded eyes. Ted turned to me for support.

"Really, Winston, it's nothing," he said.

"Come on, Ted, tell us," Nancy growled. She was going to get her way, it was only a matter of time. Ted could stall and fight it all the way, but the outcome was predetermined. He did the sensible thing and saved us all a nasty scene.

"All right, all right." He ground his cigar into the ashtray, extinguishing it slowly so Nancy would fume. He leaned over and rested his elbows on his thighs and cupped his chin in his hands.

"I'm being blackmailed," he said.

That was a showstopper. Nancy looked as if she had discovered a slug crawling out of her coffee. I, of course, remained cool. A dignified demeanor should be maintained at all times when wearing Barbour hunting apparel.

"But you could hardly call it blackmail," Ted continued. "Sometimes Richard makes me bring things in from South America. I get them into the country for him without paying duty or customs."

"That's risky," I said. "Why do you do it?"

"Well, as you know, not everything I ship is strictly legal. Nothing harmful, mind you. I want to go on record for that. I'm very careful about what I import and export. Cuban cigars, things like that."

Nancy nodded.

"I never send dangerous contraband out. No weapons, nothing like that."

"Come on, Ted, get on with it," Nancy said. She had collected herself and taken on the role of chief inquisitor.

"All right, Nance, all right. Richard knows about my illegal imports and he knows that I haven't paid taxes on the income from them. He could get me into a lot of trouble with the IRS."

"Is he threatening to tell them?" I asked.

"Not exactly. But he has dropped hints."

"How did you get involved with Rigger?" I asked.

"I had to find a banker to finance my new ship, the *Azul Pacific*. My other bankers wouldn't touch it. They said I was already too leveraged. Conservative fools. Anyway, Richard specializes in Latin America so he was a natural choice. I didn't have to explain my business to him or justify my plans."

"How did he find out about your illegal imports?" I asked.

Ted shook his head. "I offered him a Cuban cigar, of course."

"Of course. So, what are these things he makes you bring into the country?"

"Oh, nothing serious. Cheap clay pots, things like that. Really, it's nothing serious."

"Ha!" Nancy said. "I knew Rigger was trouble. Why did you invite him to be part of our sporting clays team?"

"He kind of invited himself," Ted shrugged. "I didn't know he was interested in shooting until he asked to be on the team."

"You should have invited James," Nancy said.

As you will see, she was right.

* * *

Daylight dissolved into the bay like dark ink. The Rolls cut silently through the Saturday evening traffic and James brought it to a dignified halt in front of Richard Rigger's house. It was a modest six bedroom affair in Cow Hollow. Pretty ritzy place by anyone's standards. James opened my door and we stepped into Rigger's party.

Cow Hollow parties aren't much different from Nob Hill parties. A bit more nouveau riche, perhaps, and therefore a bit more pretentious. The Claude Montana set instead of the Yves St. Laurent crowd. I threw caution to the wind and wore Italian: a nice solid gray Canali suit with a striped shirt and striped tie. I know, stripes on stripes isn't advisable but the shirt and tie colors were so complimentary that the look was perfect. Trust me.

I followed James into Rigger's library. It was a high-ceilinged room containing more people than books. We mingled and waited for Ted to find us.

"Careless storage," I said, pulling a cigar from a leather pencil holder conspicuously placed on a Louis-the-something antique desk. I sniffed the cigar and gave it to James.

"Cuban," he said after sniffing it.

I nodded. I was about to place one in my vest pocket when Ted found us and introduced us to our host and future shooting partner.

"Winston, I'd like you to meet Richard Rigger," he said.

Rigger was a barrel of a man with a cigar stuck in his face. Three strands of hair stretched across the top of his head. Not sporting material if you ask me. Yes, looks can be deceiving, but, I mean, a man who wears a sport coat and pants of contrasting shades of dark blue? Really! Nothing good can come of a man like that.

"Winston is the other member of our sporting clays team," Ted said to Rigger.

"Yes, I've heard of you," Rigger said. "Any friend of Ted's is a friend of mine."

"Glad to hear it," I said.

"Yes, meeting Ted was a mutually fortuitous event," Rigger continued.

"I understand you financed the purchase of Ted's newest ship?" I asked.

"Yes, that's how we met. We both have business interests south of the border, so it was a natural partnership." His flabby hand patted Ted on the shoulder.

"You have banking business in Latin America?" I asked.

"Yes. I have clients there, wealthy clients, of course, who invest their money through me. I can offer them much better investment opportunities here than they can find at home. Those countries are so unenlightened when it comes to finance. I help my clients find more productive outlets for their assets."

"I see," I said.

"And of course they're grateful for my services and reward me appropriately. That allows me to indulge in my hobbies."

"Like shooting?" I asked.

"Yes, like shooting." He closed one eye and aimed an imaginary gun at an imaginary target.

"Bang," he said. Then he laughed.

"He's no shooter," James whispered to me.

And James was right. A real skeet shooter keeps both eyes open. If you don't believe me ask Holland & Holland's shooting school outside of London.

"Speaking of shooting, when are those clay pigeons arriving?" he asked Ted.

"Early Saturday morning," Ted said. "The day of the tournament."

"That's cutting it close," Rigger said. "I'd better pick them up."

"There's no need for that, Richard," Ted said. "Don't go out of your way. If you pick them up you'll also have to deliver them to the shooting club. I'm sure it would be an inconvenience. You'd have to get up very early."

"That's no problem," Rigger said. "Those are special clay pigeons. I want to make sure nothing happens to them."

"I see your point," Ted said. "But my men can handle it."

"Will you be there personally?" Rigger asked.

"No, but..."

"We can't take chances, can we?" Rigger said.

"No, I suppose not," Ted agreed.

"I don't think the clay pigeons will fly away on their own," I joked.

Rigger stared at me in a way that almost made me believe they would. "Those are valuable clay pigeons," he said sternly. "I don't want to see anything happen to them."

"Yes," Ted said, rising to Rigger's self-importance. "That would be bad. The shooting club is counting on those birds."

"Then it's all settled," Rigger said. "I'll pick them up and deliver them to the club. They are coming in on the *Azul Pacific*, aren't they?"

"Yes," Ted said.

"Good. What time does the ship arrive?"

"Five-thirty."

"I'll be waiting for it," Rigger said. "We can't take any chances with those birds."

"If you insist," Ted said.

"I do," Rigger smiled. "It was nice meeting you, Winston," he said, shaking my hand. He then melted back into his party.

"He's awfully worried about those clay pigeons, isn't he?" I asked Ted.

"Yes," Ted said. "But they are good birds."

"But they aren't gold, are they?"

He looked at me the way a French waiter looks at an American diner. "Of course not," he said.

* * *

"James, we still have a few contacts in Latin America, don't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"We may need them. I suggest you do some investigating and learn more about this Rigger chap and his Latin American business interests."

"Very prudent, sir."

* * *

It was a typical Tuesday in San Francisco's Marina District. A sea wind marched down Cervantes Street and swirled through the gates protecting the affluent yards facing the harbor. I was firmly lost in my thoughts when Nancy unexpectedly arrived.

"Hello, Winston," she said.

"Nancy," I said. "What a surprise!"

"I hope I'm not interrupting."

"No, not at all. What can I get you to drink?"

"Coffee?" she asked.

I nodded and James left to brew some.

"Winston, I'm here to try to set some things straight," she said. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression about Ted. You know him. He's really not a bad man. He's just so intense about his business. And when his bankers wouldn't finance his new ship, well, it's easy to see how he could fall into Rigger's clutches, isn't it?"

"Certainly," I said.

James delivered the coffee and poured two cups. Nancy held her cup in her palms as if it was a hand warmer.

"And what he's doing doesn't really seem all that bad," she continued. "So Rigger makes him smuggle cheap pottery. Is that such a crime?"

"I suppose not."

She sipped her coffee and stared at the floor.

"But there's something else, isn't there?" I said.

Nancy raised her eyes. "How perceptive of you," she said. She put down her coffee and reached into her bag. "What do you make of this, Winston?"

It was a stone bird about six inches tall with turquoise eyes and roughly carved wings. It looked fragile and indestructible at the same time.

James studied the small piece of sculpture and then handed it to me.

"South American?" I asked.

"Peruvian to be exact," James said.

"It looks old."

"It's Moche, sir. From between the first and eighth century A.D."

"Is it authentic?" I asked.

"Very," he said.

I looked at the bird more closely.

"James," I said. "Isn't it illegal to export Peruvian antiquities?"

"Yes, sir."

Nancy blushed.

"Then I wonder how this one found its way to California?" I asked.

"There are always ways, sir. Sometimes they are shipped from Peru to Bolivia where they are coated in clay and stamped 'Made in Bolivia'. They are then shipped to North America or Europe as cheap Bolivian pottery. Upon arrival the clay coating is removed and..."

"Voila', a genuine Peruvian antiquity ready for someone's private collection. Very clever."

"Yes, sir."

"Nancy, where did you get this?" I asked.

"Ted got it from Rigger. I suspected something wasn't right about it but I wanted to be sure. Rigger's up to something, Winston. I don't know what it is, but it can't be any good. Whatever it is, we've got to stop him before Ted gets in too deep."

This little stone bird was actually quite a stool pigeon. I quickly glanced at James. Clay pigeons swirled in his eyes.

"I say, James, you don't think..."

"Yes, sir, I do."

"What, Winston?" Nancy asked. "What?"

* * *

The sporting clays tournament site resembled a small circus. Food, clothing, and gun vendors had set up shop under small, khaki tents in a clearing next to the parking area. A larger tent had been erected to accommodate the couple of hundred spectators who would all be staying for the post-tournament dinner. Have you ever noticed how there always seems to be more watchers than doers? No, you probably haven't. Well, it's true, especially where sporting clays are concerned.

Anyway, James parked the Rolls in a secure spot and began preparing my shooting gear. He opened the boot and removed my Wellingtons, Barbour

shooting waistcoat (it was a bit too warm for a full jacket), the shotgun - a beautiful Baretta over-and-under borrowed from Ted - and several boxes of ammunition.

"I'll ready the gun, sir," James said.

I nodded.

"Winston!" It was Ted in a pair of sporting knickers that would have looked quite spiffy on a man thirty pounds lighter.

"Good morning, Ted."

"It may not be a such good morning," he said in one of those overly serious voices.

"What's wrong?"

"Richard just arrived. He was delayed by a traffic accident on his way to the ship, and when he finally got to it the clay pigeons were missing!"

"Relax," I said.

"Relax? I promised the club I would supply the birds for this tournament! They'll have to call the whole thing off without them!"

"They already have the clay pigeons," I said.

"What?"

"I took the liberty of having James pick them up. He was in the area. I knew you wouldn't mind. He brought them straight to your shooting club. And lucky for us he did, with Rigger having had that accident."

"Oh," Ted said.

"Sorry I forgot to tell you."

"That's okay. The clay pigeons are here, that's the important thing."

I smiled.

"Here comes Mr. Rigger, sir," James said.

You can always tell when a man is nervous even if he's a hundred yards away. I think it has something to do with the lopsided way his head sits on his neck.

"Ted, have you found those clay pigeons yet?" His voice sounded like that of a golden retriever's.

"It's all right, Richard," Ted said. "Winston had his chauffeur pick them up. They're here. There's nothing to worry about."

Do you recall what it's like flipping on a light switch and having the 100-watt suddenly pop with a momentary flash of incandescent light before plunging the room back into darkness? If you do then you know how Rigger looked. He swallowed with such deliberateness that I thought his entire face would be drawn

down his gullet. It wasn't.

"I told you I would pick them up," he said. His vocal cords stretched like rubber bands.

"Sorry, old sport," I said. "But James was in the area."

"It's okay, Richard," Ted beamed. "The pigeons have been delivered and the tournament will go on!"

Ted patted Rigger on the back and nearly knocked him over.

* * *

The first shooting station was set up for rabbit and pheasant. The targets were launched in pairs, those simulating pheasant crossing high and fast, those simulating rabbit bounding along the ground so realistically that you could almost see furry tails. Rigger carefully watched each contestant's shot, following the flight of each clay pigeon as it sailed through the trees or along the grass. He watched where the pieces landed when they were hit and even where the unhit targets went.

"Looking for something special, Richard?" I asked.

"What?"

"You seem awfully interested in those clay pigeons."

"Oh, ah, I'm, ah, studying the trajectories."

"I see," I said.

I figured Rigger would use this trajectory information to improve his shooting. I figured wrong.

Ted shot first for our team and hit just two of the targets.

"They're just like real pheasants," he grumbled.

Rigger shot next. The uncertain manner in which he held his gun did not inspire confidence. And, as you probably guessed, he wasn't properly dressed. He looked more like a clam digger than a shooter. Rather an embarrassment, actually.

"Pull," he crackled.

Two clay pigeons sailed toward the trees. He watched the first one intently but forgot to shoot at it. The second was nearly out of range by the time he finally pulled the trigger. When the smoke had cleared he had missed all ten shots. So much for studying trajectories.

"Bad luck," Ted said to him, bestowing a conciliatory pat on the back.

"Bad shooting," Nancy muttered to me.

Nancy salvaged the round for us by hitting half of her shots. I'll admit that my six-for-ten didn't hurt either. We left the first station a bit rattled but still resolved

to giving it the old college try. Rigger looked back as if he were trying to figure out what had gone wrong.

The second station was in front of a pond. The clay pigeons were launched at the waterline level of the pond in order to accurately simulate mallards ducks. Very authentic. It was going to be one of the more difficult stations.

Again Rigger watched each bird as it was launched. I was sure it would be only a matter of time before he figured it out, and when it was his turn to shoot he did show improvement. He remembered to shoot at the first clay pigeon. He didn't hit it, but he did shoot at it. He did, in fact, shoot at all of them. He didn't hit any of them, but at least he shot at them.

"You need to relax, Richard," Ted said to him.

"He needs to learn how to shoot," Nancy whispered to me.

"Yes," I said to Rigger. "You seem too obsessed with those clay pigeons, too concerned about trajectories and all that."

"Just aim and shoot," Nancy growled.

The third station simulated springing teal. The clay pigeons were launched across another pond. Unfortunately, by this time Rigger was completely demoralized. He cringed every time a clay pigeon splashed into the water.

"Take it easy, Richard," I said. "They're only clay pigeons, they're not gold."

He stared at me and swallowed hard. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead.

"He's a bundle of nerves," Nancy whispered.

"He certainly seems distracted," I said.

"He's going to cost us the tournament," she added.

"Relax, Nance," Ted said to her. "It's early yet."

We pointed Rigger toward the next shooting station, gave him a helpful little push, and watched him ready his gun.

"Pull," he said.

A clay pigeon flew across the sky, then another quickly behind it. Rigger fired two shots into the air and watched the unhit disks hit the water. One of them skipped several times before submerging.

And so it went. Rigger kept watching the pigeons as other contestants shot, but it didn't do him any good. Out of one-hundred attempts he hit only five and it appeared to me that those had been hit by accident. A bit of a burden on the team.

"I told you you should have invited James," Nancy growled at Ted.

He ignored her and turned to Rigger. "Are you feeling okay, Richard?" he asked. "You don't look well."

"Yes, cheer up, old man," I said. "After all, we didn't lose a fortune, only the shooting tournament."

He looked at me strangely. "Fortune?" he said. "What do you know about fortunes?" He turned and left in a huff.

"Well, I never," Nancy said. "His poor shooting costs us the tournament then he acts like some *prima donna*."

"He's had a bad day," Ted said.

"You don't know how bad," I added.

Nancy looked at me funny.

* * *

The post-tournament dinner was excellent. Real game birds, not clay ones, were served in a light butter sauce with plenty of Napa Valley's finest grape juice to go around. Tasty. All in all, a first class meal. Too bad Rigger didn't have an appetite. He picked at his meal with disinterest. Something was eating him. He finally pushed his plate away and left the table.

"Where's Richard going?" Ted asked. "I hope he doesn't wander too far away and miss the awards ceremony."

"Why?" Nancy asked. "Are they going to give him an award for the worst shooter?"

"Nance, that's not a nice thing to say," Ted said.

Nancy tossed her napkin on the table and rose. Then someone struck up the band and diners suddenly became dancers. We were all separated from each other in the ensuing mayhem. I eventually found Ted extricating himself from a human sandwich.

"Where's Nance?" Ted asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Someone said they saw her going back out on the shooting course."

"What's she doing there?" Ted asked.

"She is following Mr. Rigger, sir," James said, appearing next to Ted.

"What? Why is she doing that? And what's Richard doing?"

"He is looking for something, sir."

"What on earth for?" Ted asked.

"A pot of gold," I said.

Ted looked at me funny.

* * *

James knew a shortcut (he always does, doesn't he?) and we intercepted

Nancy near the dove shooting station.

"Nance, what are you doing here?" Ted whispered.

"Rigger's up to something," she said. "I aim to find out what it is."

"I think you're about to find out," I said.

James led us into a clearing where we found Rigger rummaging through the foliage and breaking apart undamaged clay pigeons. James' flashlight shed some light on the scene.

"Looking for something?" I said.

Rigger jumped like a startled quail. "What?" he said "Who are you?"

"It's me, Churchill," I said.

"Churchill? Churchill! I should have known. It's all your fault, you know. I was supposed to pick up those clay pigeons. But you had to interfere, didn't you? You ruined everything. Now they're gone, those precious, valuable, irreplaceable..."

"You mean the Peruvian antiquities?"

He stared at me, surprised at first, then confused, then angry.

"You mean you knew the antiquities were in the clay pigeons?" he screamed. "And you let them be shot to pieces? Oh, how could you? You're inhuman!" Rigger fell to his knees.

"Don't worry," I said. "I took the liberty of substituting ordinary clay pigeons for those that contained the antiquities. You didn't really think I'd let those priceless artifacts be destroyed, did you?"

"What?" he looked up at me. "Then where are they?"

"On their way back to where they belong. And now you're going to where you belong."

"You can't send me to jail. I have friends in high places. You can't prove anything."

"Jail? I'm not sending you to jail. I'm sending you to the Peace Corps."

"Peace Corps?"

"Well, something like the Peace Corps," I said.

Two men silently emerged from the shadows and stood next to Rigger.

"It's time for you to repay your debt to society," I said. "These men will escort you."

They lifted Rigger to his feet and led him away.

"*Addios*," James said.

"*Addios, amigo*," one of the men replied.

"Winston, what's going on?" Ted asked. The poor boy was a bit confused.

"Those clay pigeons you imported from Mexico contained stolen Peruvian antiquities that Rigger was smuggling into the country. His Latin American clients molded some very old and very valuable gold and turquoise necklaces into the clay pigeons. They fit perfectly. Rigger planned to intercept the pigeons when they arrived on the *Azul Pacific* and substitute ordinary ones in their place. James, of course, beat him to it."

"So throughout the tournament Rigger thought we were shooting at the antiquities-laden clay pigeons," Nancy said.

"Correct," I said.

"No wonder he shot so poorly," she said. "He thought he was seeing a fortune disintegrate with every shot. I told you Rigger was trouble," she said to Ted, slapping his arm.

"Where are these Peruvian things now?" Ted asked.

"On their way back to Peru on the *Azul Pacific*." I said.

"That can't be," Ted said. "The *Azul Pacific* isn't leaving port until next week."

"Ah, yes," I said. "There's been a slight change. Smuggling antiquities back into Peru is almost as difficult as smuggling them out. Naturally, the people I arranged to undertake this task require compensation. The *Azul Pacific* is that compensation."

"What?" Ted asked. "You gave away my ship?" His face looked like a blank billboard.

"Small price to pay, don't you think, after all the trouble it nearly got you into."

"But..." Ted's voice tailed off. Nancy's stare reminded him that he was in no position to argue.

"I knew Rigger was up to something," Nancy said. "My visit to you confirmed it. I just couldn't figure out what it was. Tell me, Winston, how did you know?"

"A little bird told me," I said. I looked at her and she smiled. "Home, James."

The Rogue to the Rescue



In my opinion, the Silver Cloud III was the last of the true Rolls Royces. It was the last model built with a separate chassis which allowed the finest coach makers such as Thrupp and Maberly to supply elegant, custom bodies. Silver Clouds, such as the James Young Continental saloon and the Mulliner Park Ward coupe, have character. The new models, though full of hides and polished wood, do not. They connote wealth but not necessarily good taste.

James floated my 1963 Silver Cloud III down Post Street and glided it to an imperceptible stop in front of the Kensington Park Hotel, a nicely appointed inn occupying what was once exclusively the Elks Building. I had been unable to secure a proper residence and was therefore staying in a hotel. Mind you, I could have done worse than the Kensington Park. The inviting lobby with its warm Spanish wood ceiling was reassuring in an old world sort of way. Tea and sherry were served every day at 4:00 P.M. in front of the lobby's tastefully designed fireplace. Very civilized. It was not a bad place to temporarily call home.

James exited the Rolls and leered at the car double parked in front of us. Yes, it was one of those tasteless, new Rolls Royces with all the style of overcooked pasta. The owner of the new Rolls, a flamboyant man in a \$3,000 overcoat, emerged from the hotel, gave the doorman a \$50 tip so all could see, did the same with the valet who had retrieved his car, and recklessly slid behind the wheel. The tires chirped on the cool pavement as he sped off.

"Distasteful, isn't it, James?" I was referring to both the car and the clothes. When it comes to clothes it's not how much you spend but how you wear them. Some people can break all the rules and still look devastatingly dapper. Others? Well... Style, you either have it or you don't. And if you have it you have it all the time.

James gave me a discreet nod. The valet offered to park my car, looking forward to another \$50 tip, but James would have none of it. Good chauffeur, that James. Worth the difficulty of finding.

It was 3:59 and not only did I not want to miss tea and sherry but I was expecting a visit from Caroline Avalon, daughter of Harry Avalon of Avalon Industries fame. I had known Harry for some time and had done several "odd" jobs for him. I had run into him earlier in the week at the Post Street Bar and Cafe.

"I'm now a man of leisure, Winston," he had said. "My daughter, Caroline, runs the business and doing a damn fine job of it too, I might add."

There was a pause as he attempted to relight his pipe. It wouldn't light so he placed it on the table and looked at me the way firefighters look at smoldering ashes. With Harry you were always being tested. I must have passed because he continued with his story.

"Have you read the *Wall Street Journal* today?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. What have I missed?"

He took a copy from his lap and tossed it onto the table. It was folded so I could see a story entitled: "Halzbee Attempts Takeover of Avalon Industries." Harry sarcastically chuckled to himself.

"I take it you're not in favor of this takeover?" I said.

"Don't be stupid, Winston! Of course I'm not in favor of this takeover. Halzbee's a buzzard. Look at this." He opened the *Journal* to a full-page ad placed by this Halzbee character. The ad was an impassioned plea for Avalon Industries stock and it contained no kind words for Avalon's current management.

"So what does this really mean?" I asked.

"It means we, I mean Caroline, could lose the business."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Winston, Avalon Industries is a good business. It's profitable, returns a good dividend to the shareholders, and is solid as a rock. I made it that way. We have no debt to speak of. We've been conservative but by God we're still here today whereas many of our competitors aren't.

"Now along comes this scavenger Halzbee. He's planning to borrow against Avalon Industries' assets to buy the company. It's disgusting."

"Let me get this straight. He's going to borrow money to buy Caroline's company, using the assets of her company as collateral for the loan?"

"Yes. You can be sure he's got some fancy investment banker who will issue junk bonds to finance the takeover."

"Does that make sense?"

"Don't beat around the bush, Winston. You're asking if Avalon Industries is worth it. Well, here's the deal. If you sold all of the assets that make up Avalon Industries you could probably get around \$180 million. With approximately two million shares of Avalon Industries stock outstanding, that works out to \$90 a share."

"What is today's stock price?"

"Fifty-five."

"Oh." And there was the problem. "The company's worth more broken up than it is whole," I said.

Fireworks exploded in Harry's face while his skin turned the color of a Napa Valley merlot.

"Damn it, Winston!" His fist rattled the table. "A company is more than a piece of paper. It's a going concern that employs people, real people with real families. These people buy goods and services from other businesses. That's what makes our system work. It's all part of the greater plan. Not to mention that we, I mean Caroline, donate an awful lot of money to community projects. You see, Winston, it's not just about paper profits."

"You're right, of course." Harry always had a way of making you feel like you had been caught with your hands in the cookie jar.

I agreed and it calmed him only slightly.

"Do you think Halzbee can get away with this?" I asked.

"You're damn right he can. He already owns 7% of Avalon Industries. That makes him one of the larger shareholders."

Harry reached for his pipe and again tried to light it.

"I should have kept a majority of the stock when I took the company public but we needed all the cash we could get. So I kept only 15%. I put the interests of the company before mine and now I'm, I mean Caroline, is paying for it."

"Come on, Harry. You know you did the right thing."

Harry grunted. "I supposed I did. I'm just frustrated. Halzbee plans to offer \$74 a share and I can't stop him from doing it."

"That's a hefty premium over the current price."

"Avalon Industries shareholders are basically a satisfied group. His offer has to be very rich in order for them to sell."

"Can he afford to pay that much?"

"He must be able to," Harry said. "Of course, it really comes down to how much it's costing him to finance the deal. His investment banker will charge him an arm and a leg in fees. He'll have to subtract that from whatever profit he'll make. The higher the fees the less he can profitably afford to pay for the stock. We, I mean Caroline, can pay him off, buy the stock back from him at a higher price than he paid for it - its called paying greenmail - or let him make the offer. If the shareholders go for it, and I think they will, he'll own the company and sell off the assets, making a tidy profit at our expense."

"Yes, if the company is worth \$90 a share broken up and he pays \$74, he makes \$16 a share."

"Not quite. Like I said, you have to figure in the interest expense on the junk

bonds and those fees he's going to be charged by his investment banker. Once you figure those in he's probably paying about \$86 a share."

"Still, on 2 million shares..."

"Yes, that's eight million dollars profit." Harry shook his head. "Small change by Wall Street standards but not a bad piece of change for a two-bit hustler like Halzbee."

"Unfortunately, what he's doing is not illegal, is it?"

Harry leaned forward and looked me straight in the eye. "No, but the way he acquired his 7% share of Avalon Industries was."

"What do you mean?"

"He used strong arm tactics to get people to sell him their stock. That's called extortion. And he'll probably use strong-arm tactics to acquire the rest of Avalon Industries."

"Can you prove that?" I asked.

"Well, no, but I know it's true."

"Still, without proof..."

"I know, I know. If I had proof I wouldn't need your help."

"Ah, then this wasn't a chance encounter?"

"I leave nothing to chance, Winston."

I smiled.

"You will help, won't you?" Harry asked. He reinforced his request with a gaze as sharp as the clothes he was wearing.

"Of course," I sighed.

"Good. I knew you wouldn't let me down. Winston, you're one of the few people in this world today that I can count on. I'll send Caroline to see you. Where are you staying?"

"At the Kensington Park Hotel."

"A hotel?"

I shrugged.

"I hear it's a nice one," Harry said.

"Very accommodating."

So here I was, strolling into the lobby of the Kensington Park Hotel to meet Caroline Avalon. I found her sitting in one of the comfortable chairs by the fireplace.

"Caroline," I said.

She turned and rose from the chair. Her gray business suit was impeccably tailored, her dark blue neck scarf unmistakably silk, her posture irresistibly sensual. Style, you either have it or you don't. Caroline Avalon had it and she had it all the time. A real *femme d'affaire*.

She hurried toward me and gave me a hug. The poor girl was a bit rattled. I quickly poured two glasses of sherry.

"Caroline, what's wrong?" I asked.

"That annoying Halzbee followed me here. He made some awful threats and tried to bully me. That man is a real brute." Her eyes narrowed and her lips tightened.

"Your father doesn't care much for him either."

"I'm so glad Daddy ran into you." She smiled softly. "It's given him some hope. But I'm afraid I don't share his optimism. I don't doubt your ability, Winston, but Halzbee's position is too strong." She lowered her head.

"Never give up hope, Caroline."

"It's been a long time since I've seen you," she took my hand. She had that nostalgic look in her eyes, the kind of look Hollywood has made a fortune from.

"Yes it has," I said.

"I heard you spent some time in South America," she said.

"Yes, I did." I wondered where she had heard that.

"I always wondered what had happened to you. You just..."

I placed a finger on her lips. Some things should be kept in the past.

"Let's focus on the job at hand, shall we?"

She returned my smile and let go of my hand. I led her back to the fireplace.

"Do you know anything about business, Winston? Do you really think you can help?"

"Helping people is my business," I said.

The crackling fire provided a polyrhythmic counterpoint to the clinking of our sherry glasses.

* * *

"James, Harry may or not be right about Halzbee's extortion." I settled into a comfortable, antique armchair built in a more comfortable, antique era. "Harry is a fine gentleman but he's also strong-willed and used to getting his way."

"Yes, sir. The possibility does exist that he is exaggerating to serve his own desires."

"It is possible."

"I suppose we should test Halzbee to confirm it for ourselves."

"Very prudent, sir."

"And so what if he hasn't done anything illegal? The fact remains that if he gets control of Avalon Industries innocent people will lose their jobs. Halzbee will profit while others suffer. James, we cannot let that happen."

"No, sir."

"But it's quite a fix. Even if Halzbee made only a buck profit on each share he'd still pocket \$2 million. Harry figures financing is costing Halzbee twelve dollars a share. That means he could offer \$77 a share and still make that \$2 million."

"If he lowers his financing costs he would be able to offer even more or make a greater profit," James said.

"If the deal stays as it is he's going to net a cool eight mil. He doesn't have much incentive to look for better financing."

"He would if someone else entered the bidding."

I looked at James with that look of amazement that I frequently have the opportunity to look at him with.

"Yes, James, I suppose that would be an incentive."

"It may also help determine the extent of Mr. Halzbee's extortion, if any."

"Sort of like killing two birds with one stone."

"Yes, sir."

Good chauffeur that James.

* * *

"What the hell's this?" Harry roared. He slammed the *Wall Street Journal* on the table. I assumed he was referring to the story about Winston Churchill offering \$76 a share for Avalon Industries. Caroline quietly sat next to him and did not look at me.

"Are you trying to buy our, I mean Caroline's, company? What do you want with Avalon Industries? I asked you to save the company, not take it over yourself."

"Harry..."

"I thought I could trust you. This is my reward for that trust?" He grabbed the newspaper and shook it in my face. "And after I got you that big house for that party you're going to throw."

He rose and grabbed Caroline's hand. She looked at me with moist eyes.

"But Harry..."

"Don't 'but Harry' me. Come on, Caroline, let's go."

He left in a huff, dragging Caroline with him.

* * *

Harry eventually calmed down enough to attend my party which was to be Halzbee's first test. He arrived with Caroline on his arm. His tux had seen a few too many social gatherings but he still looked dapper. Bespoke clothing is always an indication of true style.

Caroline was smashing. Her hair was Hollywood, her frock French, her aura alluring.

"What are you up to, Winston?" Harry asked.

"I'm trying to save Avalon Industries."

"How, by buying it yourself?"

"Relax, Harry. Trust me."

"And how can you afford to offer \$76 a share? Where's your money coming from? Are you making a deal with someone else?"

"Relax and enjoy the party."

"Enjoy the party? How can I enjoy the party when my, I mean Caroline's, company is about to be taken over? To tell you the truth I wouldn't be here if she hadn't dragged me along. I was pretty upset with you. In fact, I still am to a certain extent."

I turned to Caroline.

"I'm glad you brought him. Maybe it will soften him up."

Harry grumbled and filled his mouth with champagne.

"Do you know all of these people?" Caroline asked as I poured her another glass of bubbly.

"Most of them. They're professional partygoers. The City is full of them. They come in useful when I need to throw a bash like this. I just order them when I order the party supplies."

Caroline laughed. It was good to see her laugh. She hadn't done much of that lately. She abruptly stopped laughing when Halzbee appeared.

"Well, well, look who's here: Harry Avalon and his lovely daughter." It was the flamboyant man with the new Rolls I had seen leaving the Kensington Park Hotel. He was wearing a pale yellow suit with an open collar blue university striped shirt. Can you believe it! A man that dresses that poorly has to be stopped on no other grounds than his crimes against sartorial decency.

"Halzbee! Who invited you?" Harry yelled.

"Actually, I did," I said.

"Churchill!" Harry screamed. "You've gone too far this time! Inviting this

buzzard to your party goes way beyond reason."

Caroline's face dropped.

"Avalon, old man, don't be so annoyed," Halzbee said.

"Why did you come over here?" Harry growled. "What do you want, Halzbee?"

"Avalon Industries, of course!" he laughed. His face turned into soft clay and slowly transformed into a giant grin. It was the kind of face you'd like to blow smoke into, if you smoked.

"By the way," I said. "I'm your host, Winston Churchill." I extended a hand toward Halzbee.

Halzbee laughed again, louder and more animated than before.

"Winston Churchill?" he said. He took a cigar from his vest pocket and did a poor imitation of the former British Prime Minister.

"Not that Winston Churchill," I said. "The Winston Churchill who's offering \$76 a share for Avalon Industries."

Halzbee stopped laughing. He chewed the end of his unlit cigar, rocked on the heels of his feet, and stared at me. He stuck out his chin and looked down the end of his nose. "So," was all he said. He then spun on his heels and he was gone.

Harry watched him leave then turned to me.

"What's the idea of inviting that buzzard to the party?" he asked.

"I wanted to meet him," I said.

"There are other ways to meet him," Harry growled.

"Yes, why taunt him and make him mad?" Caroline asked.

"I have my reasons," I smiled. "Enjoy the party," I said then I was gone.

* * *

Sometimes one must stir up the hornet's nest at the risk of getting stung. The morning papers reported Halzbee's new offer of \$77 a share. The hornets had been definitely stirred. Of course, you can't let these things die down. A little more stirring is always in order.

"James, prepare the Rolls."

"Yes, sir."

The evening was cool but clear. It was time to give Halzbee his second test. I slipped on a dark gray, wool overcoat and added a tan cashmere scarf. Even stirring up trouble requires proper attire.

A little bird had told me that Halzbee would be dining at Amelio's, an expensive restaurant frequented by patrons who had something to prove. What Halzbee

had already proved was his absolute lack of sartorial flair. I found him consuming a multi-course dinner in the company of a portable telephone and a little bird of his own. His suit was even more hideous than the appalling yellow thing he had worn to my party. No matter how hard you try you are never going to make a plaid sport coat over contrasting plaid trousers look like anything but a clown's costume. Style, never mind...

"Halzbee, old man," I said. I pulled a chair up to his table being careful not to get too close to that sport coat. The maitre d' approached but James intervened and prevented him from interfering. Good chauffeur, that James.

"Well, it's Churchill, isn't it? You are an annoying little gadfly, aren't you?" His sardonic grin was intended to impress his companion but she was much too interested in James to notice. "You have, no doubt, seen my latest offer for Avalon Industries."

"Yes, but I'm sure you have not yet seen mine." I pulled a press release from my coat pocket. "The way I figure it you can't profitably offer more than \$77 a share for Avalon Industries."

You could almost hear Halzbee's brain calculating.

"That's why I'm going to offer \$78 a share."

His face turned the color of molten lava then the rest of him erupted.

"What are you doing!" he screamed. "You can't possibly make any money at \$78 a share!"

"I can if my financing costs are significantly lower than yours are."

"What? That's impossible. No one can beat my deals, no one!" He paused for a few seconds. "How do you think you can do it?" he said.

"With first rate business acumen," I said. "Be seeing you, old man." I gave him a little pat on the arm with the press release and sauntered off. I saw him grab his phone as I walked out the door. Who would he be calling at this hour?

James, having seen to the maitre d', waited by the Rolls. He opened the door and I climbed into the leather encased back seat. James closed the door and slid behind the wheel.

"Home, James."

The Rolls rolled smoothly down Powell Street and onto Columbus Avenue, the main artery of San Francisco's Italian flavored North Beach district. As we approached the financial district James spent an unusual amount of time looking into the rear view mirror.

"See someone you know?" I asked.

"Someone I do not know," he replied.

"Then I think we should make their acquaintance."

He was able to keep the look of delight from his face but he could not keep it from his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

He tightened his seat belt and steered for a safer part of the city. The long and vacant streets near the City's southern piers were perfect. The car behind us followed and when we crossed the bridge onto Army Street James pushed the accelerator to the floor.

Now let me tell you, a Rolls Royce is not a high performance automobile. It was built for quiet, effortless motorway touring, not nipping and tucking through S-curves at 2g's. James kept the accelerator on the floorboard and the Rolls accelerated mildly, perturbed at having been asked to perform such a barbarian task, but giving it the old college try nonetheless.

James turned off the headlights. The tires yelped like wounded dogs as he coaxed the Rolls through a hard left turn and then a right. The sudden turns caught our pursuers by surprise and James had to slow down to avoid losing them. He stopped in front of a dismal warehouse with stained brick walls. Tall weeds grew along a rusting chain link fence and the wind squealed through the broken window panes.

I emerged from the Rolls and waited in front of the building.

A dark blue Mercedes sedan slid to a rock-throwing halt. Both front doors opened. The driver stayed next to the car. The man in the passenger seat took giant strides toward me. The Mercedes' headlights were still on and all I saw was the man's silhouette.

"What can I do for you?" I asked him.

"Just shut up and listen. I have some business advice for you."

"Free advice?"

"Don't get smart. You just drop your offer for Avalon Industries."

"That doesn't sound very smart."

"It's a bad deal."

"Bad for whom?"

"For you." The man was now close enough to see. His head looked as if it had been molded inside of a football helmet. He certainly didn't look much like a businessman.

"Tell Halzbee he should take his own advice," I said.

The eyes in his football head turned into baseballs.

"Don't look so surprised," I said. "The only two people interested in Avalon Industries besides me are Harry Avalon and Halzbee. Harry Avalon wouldn't use

strong arm tactics to discourage me. That leaves your boss, Halzbee."

"You're too smart for your own good," the football head said.

"It's all this free advice I'm getting."

He stepped forward but stopped when he heard a muffled whimper coming from near his car. He turned, stared into the headlights, then took a few uncertain steps toward the Mercedes. There was a lump on the ground and it was his partner. Before he realized what was happening, James was on him.

"Hey!"

"Tell Halzbee I appreciate his advice," I said to the man as he struggled against James' hold. "But a little competition never hurt anyone."

"It's going to hurt you," he grunted.

I smiled. James tossed the man toward the Mercedes. He stumbled over his driver and fell to the ground.

I straightened my tie and adjusted my pocket square. Style, you either have it or you don't. And if you have it you have all the time.

"Home, James."

* * *

"I guess Harry was right about Halzbee's strongarm tactics."

"Yes, sir."

"How childish of Halzbee."

"Very."

"It's time to teach this chap a lesson," I said. "Appalling yellow suit and all."

"Indeed, sir."

"It's time to do some fishing and I've got just the bait."

I settled into a cozy study and went to work on a letter, a letter all about financing acquisitions. I typed it on letterhead stationery that used to belong to a banker I had once encountered.

"Ready, James?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," he said, looking a bit too physically fit for an investment banker. However, he did carry an air of authority.

"Here's the letter. You know what to do."

"Yes, sir."

Fishing is a sport for the patient. Just because you have the right bait doesn't mean you're going to catch anything. Besides, fish can sense tension and they'll stay well away from nervous fishermen. It's best to wait calmly.

I waited calmly with a Bass Ale.

* * *

"Winston, you've let me down." Harry Avalon was not a happy man. "I've learned that Halzbee is going to offer \$79 a share at tomorrow's Avalon Industries shareholder's meeting. I don't know how he can afford to pay that much and still make an acceptable profit. He must have gotten a better deal from his banker. But that's a dollar a share higher than you're offering. That may not seem like much, but it is to those who own thousands of shares. Our only hope is that the shareholders won't go for it."

"But they will, Daddy," Caroline said. "Wouldn't you? I'm afraid it's hopeless."

Harry hugged his daughter.

"I guess we've lost the company, no thanks to you," he snapped. He stared at me then turned away.

"But Harry..."

But he was gone.

* * *

The Avalon Industries shareholders meeting attracted a great deal of attention. The rumor of Halzbee's sweetened takeover bid brought nearly every shareholder to the meeting. A large flock of reporters, smelling a good story, roosted among the crowd.

Halzbee nested in the front row. At least he wasn't wearing that hideous yellow suit. Instead he was a picture of corporate sartorial boredom: a solid navy blue suit, white shirt and red tie. Traditional, but uninspiring. And no pocket square! I mean, really.

James waited out of sight just outside the back door. I strolled down an aisle and sat next to Harry. He barely acknowledged my presence. I nodded to Halzbee who was only a dozen seats away. He smiled like a man with emotional problems and gave me a childlike wave. Harry simmered like boiling chili.

Caroline called the meeting to order. She was very nervous. No good for fishing. Her strong public speaking skills abandoned her and her voice quivered and her eyes darted about.

Halzbee, using his clout as a major shareholder, had bullied his way onto the agenda and was given the floor after the conclusion of routine business. He took the stage and stood behind the podium.

"It's good to see so many of you here," he said. His shiny gray-blond hair glimmered under the lights. "I am going to make your attendance worth your while." He paused. I assumed he thought he was adding to the drama. He wasn't. "I'm sure you are all aware of the recent offer of \$78 a share for Avalon Industries stock." He snickered. "Peanuts, I say. You deserve more and you

shall get more. Therefore, I hereby make an offer of \$79 a share for Avalon Industries common stock."

The audience rustled and a dull roar drifted across the room. Halzbee stood at the podium, treating the roar as applause. When things had sufficiently quieted down, I stood up.

"That the shareholders of Avalon Industries are deserving is beyond question," I said. "So they deserve to know more about your offer."

Halzbee squinted. The stage lights prevented him from clearly seeing the audience.

"What would you like to know about my offer?" he asked.

"For a start, where are you getting your financing?"

Halzbee arrogantly stuck his hands into his trouser pockets. Only his thumbs showed.

"I have very strong financial backing," he said.

"And where is that coming from?"

"The West Coast Commercial Bank," Halzbee beamed.

"Really?" I put on my best puzzled look.

Halzbee then recognized my voice and cracks of concern began to show on his arrogant face. "What's wrong with that?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Well, then," Halzbee said.

"Who's your banker?" I asked.

"Mr. Richard Rigger, Senior Vice-President, if that's any of your business."

I plastered bewilderment all over my face. The shareholders next to me became curious. The reporters smelled blood and circled the waters.

"It's everyone's business because Richard Rigger has not worked for the West Coast Commercial Bank for some time," I said. "I believe he's in the Peace Corps."

The crowd rumbled.

"That's impossible," Halzbee said. "I met with him yesterday."

"I don't know who you met with, but it certainly wasn't Richard Rigger. He's no longer in the banking business."

"How do you know?" Halzbee challenged.

"A phone call to the bank will confirm it."

A louder roar filled the room. Cameras flashed. Reporters dashed from the

room to call the West Coast Commercial Bank. Halzbee was stunned. Caroline quickly adjourned the meeting and the press descended upon Halzbee like locusts.

"This is your doing, I assume," Harry said.

I smiled.

"Damn good," he said. "I knew all along you wouldn't let me down."

* * *

The next day I met Caroline for lunch. We dined outdoors at Enrico's.

"I'm so glad we could have lunch," she said. That nostalgic look returned to her eyes.

"It's my pleasure," I said.

"Have you seen today's *Journal*?" she asked.

"No."

She handed me the paper and pointed to a headline: "Halzbee Drops Avalon Industries Bid; Churchill Follows Suit".

"Daddy says you were responsible for this. Is it true?"

I rose as James pulled my Rolls to a stop in front of the restaurant.

"Let me give you a word of advice, Caroline."

"And what's that, Winston?"

"Don't ever come to me for financing."

She smiled. I kissed her on the forehead and climbed into the Rolls.

"Home, James."

The Rogue's Quiet Weekend



The hardest part of thwarting an unscrupulous financier's hostile takeover attempt is recovering one's energy once the deed has been done. The deed itself is tough and tiring. Offer, counter offer. Bluff, counter bluff. Perhaps even a little deception. When the stakes are high the ethical standards are low. It's enough to drain the old *joie de vie* and make you feel as if you had just spent the last 24 hours traversing the French countryside behind the wheel of a D-type Jaguar. A quiet weekend is typically required to restore one's passion for *le grand monde*.

My preferred destination for a quiet weekend is California's Gold Country. The abandoned mines and Sierra Nevada foothills calm one's soul and the stately homes filled with ghosts of the Gold Rush fortify one's spirit. My spirit certainly needed fortifying after saving Avalon Industries from that fashion wreck named Halzbee.

So it was off to Nevada City with high hopes and high expectations.

* * *

"James," I said. "This is not what I had expected."

"No, sir."

I had not expected to find every parking space on Broad Street filled with an expensive automobile. It was worse than watching a sure thing stumble down the backstretch.

"Look, James," I said. "There are Jags and Mercedes everywhere."

"A few Rollers, as well," he said.

Tasteless new ones, of course. Their ostentatious owners were no doubt lurking about wherever it is that ostentatious owners lurk. All very distressing. Broad Street, Nevada City is not supposed to look like Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills.

"See if you can find a place to park."

"Yes, sir."

After several tours of Broad Street, a spot finally opened up in front of the National Hotel, a brick building with tall white, wooden columns and white, intricately carved wooden balconies. It was a nice place to park a classic Rolls Royce in front of.

James nudged the Rolls to within inches of a tatty, dark brown Peugeot 504 station wagon, the only unpretentious car on the street.

"Well done, James." Good chauffeur, that James. Do you know how hard, no you probably don't.

"Thank you, sir." He slid out of the Rolls and very properly opened my door. In case you're interested I was wearing an ascot tucked into a blue silk shirt and a white linen suit. A Panama hat completed what in my opinion is the perfect holiday look. Some may regard it as too Hollywood but a classic becomes a classic for a reason. And I'm sure I've told you before, but when one owns a Rolls Royce one's wardrobe must measure up. Even while vacationing.

The sound of James closing the Rolls' door rustled an elderly couple from the Peugeot. They were a friendly looking pair in British style clothes that were a bit worn at the edges. A wedge-shaped driving hat sat on top of the man's head and a thin, gray moustache sat on his upper lip. Quite dashing, actually. The woman's gray curls were stuffed into the type of hat worn by butterfly collectors.

"Nice automobile," the man said, admiring the beautifully anachronistic lines of my Silver Cloud III.

"Thank you," I said.

"I don't see many like that anymore."

"No, one doesn't,"

"What year is it?"

"1963."

He nodded and stepped back for a more panoramic view.

"Mr. Jepson has invited so many wealthy people here that we feel a bit out of place," the woman said.

I looked at James. Neither of us had a clue as to who Mr. Jepson was.

"You must be very wealthy to drive a car like that," the man said.

"Do not be deceived by appearances," I smiled.

"Of course we're happy just to have the chance to hobnob with the rich and famous," the woman smiled. Her comforting face reminded me of toasted bread and warm honey.

"It's a wonderful opportunity, don't you think?" her husband said.

"Yes," I said. "I suppose it is." I exchanged another glance with James who shrugged with his eyebrows.

"I can't believe so many people have turned out," the man continued, nodding at the row expensive cars. "I had no idea so many people read this paper." He took a thin newspaper from under his arm.

"*The California Investment News*," I said. None of my business acquaintances cared much for that particular publication. Then again, none of them drove Peugeots.

"I guess it just goes to show you what a good deal Mr. Jepson is offering us," the man said.

I was beginning to wonder about this Jepson fellow and you know how I get when I get curious.

"May I buy you a cup of coffee?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed!" he said. The old man smiled at his wife.

James stayed with the Rolls while I led the couple into the cafe of the National Hotel.

"I'm Winston Churchill," I said, shaking the man's hand.

"By Jove!" He gave me an astonished look. "You're not related to *the* Winston Churchill, are you?" He squinted at me.

"No, no relation," I said.

"My name's Ansley Duke," he said.

"And I'm Mary Queen of Scots," his wife added.

"She's not really," Ansley growled.

"But my real name is Mary and I am glad to meet you, Mr. Churchill." Her smile was as soft as billowy clouds. "I hope my little joke didn't put you off. Is your name really Winston Churchill?"

"It is, and a little humor is not wasted on me."

"I'm glad," she said. Her toast and honey look reappeared.

"We'll have tea instead of coffee if you don't mind," Ansley said.

"I don't mind at all," I said. Some day I'm going to write a treatise on the personality differences between tea and coffee drinkers. Keep an eye out for it.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Berkeley," Mary said.

In case you don't know, Berkeley is a university town across the Bay from San Francisco. Actually, it's a little world of its own, full of cultural diversity, unconventional thinking, and good intentions. It's also close to the horse racing at Golden Gate Fields.

"What do you do for a living?" I asked.

"We're teachers," Ansley said.

"College teachers," Mary added. "Professors."

"Naturally. How did you become readers of *The California Investment News*?" I asked.

Ansley placed the newspaper on the table.

"A colleague told us about it," he said. "We've subscribed to it for quite a few years. We've never invested in any of its recommendations, though. Seems frivolous to spend so much money subscribing to something we never use. To tell you the truth, we've always been afraid to invest in anything. We've always been conservative, putting all of our money into our savings account at the bank. We've let opportunity pass us by. But we're not going to let it happen again. We're tired of missing out on great investments."

"Yes," Mary said. "I guess we have been a bit stodgy with our money."

"But you still have it," I said. "There is something to be said for conservative financial planning."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Ansley shrugged. "But it's time for us to be more aggressive. After all, we're not young anymore. We won't have many more opportunities like this one. Have you decided which parcel you're going to buy?"

"I'm afraid I didn't come here to transact business," I said. "I'm vacationing."

"Vacationing?" Ansley's moustache thickened. "But your car, I thought for sure..." He turned to his wife.

"As Mr. Churchill said, do not be deceived by appearances."

"Oh," Ansley swallowed hard. "You see, this investment opportunity is secret. I shouldn't have told you as much as I have."

"You have told me nothing," I said.

"It's invitation only," Ansley continued. "Invitations were sent only to long-time subscribers of *The California Investment News*."

"You don't have to say any more," I said.

"Well, it's a new Gold Rush," Ansley said. "Of course, if you haven't received an invitation from Mr. Jepson we shouldn't tell you about it."

"Then don't say another word. I respect your privacy."

"But I think we can trust Mr. Churchill, don't you Mary?" He looked at his wife and then at me. "You won't tell anybody, will you?"

"Mum's the word."

Ansley reached into his tweed sport coat and pulled out a clump of papers. He handed them to me as if he were passing on state secrets.

"The prospectus," he whispered.

I opened it and read about the deal. Two hundred parcels of land were for sale with a limit of five parcels per investor. A detailed map indicated the location of

each parcel and its selling price. One of the parcels was circled.

The prospectus also contained a market forecast written by a company called International Investments. The forecast detailed the plans of the Davidson Development Corporation to build an office park and a luxury hotel next to the property. A Davidson Development spokesman listed the area's proximity to the ski slopes of Lake Tahoe and the gambling of Reno as reasons for building in the Nevada City area. Those benefits, it was stated, would attract the necessary tenants.

"You're going to buy the circled parcel?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right," Ansley said. "You see, those development plans haven't been made public yet. When they are, land in this area will be worth a fortune."

"Especially the land next to the development," Mary said. "That's the land Mr. Jepson is selling."

Ansley looked around the cafe.

"I'm just looking to make sure Mr. Jepson isn't here," he said. "He spends quite a bit of time in the cafe. He wouldn't appreciate our telling you about the deal."

"Who is Mr. Jepson?" I asked.

"Why, he's the publisher of the *The California Investment News*."

"Oh."

Ansley turned pensive.

"You know, it sure was nice of Mr. Jepson to send us a personal invitation," he said. "I didn't think he even knew we read his newsletter. So many important people subscribe to it that I didn't think he would bother with us. We don't have that much money. Oh, we have enough to buy one parcel of land but that's all. It was so nice of Mr. Jepson to include us in his select list of potential investors."

"Yes," Mary said. "It was very civil of him. It shows that you don't have to drive a Rolls Royce or be Mary Queen of Scots to be taken into Mr. Jepson's confidence."

I smiled and gave the prospectus back to Ansley.

"Don't you find it a little odd that Mr. Jepson is selling his land?" I asked. "If it's going to be so valuable why isn't he keeping it?"

"That's the typical response," Ansley scoffed. "Mr. Jepson warned us of that. But you see, he's not greedy, Mr. Churchill. He's going to keep some of the land for himself and sell the rest of it. He mentioned something about taxes that I didn't fully understand but his main reason for selling is to reward all of us who have been faithful subscribers to his newsletter."

"He's being very charitable," Mary added.

"Yes, very charitable," I said. "Still, one shouldn't rush into such things," I said.

"Oh, we won't," Ansley said. "We have until two o'clock tomorrow afternoon to make our decision."

"That's not much time."

"One must move fast in business," Ansley said. "The development plans will be announced Monday. If we don't buy now it will be too late. Once the plans have been made public the value of the land will skyrocket and we will have missed out on the chance of a lifetime. Opportunities are fleeting."

"Oh, Ansley," Mary laughed. "You sound like a TV commercial."

Ansley blushed and shrugged.

"Has anyone verified the market forecast?" I asked.

"Mr. Churchill," Ansley frowned. "I'm sure there's no need for that. There's no reason to question Mr. Jepson's integrity. We've read his newsletter for quite some time. When Mr. Jepson says it's a good deal, I believe him. You aren't jealous are you?"

"Sorry, just my suspicious nature." It was time to change the subject. "Where are you staying?" I asked.

"Here in the hotel," Mary said. "You know, it's the oldest continuously operating hotel in California."

"I didn't know that."

"Where are you staying?" Ansley asked.

"In a private house." I tried to remain nonchalant. As usual, the house belonged to someone else and I hadn't exactly been invited to stay there.

"Oh, that must be nice," Mary said. She clasped her hands together and smiled. "There are such beautiful homes here."

"Yes. We're going to buy one with the money we make off this real estate deal," Ansley said.

"Yes, we've always wanted a Victorian," Mary added.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy with it," I said. I reached for the check.

"Oh, we'll pay for that, Mr. Churchill," Ansley said, grabbing the check. "We might as well get used to spending a little money."

"Thank you," I said. "I've enjoyed your company."

"It's been our pleasure." Ansley shook my hand.

"Goodbye, Mr. Churchill," Mary said.

I nodded and returned to the Rolls. James opened the rear door and I slid into the back seat.

"Is something wrong, sir?" James asked.

"I'm not sure." I told him of Jepson's real estate deal.

"Very unusual, sir."

"Yes. Jepson's charity worries me. It's not that I don't believe in the basic goodness of mankind or anything like that, it's simply that basic goodness seldom has a place in business the way most people conduct it."

"Indeed, sir."

"If this real estate deal is a scam, a lot of people will lose a lot of money."

"Quite likely."

"Of course, I don't really care what happens to those folks with the Jags and Mercedes."

"One should not."

"But the Duke's are nice people."

"I'm sure they are, sir."

"Someone should look after their interests."

"Certainly, sir."

"I suppose if we don't do it no one will."

"Then I take it the quiet weekend is over?" James asked.

I leaned back and adjusted my ascot.

"To the hunt, James!"

* * *

I figured if Jacob Jepson was any kind of a big shot Harry Avalon would know of him. But Harry had never heard of him nor International Investments nor the Davidson Development Corporation.

"I'll do some research and call you in the morning," he said. "By the way, what's all this about? What are you up to?"

"I'm dabbling in real estate," I said.

"What?" I could see his perturbed face through the telephone line. "You just wait for my call." His words were followed by a click and a dial tone.

If you know me you know there is one thing I cannot do and that is wait.

"James," I said. "I think we should have a look at Jepson's property. Perhaps we can learn a few things for ourselves."

"Perhaps, sir."

"Good. Put on your Wellingtons. *La campagne* is calling."

* * *

The soil outside of Nevada City was deep orange. The south fork of the Yuba river meandered somewhere a few miles away. The land itself was nondescript and was covered with tall grass and thick trees. The small access road leading to Jepson's property was unpaved and more suitable to a Range Rover than a Rolls Royce. The road ended abruptly in a small clearing. It was hard to imagine office buildings and hotels on the property but I suppose I don't have the vision of a real estate developer.

"They will have to put in roads and sewers," James said as he surveyed the area. "Have they filed an environmental impact study?"

"I didn't see one mentioned in the prospectus," I said.

James stopped the Rolls and we hiked through tall grass until we came to another small clearing. We were surprised to find a raggedy shack with smoke rising from its flimsy chimney. An old man sat on a tree stump in front of the shack. He was cleaning a large hunting knife with a dirty rag. His prickly beard and sandblasted hair covered all of his face but his eyes. It made him resemble a porcupine, actually.

"Hello," I said.

The man looked up, squinted, and rose from the stump. His eyebrows twitched with suspicion. I kept an eye on the knife.

"Howdy," he said.

We ventured a few steps closer.

"Nice knife," I said.

The man looked at the knife.

"Mighty fine huntin' knife, that is." He held it up so we could see it better. "Used to belong to my father. He skinned quite a few bears with it."

"Bears?" I looked at James.

"Don't get nervous, mister. Not around here, up in Washington State."

"Oh," I said. "I don't suppose you see many bears around here."

"No, and I don't usually see many folks either," the man replied.

"Well, you'll probably be seeing many more of them pretty soon," I said.

"What do you mean?" He squinted again.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"Yup." He tilted his head and stopped squinting. "You got a problem with that?"

"No, not at all. But you don't own this land, do you?"

"Nobody owns this land, mister. Nobody wants it."

"Well, someone wants it now."

The old man twitched.

"What, you own this land now?" he asked. He tilted his head in the other direction and looked at me with half-closed eyes.

"No, I don't own it. What's your name?"

"Emery."

"What do you do around here, Emery?"

"I used to pan for gold," he said. He was still suspicious.

"Gold?"

"Now don't get excited, mister. There ain't none anymore. Used to be plenty of it. Not here, up by the river, little ways up north. I panned more gold than you've probably ever seen. I remember those days. We'd strike gold and then rush off to the National Hotel and buy everyone drinks. Those were good days, mister. Drank quite a bit. But them days are gone and they won't come back. No, mister, there ain't no more gold here."

"How do you know? Maybe the gold's underground?"

"Listen, mister, I can smell gold. I can take a hand full of dirt, bring it up to my nose and smell if there's gold down below." He reached down for a handful of soil, brought it to his nose, sniffed, shook his head and dropped the dirt. "Nope, no gold here."

"Very scientific," I said.

"Science ain't got nothing to do with it," he snapped.

"I see."

"Mister, I've smelled every bit of land in this county and there ain't no gold here. Not here, not in the river. None, nowhere. There ain't no gold nowhere around here."

"Then why are you still here?"

"I ain't doing no prospecting, if that's what you mean. Oh, I go down to the river every now and then but it ain't no good. I live off the gold I panned fifty years ago."

"Well, there's new gold on its way, Emery," I said. "Someone's going to build offices and hotels on this land. "

"Offices? Hotels? Why would anybody want to build those things here?" He looked around the rough land. "This land's worthless, mister. That's why nobody cares if I live here."

"I'm afraid those days are over, Emery."

* * *

"James, we need an airplane."

"Sir?"

"Harry Avalon may on to something but he needs more information and that information happens to be locked up at the moment."

"I see, sir."

"So he needs to utilize some of your more practical skills."

"Very good, sir."

"But we don't much time. If Jepson's deal is a scam we'll have to be back before two o'clock in order to save Mr. and Mrs. Duke from losing their life savings."

"And if it is not a scam?"

"Then we'll relax and enjoy the flight."

We drove to the local airport at a speed the Rolls found slightly uncomfortable. The sun was still in the process of rising. The only sign of life was a sleepy tabby who was looking forward to sunning himself on top of an oil barrel. We borrowed an airplane and flew to San Francisco. Harry met us at the airport.

"What are you doing in Nevada City?" Harry asked.

"Having a quiet weekend."

"That's what I was having until you called." He looked me over the way he looks people over. "I suppose I owe you one, though. Come on." He led us to his car.

"So what have you discovered?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I may have found something but I need more information and that information isn't at my immediate disposal."

"You shall have it," I said.

Harry stopped his Mercedes at the fringes of the Financial District just a few blocks from the offices of International Investments. James slid out of the car and immediately went to work. He did his usual superb job and obtained the information without a hitch.

"I don't want to know how you got that," Harry said, nodding toward the bundle of papers in James' arms. "But it was a damn fine job."

I smiled. Harry drove us back to his spectacular Russian Hill home and we settled into a den that housed more books than most municipal libraries. A few vintage first editions shared selfspace with law books and business tomes. He took a bottle of port from a wine rack that someone had ingeniously built into an antique glass-doored bookcase. The port was a 1963 vintage from the Rio Torto

valley. It had a fine color, fine nose, and a fine taste.

We toasted each other then Harry sat down to examine the papers James had obtained for him.

"It's a very complicated scheme," he said after a while. "There are so many holding companies involved that it's hard to follow. But it boils down to this: two men named Jacob Jepson and Ernie Davidson run the entire show. Look," Harry said, showing us some diagrams he had drawn. "At the top we have Ernie Davidson and Jacob Jepson. Each of them own 50% of West Coast Construction. West Coast Construction owns 50% of Davidson Development and also 75% of International Investments."

"The firm that did the market forecast," James said.

"Correct. Jacob Jepson owns the other 25% of International Investments. He also owns all of *The California Investment News*."

"What about the other 50% of Davidson Development?" I asked.

"It's owned by *The California Investment News*."

"What? Harry, you're talking in riddles."

"Listen," he grumbled. Harry never did have much patience with financial neophytes. "What it all means is this: Ernie Davidson and Jacob Jepson own everything. They own the company that did the market forecast and they own the firm that is supposed to do the development. They also own the newsletter that is providing them with investors."

"Shady," I said.

"Shady? It's more than shady. Now listen to this. The important part is the history of these firms. It appears that West Coast Construction has embarked upon several other developments recently, each time using different holding companies. Each time nothing was built. In fact, as far as I can tell West Coast Construction has never constructed anything, and Davidson Development has never developed anything. In all cases International Investments did the market forecast. Several lawsuits have already been filed against them in other States. Winston, Davidson and Jepson are crooks. What you've got here is a scam."

"I was afraid of that," I said. "That's bad news for the Dukes."

"Who?"

"Never mind. You don't know them. Anyway, thanks for the analysis, Harry. May I take these papers?"

"Sure."

"Now, if you'd take us back to the airport we've got to be back in Nevada City before two o'clock."

Harry looked at his watch.

"Good luck," he said. "You haven't a chance in hell."

* * *

Harry was right. It was 2:15 by the time James brought the Rolls to a halt in front of the National Hotel. I did not wait for him to open my door. Ansley and Mary were in the cafe.

"Mr. Churchill," Ansley called. He looked like a teenage boy who had just received his first kiss. "Where have you been?"

"In San Francisco."

"San Francisco? What were you doing there?"

Mary looked at me funny.

"Did you buy that land yet?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," he said. "So did many others. You should have seen them all, Mr. Churchill!" His moustache twitched with self-satisfied excitement.

My heart sank to the floor and I sat down to join it.

"You don't look too well, Mr. Churchill," Mary said. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Mary tightened and her face lost its toast and honey appearance.

"Oh?" she said.

"I went to San Francisco this morning to investigate Mr. Jepson and the companies involved in his real estate deal."

"What? Mr. Churchill, you didn't?" Ansley was a mixture of anger and surprise.

"What did you find, Mr. Churchill?" Mary asked. She clasped her hands tightly together.

I placed Harry's papers on the table.

"Unfortunately, Jepson's real estate deal is a scam," I said. "Jepson and his partner are crooks. They are very good at selling land based on phony development plans. Several lawsuits have already been filed against them. These men are frauds."

"Oh, my," Mary said. Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Are you sure?" Ansley asked. He rose and looked down at me. "You better have proof, Mr. Churchill. You can't just go making accusations like this without proof."

"It's all here in these papers," I said. "With the lawsuits piling up against them they'll probably take the money from this real estate scam and flee the country if they can."

Ansley sat down and looked at the papers and then stared into space. Reality

hit him like a hard left hook.

"Our entire savings," he said. "We've lost it all." His colorful face turned colorless.

"We should have been more careful," Mary said. "But we were so excited."

"I'm not very excited now," Ansley groaned. They sat quietly and stared at the table. "I guess we should have listened to you, Mr. Churchill. But how were we to know?" He looked at me as his eyes pleaded his case. "We shouldn't have rushed into this. You were right."

"Oh, dear," Mary said. "Oh, dear. What should we do now? Can these men be stopped?"

"The deal will eventually be exposed for the scam that it is," I shook my head. "You can then sue Jepson and his partner, but there will be so many other claims against them that the chances of recovering your money are not very good. And it will take time."

"Can't we call the police or some other authority?" Ansley asked.

"They really haven't done anything illegal yet," I said.

"Then there's nothing we can do?" Ansley's moustache disappeared as his lips puckered.

"Nothing legal."

* * *

"James, pack up the Rolls," I said. "I want to leave Nevada City as soon as possible. This quiet weekend has been a considerable disappointment."

"Indeed, sir."

We packed in silence then he packed the Rolls.

"To the National Hotel, James. I want to say goodbye to the Dukes."

"Yes, sir."

He drove me to the hotel then went on to pick up a very important package that was waiting for us. Jepson was in the hotel, taking an early supper in the cafe. He was a slovenly beast of a fellow. He had too many gold and diamond rings on his fingers and probably drove a Cadillac.

The Dukes desolately sat at a table next to the window. Have you ever seen the lost expression on hunting dogs when the fox gets away? No, you probably haven't. But if you have then you know how the Duke's looked.

"Hello," I said to them.

"Hello," Mary replied. Her voice was tired.

Ansley was quiet.

"Awfully decent of you to stop in and say goodbye," Mary said.

"Not at all. Actually, I'm here to get your money back."

"What?" Ansley nearly jumped out of his chair. "By Jove, Mr. Churchill, are you serious?" Ansley looked at Mary.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked.

"Buy the land from you."

"Mr. Churchill," he recoiled. "We will not accept charity."

"It's not charity, it's a business deal. I don't have the money right now, but if you sign over the title to the land, I'll sign a promise to pay."

"Mr. Churchill..."

"Trust me," I said. I looked Ansley straight in the eye. "If you had listened to me before you wouldn't be in this fix." I already had the papers prepared and I laid them on the table.

"I don't know," Ansley said.

"Do it," Mary said.

Ansley looked at his wife and capitulated. We signed the agreement.

"I don't feel right about this, Mr. Churchill," Ansley said. "No matter what you say it's still charity. What are you going to do with that land?"

"Oh, I'll find a use for it," I said. James drove up in the Rolls and I smiled.

Ansley resumed his argument but was interrupted by Emery's appearance in the cafe.

"Whee, drinks for everybody!" Emery shouted.

"Who's that and what's he talking about?" Ansley asked.

Jepson looked up from his pork chops.

"Gold! I found gold!"

Nothing captures people's attention like gold, does it? It certainly caught Jepson's attention. He rose from his table, threw down his napkin, and approached Emery.

"Gold?" he said. His nose sniffed like a bloodhound's.

"Yep!" Emery said.

We all gathered around the scruffy prospector.

"You found gold?" I asked. "Where?"

"Right here." He pulled out a musty map and pointed to Ansley's parcel of land.

"That's my land!" Ansley said. He looked at Mary and grinned.

"No, that's my land," I said.

Ansley's jaw dropped like a runaway elevator. His face became a kaleidoscope of colors before settling on red. You could have skated on his eyes.

"You, you, you cheated me!" he cried. "You must have known there was gold on my land! You crook! You big crook!"

Jepson's mouth exploded and his eyes glazed over.

"Quiet down, would you?" he yelled.

Emery looked at Jepson.

"What for?" he asked.

"You don't want to start a stampede, do you?"

Emery became subdued.

"No. I guess not," he whispered.

"There," Jepson nodded, wiping his forehead.

"But I'll tell you one thing," Emery continued. "That whole area's full of gold. I can smell it."

"What are you saying?" Jepson asked. He stuck out his jaw and stared at Emery.

"Look here. See there?" He pointed at the map. "There's gold there."

Jepson's eyes also became large enough to skate on.

"There's gold there?"

"You bet there is," Emery nodded.

Jepson turned to me.

"That's your land, is it?"

"It was mine," Ansley growled. James had to hold him back. It didn't take much effort. "I bought it from you this afternoon."

"Oh yes, I remember," Jepson said to Ansley.

"But I just sold it to this man." Ansley glared at me.

"Yes," I grinned. "And that land is now worth a fortune. So is all the surrounding land."

"Mr. Jepson," Ansley said. "Didn't you know there was gold out there?"

Jepson snarled.

"No he didn't," I said. "If he had he wouldn't have sold it. Now I'm going to find all the other people he sold land to this weekend and buy it from them before

they find out about the gold."

Jepson reeled. You can always tell when a man is sick to his stomach by the way his skin turns color. Jepson's skin was like an empty snakeskin. When his color returned so did his attitude.

"You got enough money to buy all that land?" Jepson asked.

"I don't think he does," Ansley sneered. He raised his head in defiance. "He had to sign an IOU in order to buy my land."

"Is that right?" Jepson laughed. He had a repulsive laugh that sounded like someone banging on an empty metal barrel. "You've got to have a lot of bread to play the real estate game." He laughed again and patted me on the back. "I've got that kind of money. You don't. I can afford to buy back the land. You can't."

"Perhaps we can make a deal," I said.

"Deal? What kind of deal? You've got nothing to deal with." He had an awful grin on his chubby face.

"I've got information."

He stopped grinning.

"Once everyone learns about the gold you'll never be able to buy back the land," I said. "At least not at a reasonable price."

"You wouldn't dare ..."

I examined the pieces of gold in Emery's hand. "Very good quality," I said.

"See that?" Emery said, pointing to one of the pieces. "That means the area's full of gold. I can tell just by looking at it. Whee! Drinks for everybody!"

"Pipe down!" Jepson yelled. "What's your deal?" he said to me.

"You buy my parcel of land, at a healthy premium, of course, and I'll keep quiet about the gold."

"That's blackmail," he said.

"Land prices will skyrocket once news of the gold gets out," I said. "My silence is worth something. It turns out you were pretty foolish to sell that land."

"Let's talk money," he said.

We settled the deal and Jepson rushed off to buy back his land. I ushered the Duke's out of the cafe and paid them for their parcel. James waited in the Rolls.

"Mr. Churchill," Ansley said. "I don't understand it. At first I thought you had cheated me out of my land. Then you gave me all of the money, including the extra that Jepson gave you to keep quiet about the gold. Aren't you going to keep some?"

"Yes," Mary said. "You certainly deserve a share."

"No. You take the money and put it in the bank," I said. "Return to your conservative ways."

"But you knew there was gold on that land," Ansley said. "Couldn't we have made more money if we'd kept it? Gold is very valuable."

I climbed into the back of the Rolls and lowered the window. "Mr. Duke," I said as James started the engine. "The only gold on that land is fool's gold. Home, James."

The Rogue Meets His Match



To me she will always be *the woman*. I have met many women in my time but none like Irene Atom. She was not one of those prissy high society types who exist solely for expensive parties. No, Irene Atom was what could best be described as clever.

* * *

It was an unusually balmy winter evening in San Francisco. The *glitterati* wore their fur coats out of fashion, not necessity. It was also opera season, that dangerous time of year when culture and sociality gang up on unsuspecting aspirants to the *beau monde*. I've been told that it takes a man at least six seasons to harden to the point where he can stomach the opera and still maintain enthusiasm for the post-opera party. Many do not have the mettle and they slide back into the bourgeoisie, fading forever from the gossip columns.

It was Friday night and I was at a post-opera party in the home of a flamboyant financier. I may at times miss the opera, but I never miss the party. Unfortunately, the *prima donna* was also attending the party. She was artificially demure, holding court among a group of fawning admirers. I hoped none of them would ask her to sing. It's not that I have anything against good music, it's just that there's something about sopranos. I think it's the remarkable similarity between their singing and the banshee of love-starved cats. I crossed my fingers and hoped for the best.

"Winston!" someone called.

I turned to face the voice. It was Sidney Felstein, dashing in a stiff tuxedo with a champagne glass attached to the left sleeve.

"Sidney, been to the opera, I see."

"Yes. Marvelous, simply marvelous."

The *prima donna* overheard our conversation and smiled.

"Don't encourage her," I muttered, pulling him aside. "So, Sidney, how have you been?"

"Fine, fine. And you?" He was nervous. Well, Sidney was always nervous. This time he was more nervous than usual.

"Fine," I said.

"Fine. Listen, Winston, I've got something to talk to you about." He spoke softly and looked around to see if anyone else was listening.

"Fire away," I said.

"As you probably know, I've always had political ambitions."

"Is that so?"

"Yes," he nodded. "In fact, I'm going to run for governor next year."

"Congratulations!" I patted him on the back.

"Yes, I am quite pleased about that. But there is a dark cloud in the ointment."

"What?"

"You see, many years ago I committed a trifling indiscretion that I'm afraid might come back to haunt me. You know how the press treats electoral candidates. They rake them over the stove. They dig up all the smut they can find regardless of how old it is."

"Yes, I suppose one must have a clean past."

"No skeletons in the cabinet."

"Right." I was beginning to worry about old Sidney. Perhaps had imbibed a bit too much of the bubbly.

"Well, I have a skeleton that must be disposed of, if you know what I mean."

"What kind of skeleton?"

He looked around again and continued once he was convinced no one was eavesdropping.

"There are these photographs, Winston. You see, many years ago I was romantically involved with an entertainer. The photographs are of the two of us. No one must ever see them."

"Is it so bad to have been romantically involved with an entertainer?" I asked. "Sometimes a glamorous past is an asset."

"When I say entertainer I don't mean an artist in the traditional sense. Not a musician nor an actor."

"What do you mean, Sidney?"

"I mean an entertainer on Broadway."

"Broadway? Not bad."

"In North Beach."

"Oh, that Broadway." In case you don't know, Broadway in San Francisco's North Beach is full of what can politely be called "strip joints".

"It was a clandestine relationship and these photographs could be very damaging to my campaign if they fall into the wrong hands."

"Are you being threatened? Is she blackmailing you?"

"No." He fidgeted. "I don't think this person even knows about my plans to run for governor."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I'm afraid of the uncertainty. I'm afraid I'll be blackmailed once my candidacy is announced."

"Oh," I said.

"What I need is a preemptive strike. You know, get the photos before the temptation arises."

"I see."

"Yes, well." Sidney poured the champagne into his mouth. Words momentarily escaped him.

"And you want me to obtain these photographs for you," I said.

"Yes, Winston, that's the idea. What do you think? You can do that sort of thing, can't you?"

"What's her name?" I shrugged.

"Irene Atom."

"Irene Atom? I never heard of her. Where is she living?"

"Somewhere in North Beach."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"No, I can't. I haven't seen her for years. She retired over fifteen years ago."

"That's a long time, Sidney. Are you sure she's still around?"

"It's not that long." He shrugged and shivered at the same time. "People have long memories."

He was holding something back, but that's just how these political types are.

"I suppose you're right," I said.

"Then will you help me?" he asked.

Before I could answer, my worst fears came true. The *prima donna* began to sing.

"Well, Sidney, I've got to go."

"But will you help me?"

"You know me, Sidney. I'm always willing to do my part to expedite the political

process."

Sidney smiled. I hurried away from the party before the *prima donna* could inflict permanent damage to my nervous system. The only sure remedy for a soprano is the solitude of a Rolls Royce.

* * *

"James, I believe the best way to locate Irene Atom is to ask a few of the North Beach old-timers."

"Indeed, sir?" He spoke in a manner that seemed to doubt my approach.

"Yes. There must be someone who knows her whereabouts. Don't you agree?"

"If you say so, sir." His manner was becoming a bit annoying. I have noticed that there are times when he can be a bit arrogant. Still, he is a good chauffeur. Worth the difficulty in finding.

I began my search for Irene Atom that evening. You've got to get up pretty late in the day if you want to find information in North Beach.

The streets glistened in the damp aftermath of a brief rain. The distinctive North Beach aromas had been temporarily suppressed by the sudden dousing and they now emerged from the pores of the city and rose like steam from a baked clam. The obvious thing to do was to hit all the old joints and find someone who still knew Irene. Not quite like looking for a needle in a haystack, but almost.

James took me to Enrico's, a slowly fading North Beach icon known for live jazz and lively ambience. I was hoping to find an old-timer named Eddie Muncher, a full-time hanger-on who knew more about North Beach than anybody. In the old days he had owned an obscure, tiny club called "The Green Apple". Only hard-core locals ever knew of it. Since then I had kept Eddie supplied with racing tips so he was always willing to do me a favor. And if anybody knew the whereabouts of Irene Atom it would be Eddie Muncher.

I settled myself at an outdoor table, ordered an espresso, and watched the crowds on their way to Finocchio's next door. In case you don't know, Finocchio's is a joint specializing in female impersonators. And it was amazing how many people went there. Mostly out-of-towners searching for a glimpse of the real San Francisco.

But my concern wasn't the *real* San Francisco, it was Sidney Felstein and Irene Atom. An unlikely sounding couple, I must say. I really didn't know Sidney all that well but it didn't surprise me that he would have gotten himself mixed up with a stripper. His taste in women was always a bit strange. Not quite gubernatorial material, if you ask me.

I was on my second espresso when Eddie finally wandered by. He wore a too-green plaid sport coat and a dark brown hat with a gray feather in the band. His nose had lost the battle to dominate his face but it had not yet given up the fight.

"How ya been, Winston?" he said.

"Good, Eddie. And you?"

"I'm still alive and kickin."

"Still play the horses?"

"Aye, whenever I've got spare change."

I smiled and slipped a list of horses and some spare change into his coat pocket. He winked and smiled.

"Say, Eddie, I've got a question for you."

"Ask away, Winston."

"Have you ever heard of a stripper named Irene Atom?" I asked.

"Irene Atom," he pondered. "A stripper, you say?" His eyes squinted, forehead creased, and jaw tightened. When Eddie ponders, he ponders.

"Yes," I said.

"The name sounds familiar," he said. "She still performing?"

"No. She's an old-timer. Retired at least fifteen years ago I'm told. Thought you might have heard of her."

"My memory must be a-slippin, Winston. I don't know of no stripper named Irene Atom."

"Well, thanks for exercising your brain."

"You're welcome, Winston. I'm sorry I can't remember. I'll let you know if it comes back to me. Be seeing you." He saluted me with his index finger and shuffled off.

Have you ever noticed how interrogation makes one hungry? No, you probably haven't. Well, believe me it does. Questioning Eddie Muncher had made me extremely hungry so I followed the scent of garlic across the street to Little Joe's. There was nothing wrong with the food at Enrico's but I figured I'd be able to run into a few more old-timers at Little Joe's. And I was right. I sat down at the counter next to an old hawker named Skeets.

"Hello, Skeets."

He looked at me through bangs of dry yellow hair that was so much like straw a horse would have eaten it.

"Why, hello Winston Churchill!" he said. "I haven't seen you in ages."

He held out a scruffy hand. I shook it carefully.

"How have you been?" I asked.

"Can't complain. I'm eating enough garlic to stay healthy."

"Good."

"Yes, sir. Garlic and olive oil will make you live forever."

I smiled. He may just be right.

"Say, I'm looking for someone", I said. "Maybe you can help."

"Sure. I'm always willing to help a pal." He slurped some spaghetti into his mouth. "Who are you looking for?"

"A stripper named Irene Atom. She retired about fifteen years ago."

"Irene Atom? A stripper?"

"Yes. I'm told she used to work in North Beach."

Skeets shook his head.

"You sure she didn't work at Finocchio's?" he laughed.

"She was a stripper," I repeated.

"Oh." He shook his head again. "No, I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Then keep eating your garlic."

Skeets smiled and saluted me with a fork full of spaghetti. "I'll let you know if something turns up," he said.

"I'd appreciate it."

"But I don't think anything will."

I ate a plate of first-rate pasta *carbonara* and resumed my search. But it was no good. No one remembered a stripper named Irene Atom.

* * *

"You've got to find her!" Sidney screamed. "She's got to be around somewhere!"

"Are you sure?" I said. "She may no longer be in San Francisco."

"She is, Winston, she is. I just know it."

It seemed to me that Sidney was a trifle paranoid. Perhaps it was the pressure of mounting a political campaign.

"I can't find anyone who remembers her," I added.

"Winston, you've got to find her! You've got to try again."

"All right, Sidney, I'll try," I sighed.

"Thank you." He relaxed slightly. "I'll reward you with a cabinet position if you find her."

"That won't be necessary," I said. The thought of serving in government chilled me to my bones. That was not by gig.

“Well, I’ll find some way to reward you.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sidney.”

He smiled, shook my hand, nodded and led me to the door.

“Good luck,” he said.

* * *

“James, any ideas on how to find Irene Atom?” It was a silly question as it turned out.

“Yes, sir, I do. In fact, I’ve been making a few inquiries on my own and I believe I have discovered her place of residence.”

"I say, good job!" Good chauffeur, that James. Do you know how hard, no you don't.

“She is living with someone is North Beach and no longer uses the name of Irene Atom.”

“I suppose that was to be expected. Still, it’s unusual that none of the old-timers had ever heard of her. But never mind. Take me to her, James.”

“Yes, sir.”

James prepared the Rolls and soon we were slicing through the streets of North Beach. He drove several blocks down Columbus then turned right onto an upwardly sloping street lined with multiple-floor apartment houses. Most of them were Victorians but several modern boxes had unfortunately been wedged in between the older structures. They looked like weeds growing between cracks in the sidewalk. As usual, parking was impossible. James temporarily double-parked the Rolls in front of one of the Victorians and let me out.

"She lives in Apartment 31," he said.

I nodded and approached the building. It used to be white but dirt and cracked paint had turned the facade dull tan. A man with long gray and black hair sat on the steps. He wasn't doing anything but staring. I approached the steps and he looked up.

"I'm looking for Irene Atom," I said.

His eyes were as hard as marbles. He shrugged.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

Again he shrugged. I don't think he lived anywhere. I left him to his private world and climbed the three steps to the front door. It was a nice door - dark wood with frosted glass etched with an art deco ethereal design. It could have used some refurbishing, though. I twisted the door knob and found the door unlocked. I eased it open and stepped in. The foyer had the musty smell that foyers get after a century of sweat, tobacco smoke, and leaky windows. The mailboxes were to the right of the doorway; the stairs in front of me. Someone

opened a door on the next floor but I couldn't see who it was. I got the impression, however, that I was being watched.

I made the quick deduction that Apartment 31 was on the third floor and started up the stairs. They were noisy. I walked as softly as possible but I still sounded like a herd of thundering Buicks. I was right about Apartment 31 - it was on the third floor, halfway down the hall.

I paused at the door and heard shuffling inside. I displayed the quick thinking I am known for and decided it would be better to use a false identity and quickly thought of one.

I knocked on the door. A scruffy, middle-aged man opened it. His hair was very short and it stood straight up. Tiny stubbles of beard poked out of inappropriate parts of his face.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I'd like to see Irene Atom."

"Who?"

"Irene Atom."

He looked at me funny. I thought that perhaps for once James had gotten it wrong.

"She used to be an entertainer," I said. "Does she still live here?"

"Oh, Irene." His eyes became opaque. "What do you want to see her for?"

"I'm a journalist. I'd like to interview her." It seemed like a good story to me.

He looked at my custom-tailored, dark gray double-breasted suit and recently shined black Italian shoes. Ferragamo, of course.

"You look like a lawyer to me," he said.

"I say, there's no need to get nasty," I said. "I really am a journalist. From Cleveland."

"Journalist," the man mumbled. "How do I know you're a journalist?" People in this city are so suspicious.

"You'll have to trust me, I guess."

He looked me over again. I think he liked my shoes.

"Wait a minute." He closed the door and I heard some whispers and more shuffling. After a few minutes, he reopened the door. I should have known that James would not have gotten it wrong. Good chauffeur, that James.

"Come on in," he said.

"Thank you."

The apartment was drab with outlines on the walls where until recently pictures

or posters had hung. Only one light was on, a dim table lamp balanced on a crooked end table next to a stuffed armchair. The woman sitting in the chair was smothered in shadows. She rose and stepped into the musty yellow light.

"Hello, I'm Irene Atom," she said.

She was late middle-aged with sharp facial features and young blonde hair. She was attractive, not beautiful, and had the kind of face that you could stare at for hours but never fully understand.

"Hello, my name's Fred Miller," I said. It was the best name I could come up with at the time.

"You are?" She studied me the way a palm reader studies palms. It was a bit disconcerting. "Then I'm glad to meet you." Her handshake was powerful. "You've met Brian." She nodded toward the man.

"Hello," I said to him.

"Fred Miller," Brian mumbled. His expression was a mass of scrambled eggs.

"So, you're a journalist?" Irene said.

"Yes, I write for the *Cleveland Times*."

"Cleveland?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing in San Francisco?"

"I'm here to write about North Beach."

"What do people in Cleveland care about North Beach?"

"Tourists care about North Beach. I write a travel column."

"Yes, of course." She wasn't impressed. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

"I'm writing a piece on North Beach and how it has changed over the years. I was told that you might be able to tell me about the old North Beach."

"Who told you that?"

"Some of the people I've talked to on the street."

She smiled. A heretical smile, actually.

"What would you like to know?" she asked.

"I would like to know about your past."

"My past?" Her eyelids fluttered. "It was not very exciting. In fact, it was very ordinary."

"What is ordinary for North Beach is special for Cleveland," I said.

"I suppose so." Her smile was unnerving.

"And people's lives are usually more interesting than they think they are."

"Are they?"

I couldn't tell whether she was buying my line or not.

"Yes. May I ask you a few questions about your life?"

Her eyes shifted to Brian and then back to me.

"If you really want to ask them," she said. "But I assure you that my life has not been very interesting." She turned and swayed back to the stuffed chair. Brian brought two metal chairs from the kitchen and we sat down. The light from the cheap lamp cast harsh shadows on her face.

"Now Mister, what did you say your name was?"

"Miller," I said.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Miller. How could I forget that? It's such a common name, isn't it? Now, what would you like to know?"

"Well, one of the first things people think of when they think of North Beach is Broadway and the strip joints."

"Is that what they think?"

"Well, yes." I didn't like the way the conversation had begun. "I understand you were once a stripper," I said.

She quickly looked at Brian.

"Am I wrong?" I asked.

"No, no," she fluttered. "You have it right." She crossed her legs. "You journalists have a way of getting right to the heart of the matter."

"If you don't want to talk about it we can talk about something else," I said, sensing her uneasiness.

"What else would people in Cleveland like to read about?" Her mouth smiled but her eyes remained cold. She was on her guard but she spoke with a disarming easiness.

"The old and the new?" I said. "People always like to read about how things have changed, how the good old days have gone."

"Ah, the good old days," she nodded. "There were real night clubs back then. And the comedy clubs!" She suddenly came alive and spoke with infectious enthusiasm. "But sadly they are gone. I really think the good old days ended when 'The Green Apple' closed, don't you?"

"Yes," I nodded. "That certainly left a void."

Heat rose from her eyes.

"Would you happen to have any old pictures?" I asked.

She looked at Brian then back at me. I thought she was going to say no.

"I don't mean X-rated." I said.

"What do you mean?" she inquired. She almost spoke with a Southern accent.

"Oh, something innocent. Suitable for the newspapers."

"Suitable for the newspapers!" she laughed.

"For Cleveland newspapers," I said. "Pictures that would show how things were in the old North Beach, you know, so I could do a before and after."

"Well, I may have something." She motioned to Brian. He left the room and returned with a box. Irene opened it and shuffled through some pictures. I recognized a young Sidney in several of them and tried to contain my excitement, but I'm sure my eyes widened a wee bit. The photos didn't look very incriminating to me, just Sidney and Irene holding each other and smiling at the camera. I perused the photos.

"Yes, these are very good," I said. "Just what the people in Cleveland would like to see."

"Are they?"

"Yes. I'd like to buy them from you." I knew Sidney would put up the cash.

"All of them?"

"As many as you would like to sell." She'd get suspicious if I showed interest only in the ones with Sidney in them. At times I can be very clever, don't you think?

She looked at me. Her eyes had cooled.

"I'm afraid not," she said. She took the photos back, placed them in the box and handed it to Brian. I watched intently as he took them back to the other room.

"I can pay you a good price," I said.

"It's not the money," she said. "They have sentimental value. These photos are all that remain of my life. I can't possibly part with them."

"Do you have the negatives? I could make copies."

"No, there are no negatives. All I have are those pictures. They are all that remain of my 'good old days'."

"I see. Well, think about my offer, would you?"

"I won't change my mind."

"If you do, leave a message for me at the Kensington Park Hotel."

She smiled and rose from her chair.

"Now I'm afraid I must go, Mr. Miller," she said. "Brian and I help a friend clean

up his restaurant every night. He closes at midnight."

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes to twelve.

"I'm sorry I've taken so much of your time," I said. "I do appreciate your cooperation."

"It's been my pleasure." Her handshake was sly.

"Please think about those photos," I said. "I'd settle for even just a few of them."

"Perhaps I could spare one," she said. "I'll think about it. No promises, though."

"Fair enough," I said.

Brian led me to the door and closed it behind me. I walked down the stairs and out of the building. Even as I climbed into the Rolls I felt as if I was being watched.

"Does she have the pictures?" James asked.

"Yes," I said. "I offered to buy them but she wouldn't sell."

"Pity, sir."

* * *

"She won't sell them?" Sidney screamed. He was unhappy.

"No."

"Winston, I've got to have those photos!" he yelled. His voice sounded like an Austin Healy 3000 on five cylinders. Do you know what an Austin Healy 3000 sounds like on five cylinders? No, you probably don't. Well, it's damned unpleasant.

"If she won't sell them to you then you'll have to get them some other way," Sidney continued. "Money is no obstacle."

"I'll do my best."

There was a pause.

"I'm sorry, Winston. I know you will. I didn't mean to suggest you wouldn't. It's just that you know how important this election is to me."

"Yes, I'm beginning to."

"Good. I knew I could count on you."

"I don't have them yet."

"But you will get them. I know it. Good job."

* * *

It was a crowded North Beach Saturday night. The neon lights buzzed electric excitement and the magical aroma of garlic and olive oil carried on the sea breeze. James parked the Rolls near Irene's building.

"They should be gone by now," I said. It was a few minutes before midnight. "If you have any trouble finding the box, go to the window. I can see it from here."

"Yes, sir."

"Otherwise, I'll just wait for you. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir."

James left the Rolls and walked down the sidewalk. I rolled down the window and rested my arm on the sill. I'm not a chauffeur so I'm allowed to do that. Seconds later two familiar looking men passed by carrying suitcases. One of them wore sunglasses even though it was night. He had short hair that stood straight up. The other man kept his head down but I was sure I had seen him somewhere before. It bugged me.

"Good night, Mr. Churchill," one of them said to me as they passed.

Those words were like ice cubes on my spine. Whoever they were they knew my name! By the time I recovered and went after them they were gone. North Beach had engulfed them.

I ran back to the Rolls and found James leaning out of the window of Irene's apartment. Something was wrong. The long-haired man was no longer on the steps. He had probably found a new home, steps with running water or a better view. I dashed into the apartment building. The lobby was quiet. Much too quiet. I was no longer being watched.

I jumped up the stairs with all the getup of one of Maranello's finest and dashed into Apartment 31. The apartment was not dark. An unshaded light bulb hung from the ceiling and created film noir shadows. I know a vacant apartment when I see one and this was definitely a vacant apartment.

"James, what's going on?"

"This was on the chair," he said.

"What is it?" I asked, taking the large envelop from him.

"It has your name on it, sir."

"What?" My stomach felt funny. "I used an alias with her. How did she know my real name?" I ripped open the envelope and took out a letter. It read:

My Dear Mr. Winston Churchill,

I know who you are and I know that Sidney sent you. I had been warned that if he ever wanted to get those photographs back he would surely ask someone like you to do it. I did well to heed those warnings for you were very good. It was not until I tricked you into revealing your true knowledge of the old North Beach that I

was certain it was you (who in Cleveland would have known about "The Green Apple"?).

I realize that you probably do not know the real significance of those pictures. If you did, I am sure you would never have agreed to obtain them for Sidney. He probably told you that I would use them to blackmail him. Let me tell you the true story.

I do not know how well you know Sidney. Socially, he appears to be an angel. Personally, he can be a real bastard. I am not going to go into all of the sordid details, but suffice it to say that he is not above inflicting bodily harm. We had a very turbulent relationship those many years ago, and although it is now over, I still do not trust him.

So you see, I must keep those photographs. They are my only form of protection against this man who can be such a monster. Rest assured that I will not use them to blackmail Sidney. I have no vendetta, and as long as he stays away from me I will cause him no harm. I am leaving the country with Brian and hope that the distance will protect me from any further intrusion caused by Sidney Felstein. I am leaving him a poster from my entertaining days which he might care to possess; and I remain, dear Winston Churchill,

Very truly yours,

Irene Atom

"Ha!" My fingers were numb.

"Sir?"

I handed James the letter, unfolded the poster, and received a second shock. The poster was from Finocchio's. Above a picture of a young Irene Atom were the words: *Irene Atom, Female Impersonator.*

"It's her!" I yelled.

"Him," James said.

"Yes, him."

"We've been had, sir."

"Indeed, we have." I looked at the poster again. I was a bit miffed yet I couldn't help but admire the way in which Irene had outsmarted me.

"What a clever woman," I said. I couldn't keep the grin from my face.

"Man, sir."

"Yes, man. James, I think I shall keep this poster for myself."

"Very good, sir."

I went to the open window and stared at the North Beach streets that had helped Irene Atom elude my grasp. The cool bay air slapped my face.

"Good night, Irene!" I said.

The Rogue Makes a Comeback



The thrill of having been outwitted so cleverly by Irene Atom was temporary and I soon fell into a despondency that not even my Rolls Royce could cure. Do you have any idea of how despondent that is? No, you probably don't. Well, let me tell you it's very despondent. To top it off I had no place to stay and was forced to check back into the Kensington Park Hotel.

The doorman said "good morning" with a New York accent as he opened the brass-rimmed doors. It was a clear, winter San Francisco morning and a sharp, ocean-tinged breeze slapped my face. What a way to start the day.

I pulled my dark green, almost brown, Canali overcoat tight and walked into the wind. There's nothing like a good overcoat to keep the chill from ones bones. My overcoat had been meticulously crafted from the finest Merino wool by the hands of the finest Italian tailors. Speaking of Merino wool, did you know that each Merino sheep produces up to ten kilograms of wool? Perhaps you didn't. If not, then you probably also do not know that Merino sheep were originally from the Mediterranean basin and were taken to Australia and New Zealand in the 18th Century. If you did, then consider yourself one of an impressively knowledgeable minority.

As I walked on I was soon faced with the difficult choice of a either good cigar from Dunhill or the *San Francisco Chronicle* from a corner newsstand. I chose the *Chronicle*. Dunhill will always exist; the continued existence of small corner newsstands in the modern world is remote. Perhaps you have noticed my tendency to support the underdog.

I passed the Ritz Deli and noticed Sarah Everton having an intimate cup of coffee with a man I think I may have met before. She saw me through the tall windows and motioned for me to join her.

"Good morning, Sarah," I said.

"Good morning, Winston." She grabbed my hands and kissed me a bit too dramatically. "It's so nice to see you. It's been such a long time." Her smile restored the youth to the outer reaches of her face. It had been a while since I had seen her and I must say that if she wasn't careful she was going to end up as portly as her husband. Have you noticed how wealth has a way of ravaging the body? Perhaps you have.

The man rose.

"Do you know Tom Sledgeton?" Sarah asked, presenting her breakfast partner. He was a tall man, also well on his way to becoming portly. He wore an expensive suit that he had bought off the rack without alteration. It's a crime to pay that much money and not get bespoke or at least made-to-measure. Style, you either have it or you don't and if you have it, well, enough said about that. Mr. Sledgeton did not have it.

"We may have met before," I said to him. "I'm Winston Churchill."

"How do you do?" he said. He looked me over the way an investor looks over stock quotations.

"Tom's a good friend of Rodney's," Sarah explained.

"And how is Rodney?" I asked.

"Fine. He's out of town on business. He'll be back this afternoon. We're having a dinner party Friday night. My horoscope said it would be a good night for a party. Why don't you join us?"

"I'd love to."

"Good," she said. "Parties are always better when you're around. Something exciting always seems to happen."

"I'm sure she means that in a positive way," Sledgeton said.

"Of course I do!" Sarah laughed.

"Thank you," I said.

"Well, it's been nice meeting you," Tom Sledgeton said, suddenly grabbing my hand.

I took the hint.

"Yes, goodbye," I said. I kissed Sarah on the cheek and left the deli. I continued toward the newsstand with renewed vigor. The prospect of the Everton's party brightened my spirits.

The Everton's were young money on a buying binge they hoped would secure their place in established society. They lived in a small palace, imaginatively called "Everton House", on Broadway, west of Van Ness. Pretty ritzy territory. My

Rolls Royce always looked at home in their driveway.

I had known Sarah's husband, Rodney, for quite some time. He was an impetuous man, relentless in his pursuit of success. His conglomeration of businesses were prosperous, his shotgun collection impressive, his parties predatory and expensive. Friday evening promised to be eventful if nothing else.

* * *

James easily conquered the Friday night traffic and we arrived promptly at Everton House. Since it had been raining on-and-off I wore a genuine Burberry's trench coat over a heavy wool, brown bespoke suit from Henry Poole. Sarah's butler answered the door. It slipped from his grasp as he opened it and it banged against the wall. Very shabby. Not something a proper butler would have done. Then again, he didn't look like a proper butler. He was in his mid-twenties with a sculpted physique that should have been adorning a piazza in Rome. Definitely Sarah's type.

"Winston Churchill," I announced to him.

"Who?"

"Winston Churchill."

I handed him my trench coat. He reluctantly took it. I'm sure my sartorial flair was wasted on him. He didn't look like the kind of man who could tell the difference between a real Burberry's trench coat and a cheap imitation. In case you don't know, the secret to a real Burberry is the cotton. It is chemically treated while still in the yarn, woven tightly into cloth, and proofed again before being made into a garment. Class will always tell.

The butler looked at James.

"Where shall we put your driver?"

"He's not my driver, he's my *chauffeur*."

"Oh, then he'd better come inside."

The butler led us into a large living room decorated in shades of dark blue and maroon. The furniture was magazine chic and appeared to be permanently fastened to the floor. A stone mantle imported from France sat above the fireplace and a fire crackled in the hearth. The random mixing of interior design styles and eras did not appeal to my decorating tastes.

Rodney, shotgun in hand, stood in the center of the living room. Two other men, one of them Tom Sledgeton, stood in jealous trances in front of him. Rodney saw me enter and smiled.

"Winston!" he called. "It's good to see you again. Sarah told me she had invited you. I'm glad you could come."

I joined the trio and shook a massive hand attached to a log-shaped arm that protruded from Rodney's canyon-width shoulder. Everything about Rodney was

big.

"I'd never miss one of your parties," I said to him. "You're looking good. And I say, so is that shotgun."

Rodney beamed.

"Yes, I just bought it at an auction. I outbid these two for it."

Sledgeton and the other man snarled.

"Oh, by the way, do you know these gentlemen?" Rodney asked, exaggerating his pronunciation of "gentlemen".

"Tom Sledgeton," Sledgeton said to me as if we had never met.

"I'm Edgar Littleton," the other said as he shook my hand. He was a small man with Ivy League glasses and a bald head.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"All three of us went to Wharton Business School together," Rodney said. "We've been friends ever since. We have the same hobbies, the same interests, the same everything. Why, we could be triplets!" he laughed. "They're a bit sore at me now, though, because I outbid them for this shotgun. She's a beauty, isn't she?"

Rodney raised the double barrel shotgun for all to see. It had a gold pheasant intricately engraved above the trigger and the stock glowed like finely polished furniture. It was the most beautiful shotgun I had ever seen - even more beautiful than the ones Ted Nance collected.

"It's a vintage A. J. Roberts," Rodney said. "Cost me \$125,000."

I whistled.

"But she's worth every penny," Rodney continued. "Look at that detail work. And the barrel has not been re-blued. That shine is original."

"You've got yourself a masterpiece," I said.

"I know. And they don't." Rodney poked his nose at his two friends and grinned. "Edgar went out of the bidding surprisingly early. But Tom fought me all the way."

"Until you drastically overpaid for it," Tom said. "Still, I should have continued bidding. That A. J. Roberts would have been the crown jewel of my collection. I wanted it badly, but Rodney always seems to know what my limit is."

Rodney laughed and patted Sledgeton on the shoulder.

"Go get a drink and drown your sorrow," he said.

Sledgeton nodded and slithered off.

"I've got a new company, too, Winston."

Edgar frowned and adjusted his frames.

"Edgar tried to outbid me for it," Rodney chuckled. "But he lost his nerve. He always does."

"That isn't so," Edgar growled.

"Oh, Edgar, why don't you go and have a drink with Tom. You can both drink away your losses."

"Honestly, Rodney," Edgar said. "One of these days you're going to pay for your arrogance."

"Ha! You guys couldn't afford to make me pay," Rodney laughed.

Edgar shook his head and stormed off. Rodney ran out of laughs and turned to me.

"Winston, the best thing in life is winning," he said. "Like winning that shotgun from Tom and winning that company from Edgar. Winning is truly everything. It's the food we eat and the air we breathe. Yes, winning is what it's all about. Winning makes life worth living."

"What about how you play the game?" I asked.

"If you play the game right, you win."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"Winning makes me happy, Winston. And my shotguns."

"Are you still talking about that shotgun?" a woman asked.

"Of course," Rodney smiled.

The woman joined us and was swallowed into Rodney's friendly embrace. She looked a bit frail but her face was lively. Her eyes were like marbles and they rolled underneath a pair of artificially enhanced eyelids.

"Winston, this is Edgar's wife, Agnes."

"Hello," I said to her. "I'm Winston Churchill."

"My, Rodney, you have such important friends," she giggled.

"I do my best," Rodney laughed.

"Have you met my husband?" Agnes asked me.

"Yes," I said. "And Tom Sledgeton."

"My, the whole crew," she shook her head and chuckled.

"Excuse me," Rodney said to me. "I'm going to put this gun away. Agnes will keep you company."

Agnes smiled and nodded.

"He's been showing everyone that shotgun," she said. "I'm tired of hearing about it. He's just rubbing it in, though, trying to make the other two feel bad. They've been competing against each other like that ever since college. I've never seen anything like it. Once one of them wants something the others also have to have it. It drives me crazy. But they seem to enjoy it. I guess it's just one of those things women don't understand."

"Your husband didn't seem to enjoy losing that company," I said.

"Oh, he'll get over it. He always does. I really don't know how they've managed to stay friends all these years."

"Rodney, put that gun away," Sarah yelled from across the room.

"All right, all right," Rodney said. "Hey, Winston, come over here."

I smiled at Agnes.

"Sorry, but I'm wanted," I said.

"That's all right. One should never keep Rodney waiting."

I joined Rodney in front of a large gun case in the far corner of the room.

"Look at this one," he said, taking another shotgun from the case. "It's a Parker."

"Very nice." It looked like one of Ted Nance's guns.

"I think you've seen the rest of them."

I scanned the case.

"Yes, I think so," I said.

He closed the case and locked it.

"Here, hang on to this for me, will you?" he said. He handed me a small, tan envelope. "Keep it with the others."

"Sure."

* * *

Have you ever noticed how elegant dinner parties tend to raise one's spirits? If you inhabit my milieu then you have, if you don't then you probably haven't. But it's true. Trust me. The Everton's party had worked its magic and cured my malaise. The Rolls had regained its charm and I felt good enough to order a new suit. I will not disclose the name of my tailor but I will tell you that the suit will be double-breasted and cut from a dark gray birds-eye fabric that you may have seen on Bogart. And, of course, I had to acquire accessories to match: tie, pocket square and belt. When one owns a Rolls Royce one's wardrobe must measure up. We'll talk about shoes later.

I was in the best of spirits when Monday dawned. The *Monday Chronicle* was delivered with my breakfast and I sat back in a comfortable chair next to my

room's window and took a sprinkling of news with my orange juice. All very civilized. All very civilized until the bottom half of the front page. A two-column story shattered my morning: Rodney Everton was missing.

According to an exclusive *Chronicle* story, Rodney had not returned from a Saturday hunting trip. Sarah Everton had expected him home that afternoon but he never returned. She was a bit miffed at the police for telling her that Rodney had not been missing long enough to warrant a full investigation. As the British would say, it was all a bit rum.

Under the circumstances the civilized thing to do was to visit Sarah and offer my services. I called for the Rolls and James immediately took me to Everton House. Sarah answered the door herself.

"The butler had to take a short leave of absence," she apologized. He had probably banged the door once too often. Even Sarah has her limits.

"What about Rodney?" I asked.

"Oh, it's terrible, Winston." She clung to a damp handkerchief and led me into the study.

"Tell me what happened."

"Friday night after the party Rodney told me that he was going hunting in the morning. He got up around 5 a.m. I made him coffee and then he took his new shotgun and left. He said he would be home late in the afternoon but that was the last time I saw him."

I walked over to the gun case. The A. J. Roberts was missing. Curious.

"I'm sure there's been a dreadful accident," she continued. "It's the only explanation."

"Don't jump to conclusions," I said. "He hasn't been gone that long. He may have decided to stay longer. Perhaps the hunting was good."

"Oh, Winston, you sound just like the police! Rodney would have called me if he was going to stay longer. He always does. It's not like him to just stay away."

"Who did he go with?" I asked.

"I don't know. He didn't say. He often goes with Tom or Edgar. Tom did not go. I don't know about Edgar."

"Have you talked to Edgar?"

"No. Maybe the police may have. I don't know. Oh, Winston, I'm so worried." Her eyes went dark for a second.

"I'll do what I can to help if you'd like," I said.

"Oh, Winston, I appreciate that, but Tom is taking care of things."

Tom Sledgeton entered the room on cue. He was surprised to see me.

"I came over when I read the news," I said to him.

He nodded. Sarah went to him.

"Tom's been so good during all of this," she said. "I don't know what I would have done without him."

"She exaggerates my value," Sledgeton said. "But it's important to help friends in need."

"Yes, very important," I agreed.

"Thanks for your concern," Sledgeton said, leading me to the door. "But I think everything is under control for the moment."

"Yes, I'll be all right," Sarah said. "I'm eternally grateful for your visit."

I nodded and left Everton House.

"Any news, sir?" James asked.

"Rodney went hunting and never returned." I paused for dramatic effect. "And the A. J. Roberts is missing. According to Sarah he took it hunting."

"Then there has been foul play, sir."

"Indeed there has, James, indeed there has."

* * *

The next morning I was stirred from a restful slumber by a raging telephone. Agnes Littleton was on the line.

"Winston, I'm sorry to bother you, not knowing you all that well and what not, but I don't know who to turn to. You've heard about Rodney Everton's disappearance?"

"Yes."

"Well, the police have just been talking to Edgar. You don't think they think he may have something to do with it, do you?"

"Probably just routine," I said.

"I hope you're right but they seem to believe that he went hunting with Rodney on Saturday morning. But he didn't. I don't like this, Winston. The police are asking terrible questions. What should I do?"

"Don't worry. If Edgar is innocent he has nothing to worry about."

"Of course he's innocent!" She yelped like a yelping terrier.

"Then just sit tight. I'll take care of things."

"Thank you so much, Winston. May I call you Winston?"

"Certainly."

"Then thank you again, Winston."

I hung up and the phone immediately rang again. It was Sarah.

"Winston, they found Rodney's truck in the Sierras! But there's no sign of Rodney. Oh, Winston, I'm afraid he's dead!"

"Calm down, Sarah. Why would you think that?"

"I'm sorry, Winston. I'm just so worried."

"I understand. Have they found anything to indicate Rodney has been injured?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell me much. No, I don't think they did."

"Well, don't give up hope, Sarah."

"I won't."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. Tom's still taking care of me. I just thought you'd want to know about the truck."

"Yes, I'm glad you told me about it. Please call me if anything else comes up."

"I will."

I hung up the phone and went back to bed. My head had just hit the pillow when the pounding on my door started.

"Strike three, I'm up," I growled.

The pounding wouldn't stop so I opened the door. A man in dirty clothes and a muddy face barged in and tracked mud across the floor.

"Winston," he said.

I was surprised to hear my name and a little alarmed at his presence in my room. He reminded me of some creature from a third-rate horror movie.

"Winston, it's me."

I looked at him more closely. It took some imagination but I eventually recognized the face before me. It was Rodney Everton!

"Rodney!" I said. "You're missing."

"I am?"

"Yes. What happened to you?"

"I don't know," he shook his head.

"Sit down. Can I get you something to drink?"

He sat down and scratched his head. Little flakes of mud and leaves fell on his shoulder.

"I'll take whiskey if have it."

I found a small bottle of Beefeaters in the mini bar.

"Rocks?" I asked.

"Straight."

I poured the whiskey into a glass and handed it to him.

"Now tell me what happened," I asked.

"I don't really know. I can't seem to remember very much."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember the party. And I remember waking up in the wilderness. But I can't recall anything in between. I must have been drugged and dumped somewhere. Winston, what's going on?"

"You've been reported missing," I said. "There was a nice piece about you in the *Chronicle*."

"There was?"

"Yes."

He thought about it for a while and seemed pleased with the thought.

"So how long have I been gone?"

"A couple of days."

His eyes blinked a few times.

"That's why I'm so hungry. Say, what day is it anyway?"

"Monday."

"Monday!" His eyelids jumped and a few more flakes of mud fell like snowflakes.

"Yes. By the way, how did you get here?"

"I wandered through the woods for a long time, then early this morning I found my way into some small town. I jumped in the back of a truck bound for San Francisco. I suspected foul play so I came straight to you."

"Then you haven't been home?"

"No. I thought it might be easier to get to the bottom of this if no one knew I was back."

"Good thinking," I said. Rodney hadn't gotten rich by being dumb.

"How's Sarah?" he asked.

"Concerned. But Tom Sledgeton has been providing comfort."

"Has he?" He rubbed his jaw with the dirty thumb and index finger of his left hand.

"Yes," I said.

He finished the Beefeaters and attempted to sort things out.

"So what's the story?" he said. "How did I disappear?"

"According to Sarah, Friday night you told her you were going hunting in the morning. You left early the next morning and that was it. They found your truck in the Sierras, but they didn't find you. Sarah thinks you may have had a hunting accident."

"This was no accident. I don't know what happened, I'm still a bit groggy, but this was no accident. Winston, we have to find out who did this to me."

"Edgar Littleton, perhaps?" I said.

"Edgar? Why Edgar? Why would he do something like this?"

"He is a hunting partner of yours, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you did outbid him for that company, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did." Rodney paused and then smiled. "And don't forget, I also beat Tom out of that shotgun."

"Yes, and it's missing."

"What? My A. J. Roberts is missing?"

"Yes, you allegedly took it hunting with you. Curious, isn't it?"

"It's more than curious, it's dastardly. Who could have done such a thing?"

"Let's find out."

"How?" Rodney asked.

"We'll set a few traps and see what we catch."

Rodney smiled. A true sportsman always enjoys a good hunt.

* * *

James had again used Connally hide food on the Rolls' leather upholstery and the seats smelled wonderful. The rich aroma cuddled me as I sat down.

"Good job, James."

"Thank you, sir." He tilted his head and waited for instructions.

"To Everton House."

"Yes, sir."

Everton House was quiet. Tom Sledgeton's Mercedes was in the drive. It's nice to have a car like that to park next to because it makes the Rolls look all that much better.

Sarah again answered the door herself.

"The butler's still away?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so." Embarrassment crossed her face as if she had turned it on with a switch. She led me into the study. Sledgeton was stuffed into a gothic chair with *The Wall Street Journal*. He did not rise when we entered the room. Poor manners.

"Any more news?" I asked.

"No," Sarah shook her head. "All they've found so far is his truck. There's been no trace of Rodney at all."

"Have they found his shotgun?"

"No."

"What are the police doing now?" I asked.

"Waiting," Sledgeton said. He didn't take his eyes off the paper.

"Waiting?" I grumbled. "Is that all?"

"Yes, Winston," Sarah said. She looked me in the eyes and gave me her best Mary Astor look. "I really don't think they're doing enough."

"What more can they do?" Sledgeton said. "The Sierra's a big place. I'm sure they don't have enough men to search everywhere."

"I suppose you're right," Sarah said. "But I wish they could do more. I wish there was something I could do to help."

"Perhaps there is," I said.

"What do mean?" Sarah asked. The surprise in her eyes was genuine.

"Have you thought about consulting a psychic?" I asked.

"What?"

"They have been known to help the police solve mysteries and find missing people."

"You can't be serious," Sledgeton said. He lowered his paper and glared at me.

"I am serious," I said. "It's worth considering."

Sledgeton shook his head and turned his attention back to the *Journal*. Sarah turned pensive. She was very good at that.

"But a psychic?" she said. "How unusual."

"Rodney's disappearance is unusual. Sometimes you've got to be creative in these matters and try untraditional approaches."

She thought for a moment.

"Maybe you're right," she said. "You are experienced in these matters."

"Sarah!" Sledgeton tossed the *Journal* and went to her. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not being silly. Winston may be on to something. I've read about these psychics. They have helped the police find people and solve mysteries. Besides, I've got to do something, Tom. I can't rely solely on the police. They aren't getting anywhere. Do you have any better ideas?"

"No, I don't have any ideas at all," Sledgeton said. "But I think Winston's idea is ridiculous. You read too many horoscopes."

"Don't belong to the Flat Earth Society, do you?" I asked him.

"What?" My sarcasm was wasted on him. Not surprising given his poor taste in clothes.

"Then it's settled," Sarah said. "Where can I find a psychic?"

"I think I know someone who may be able to help," I said.

"Yes, I thought you might," Sledgeton howled.

"How do we go about this?" Sarah asked.

"Really, Sarah, I can't believe you're serious about this." Sledgeton stormed out of the room.

"Leave it to me," I said. "I'll bring the psychic here. I think Tom, Edgar and Agnes should all be present."

"Will there be a séance?" she asked.

"Yes, but not one like you've ever seen before," I said.

* * *

"I think this is perfectly outrageous," Sledgeton whispered to me.

"You don't believe in the supernatural?"

"No. I don't think you do, either. I think you're taking advantage of Sarah."

"Why would I do that?"

The question stumped him. He was about to continue his attack but froze when Madame Faux, the Seer of All Things, entered the room. She looked half gypsy and half renaissance minstrel.

"I am ready to begin," she announced.

"Shall we all sit around a table and hold hands?" Sarah asked.

Madame Faux threw her a disgusted look.

"We don't do things that way anymore," she said. "This isn't TV."

"Oh," Sarah blushed.

"We will need a room where we can all sit closely," Madam Faux said.

"The study," I suggested.

"Yes," Sarah said. "The study will be fine."

Madame Faux and I arranged several chairs and a sofa into a semicircle that faced the door. I placed a small table in front of the chairs. Madame Faux balanced a candle on the table.

"We shall begin," she said. "Everyone please sit down."

I lit the candle and turned out the lights. The room was very dark and the candle cast jumpy shadows on the walls and on the large bookcase behind the circle of chairs. It was a perfect setup. Madame Faux sat behind the table and faced us.

"My, it's dark in here," Agnes said.

"It is supposed to be," Madame Faux said. "We are dealing with psychic forces."

Sledgeton giggled.

"Good, a disbeliever," Madame Faux said. "It is always better to have one." She slowly closed her eyes. "All I require is your silence."

"You shall have it," Sledgeton yawned. He leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes. However, he awoke quickly when Madame Faux began chanting in some foreign language that sounded like Latin played backwards. She certainly knew how to captivate an audience. Then she stopped chanting and went into a trance.

"Edgar Littleton," she said from her trance. Her voice had become deeper and it sounded as if it was echoing off the walls of the Grand Canyon. I wondered how she did that.

Edgar let out a little yelp at the mention of his name. The poor lad seemed a bit shaky.

"Tom Sledgeton," Madame Faux's voice boomed deeper off the canyon walls.

"Yeah?"

"I sense a connection between you and Rodney. A strong connection. An undying friendship."

"Everyone knows that," Sledgeton snarled.

"Shhh," Sarah whispered.

Sledgeton shrugged.

"But the tie that binds you is now broken," Madame Faux continued. "The friendship of many years has been severed."

"What is she talking about?" Edgar whispered.

"I sense hostility," Madame Faux said. "Hostility and a great sadness. I sense the spirit of Rodney Everton."

Agnes gasped.

"The spirit is approaching," Madame Faux continued. "It is a tortured soul, one betrayed by friendship. So sad, so sad."

"She's giving me the creeps," Sarah said.

Sledgeton rose. "I'm going to put a stop to this right now," he said.

He was halted by a haunting voice that appeared to be coming from every corner of the study.

"Where's my shotgun?" the voice asked.

Sledgeton froze.

"Rodney," Sarah whispered, looking as if she had seen a ghost. "It's Rodney!"

"That damn shotgun," Agnes said. "That's all he ever thought about."

"Which one of you has my shotgun?" the voice continued.

"It can't be Rodney," Sarah said. "It can't be."

"Why not?" I asked. She didn't answer.

"This is some kind of hoax," Sledgeton said.

"Do you have my shotgun, Tom?"

Sledgeton stiffened.

"Still think it's a hoax?" Agnes asked him.

"Sarah, do you have my shotgun?"

Sarah recoiled. Suddenly Agnes screamed. A shadowy shape flickered near the doorway.

"It's Rodney's ghost!" Agnes cried.

Sledgeton squinted. "That's no ghost," he said. "It's casting a shadow." He started toward the doorway.

"Where's my shotgun?" Rodney yelled, much louder than before. "Where's my shotgun?"

"Shut up, Rodney," Sarah screamed.

"Where's my shotgun?" Rodney continued.

Someone blew out the candle and there was movement in the darkness. I heard noises from behind the bookcase and when the lights came on Sarah had the A. J. Roberts pointed at Rodney.

"Go back to hell, Rodney," Sarah screamed.

She pulled the trigger but the gun did not fire. She pulled the trigger again. Then again.

"It won't shoot without this," I said, tossing the tan envelope Rodney had given me at the dinner party onto the table.

"What's that?" Sledgeton asked.

"The firing pin," Rodney said. "I remove the firing pin from all of my guns and give them to Winston for safe keeping. It makes the guns safer to keep in the house and also makes them useless if they're stolen."

James appeared and took the A. J. Roberts from Sarah.

"Then you're not dead," Sledgeton said to Rodney.

Rodney stepped forward.

"Does this feel like a dead man?" he asked. He reared back and landed an uppercut to Sledgeton's stomach.

Sledgeton fell backwards, stumbled over a chair and fell to the floor. Sarah went to his aid. She looked up at me.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"I didn't," I said. "I thought it was Tom."

Sledgeton tried to pick himself off the floor.

"Me?" he wheezed.

"Yes. I knew Rodney's disappearance had something to do with that shotgun. A true collector would never hunt with a valuable gun like that A. J. Roberts. The risk of damaging it is too great. Then there was the matter of the firing pin. I knew how badly you wanted that shotgun so I penciled you in as the prime suspect. Of course, when I learned of your affair with Sarah I became fairly certain that she was an accomplice."

Sledgeton turned to Sarah.

"Then you took the gun," he said to her.

"Yes. But I did it for you. I knew how much you wanted it so I decided to get it for you. I paid the butler to kill Rodney. I drugged Rodney's coffee Saturday morning then the butler took him away. He was supposed to make it look like a hunting accident. Apparently the useless oaf screwed it up.

"Anyway, I was sick of Rodney. I wanted to be with you, Tom. I wanted to be free of Rodney once and for all. I wanted him to be a loser for a change, and I wanted to make you a winner. I wanted to make you happy. I knew that gun would make you happy. You see, I did it all for you."

Sledgeton was moved. He kissed Sarah and held her close. Rodney glared at them. Fortunately, the shotgun was still inoperable.

"Why did you go along with this stupid séance?" Sledgeton asked her.

"I had to appear to be doing something to find Rodney. If I hadn't done something Winston would have become suspicious and he would have uncovered the whole thing. A séance seemed harmless enough."

"But he uncovered it anyway," Agnes said.

"Yes, he did," Rodney said. "He uncovered a few other things as well." He glared at Sledgeton.

"You leave him alone," Sarah said.

"I'll do with him as I please."

"Oh, yeah?" Sledgeton said. "That's tough talk from someone who's supposed to be a ghost."

"I'll turn you into a real ghost," Rodney yelled.

I took Madame Faux by the arm.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go. This conversation is getting much too spirited. Home, James."

The Rogue Goes to the Dogs - Part I



It is said that a dog is man's best friend. For some men that is undoubtedly true. For others money is their best friend. In some rare cases both dog and money are a man's best friend. Nick Arthur was one of those cases.

"Sporting dogs are the only *real* dogs", Nick said with the stern emphasis of a man who wants to be taken seriously. "None of those sissified house pets for me. No, a dog belongs in the outdoors at his master's side."

"Man's best friend," I smiled.

"It's more than that," Nick snapped. His gaze was as sharp as the crease in a good butler's pants. "I'm talking about field trials. Ever heard of them?"

"Field trials? No, not really."

"They're sporting events where a dog becomes more than man's best friend, he becomes his partner. Each relies on the other. It's teamwork, Mr. Churchill. To win, dog and man must each do their jobs. There's more to it than friendship. Loyalty. Respect. That's what it's all about."

Nick Arthur looked as if he knew what he was talking about. He was a tall man with perpetually tanned skin, a head that looked as if it had been carved out of stone, and enough muscles to satisfy an anatomy class. A real outdoorsman. He was also a mergers and acquisitions specialist and the owner a gorgeous Spanish style home in the Marina with fabulous views of the Golden Gate Bridge, the yacht harbor, and Alcatraz. I had heard that he also owned a beautiful home down the peninsula in Woodside. Horsey country.

You would think that a man with all of that wealth would be exceedingly happy, but he was far from blissful. And the party he was throwing wasn't cheering him up much.

"If you don't know about field trials then you must not be a sportsman," he continued.

I found his statement a trifle irritating. No one has ever questioned my sporting nature.

"Well, now, I certainly appreciate sport, and I like to think that there's a certain amount of sporting blood running through my veins," I said.

He looked at me the way a breeder looks at horses. It may have been my ascot, a fine, dark-blue silk foulard, that eventually won him over.

"Well, maybe," he said.

"I assume you are successful in these field trials." I said.

"Very." He then carefully looked around the room. "Until recently, that is." His tanned skin suddenly looked the way Chateaufort du Pape would look if you poured water into it.

"Oh?" Now we were getting somewhere.

Nick looked down at his feet and became another person, molded instead of sculpted, glued instead of sewn, shaken instead of stirred. He was quiet for a moment. Quiet, but restless. Nick Arthur did not wear humility well.

"Harry Avalon says you're a man who can be trusted," he said.

"Loyalty. Respect. That's what it's all about," I answered.

"Come and see me this weekend," he snickered. He scribbled a Woodside address on the back of a business card and handed it to me. "You may be able to help."

* * *

I expected Nick's Woodside home to be American Western. You know, one of those sprawling ranch style homes with low ceilings and attached garages. Imagine my surprise when I found a replica of an English country estate! The main house was large enough to be the ancestral home of a Duke. It alternated between two and three stories, had four wings, six chimneys and enough character to write a play about. The barn, a U-shaped structure with a thatch roof that sat on stone walls like a hat, was a mansion in itself. Dark wood beams crisscrossed the surface of its white sides. A large arch in its center shaded a road that led to a long row of stables. Very pastoral. My Rolls Royce was created to be seen parked in front of places like this.

I expected a neatly attired servant to greet my arrival but no such creature appeared. All was quiet except for the sound of a horse in the distance and some barking dogs even farther away.

"This way, James," I said, strolling toward the barn.

"Yes, sir."

We rambled down the road, under the arch toward the stables where we encountered the first signs of Homo sapiens: a stable boy, a young man, actually, grooming a horse. He stopped grooming when he saw us.

"What do you want?" he asked. He was a fit young man with a haircut that made the most of his peaked forehead. He wore braces over an open-collared white shirt. He could have had a career as a Ralph Lauren model had he not chosen horses.

"My name is Winston Churchill. I'm here to see Mr. Arthur."

"He's in the field." He nodded to his right and continued to groom the horse. Each stroke was smoothly applied. Here was a man who knew his way around horses.

James nodded his approval. We then followed the sound of the dogs. Beyond the stables were several dozen acres of tall grass and trees. We found Nick on horseback struggling with the leashes attached to two energetic English Pointers. The dogs sniffed the ground and tried to outrun their master. Nick saw us and turned his horse to the left. The dogs immediately mimicked the turn. Nick rode to us and dismounted. The stable boy appeared and took the dogs.

"I'm glad you could make it, Mr. Churchill." He shook my hand and looked at James.

"This is my chauffeur, James," I said.

Nick's eyebrows raised like a drawbridge.

"Very good," he said.

"Nice place you have."

He shrugged. He did not want to talk about real estate, he wanted to talk about dogs.

"It's nice to have enough land to be able to get out and condition them myself," he said. "Al exercises them when I'm in the City, but no one cares for them like I do. Al, bring Concorde over here."

The stable boy brought one of the dogs to Nick.

"Named him after the SST," Nick said, scratching the dog's ears.

"Beautiful dog," I said.

"Yes, beautiful and talented. Just watch."

Nick remounted. Al undid the leash and Concorde ran several hundred yards ahead of the horse and sniffed at the breeze. Nick's horse trotted at a leisurely pace. Concorde, unencumbered by the leash, roamed the field. After a few minutes his motions became forceful. He ran forward then quickly came to a complete halt, his tail frozen and pointed skyward at a ninety-degree angle. Nick goaded his horse into a brisk canter toward Concorde. He dismounted and went to where the dog pointed. A startled quail launched itself into the air. Nick pulled a pistol from his side and fired at the quail. The bird flew on.

"Blanks," James said.

I nodded and watched the bird fly away. Concorde remained perfectly still until Nick gave him a signal to move.

"Good," Nick said. "Very good." Concorde reveled in his master's praise.

"Very impressive," I said to Nick upon his return.

"What you have just seen is a field trial," he explained. "Man and dog working as a team. Did you see how straight Concorde's tail was? And he didn't flinch at the sound of the gun. Concorde is first rate, the best dog I've ever had."

"So why aren't you winning?" I asked. Might as well get the poignant questions out of the way.

His face darkened in the sunlight.

"Let's go to my office," he said.

I followed him into the barn. I was surprised to find a beautiful office oozing with wood paneling and leather-covered furniture. Pictures of dogs covered the walls. Nick sat down behind a huge dark wooden desk.

"Have a seat," he said. "Would you like a drink?" He leaned back and opened a small refrigerator.

"Wouldn't happen to have a Bass Ale, would you?"

"What about a Coors?" he countered.

"I'll pass."

He pulled a beer from the fridge.

"See those ribbons?" he said, nodding toward a cluster of ribbons on the wall. "Concorde and I won all of those. Trouble is, we haven't won anything in four months."

"In a slump?"

"It's more than a slump. You saw Concorde perform out there. You saw how easily he found that quail."

"Yes."

"Well, in the last three field trials we've entered he hasn't found a thing."

"Maybe there weren't any quail to be found," I said.

"The last three field trials were single field events. That means each contestant uses the same field. Quail are planted in the field before each dog goes out. There were quail out there, Mr. Churchill."

"I see."

"The worst part is, he picks up a scent, goes to it, and points. When I get there, there's no bird. Nothing at all."

"Nothing?"

"No. Maybe it's because I haven't spent enough time with Concorde recently. I don't know. Even though I'm very busy with the Spectrum Pharmaceuticals acquisition I do manage to break away every weekend. Besides, Al has been

doing a good job of conditioning him. I don't understand what's happening. It's not natural."

"You suspect foul play?"

Nick shook his head.

"It's hard for me to believe it could be," he said. "Field trial contestants are true sportsmen, Mr. Churchill. We're fierce competitors and all of us want to win, but we want to win fairly. Skill, fair play, that's what it's all about."

"What a wonderful world."

Nick stared at his beer can as if it were a photograph of a long, lost love.

"I was wondering if you could come along with me to the field trial this weekend," he said.

"I don't know anything about dogs," I shrugged.

"That's all right. Perhaps you'll notice something that I'm missing because I'm too involved to see it."

"I guess a day in the fresh air would do me good," I said.

"Excellent!" He quickly rose from his chair. "Now, Mr. Churchill, I've got to get back to my dogs."

He led me out of the barn and returned to his horse. He mounted and rode back out into the field.

"Spectrum Pharmaceuticals," I said to James as we started back to the Rolls. "I recall reading a few things about that company."

"Yes, sir. It is quite a messy takeover attempt."

"Really?"

"There have been many complications."

"Well then, I suspect this takeover is the cause of Nick's field trial failures. Diverted attention and all of that."

"Very likely, sir."

"He and Concorde will probably start winning again once he completes his acquisition of that drug company."

"Spectrum Pharmaceuticals is more than just a drug company," James said. "They also manufacture other chemical-based products including one that can be sprayed into one's car to make it smell new again. They even have a scent that supposedly duplicates the smell of leather."

"How ghastly!" I said. "Of course, no one will ever be able to duplicate the aroma of real Connally leather."

"Very unlikely, sir."

We returned to the Rolls and as James opened my door I noticed someone in the far corner of the field beyond the barn.

"Who's that?" I said to James.

It was an older man and when he noticed us he hurried off.

"Rather suspicious behavior," James said.

"Perhaps we should have a look."

"Very prudent, sir."

I slid into the Rolls. James started the engine and drove down the long lane toward the main road. As we came to the intersection a black Mercedes sedan sped by.

"Isn't that him?" I asked.

"I believe so," James replied.

"I think he's going too fast for us to catch him."

"It would be a strain on the Rolls, but I could do it," James said.

"Yes, I know you could."

* * *

The air was brisk when we arrived at Nick's Woodside estate early Saturday morning. A light fog created a damp shroud that would eventually dissolve into the coming sunrise. A Jennings Challenger transporter, a monstrous vehicle with room for six horses, a groom's area, and seats that could be turned into bunks, could be seen in the pale mist.

"Good morning!" Nick called. He walked toward us at a brisk pace. "We're about ready to go." He clasped his hands together. "This is what I really live for, Mr. Churchill. Oh, I like the excitement of making a deal, acquiring a company, but nothing compares to this. There's nothing like the companionship of a good dog. To tell you the truth, I prefer dogs to people."

"I suspected that," I said.

"They're loyal, caring, and a lot less trouble." He waited for my reaction. There was none. Sometimes you've just got to play it cool.

"You know," I said. "I'm rather looking forward to seeing one of these field trials."

"Good! Maybe you'll catch the bug, get a dog of your own."

I smiled.

"Then again," Nick scrutinized me. "You may not be the type."

I was rather put off by that last comment. Nick was still unconvinced of my sporting nature. I mean, really! I was wearing a pair of thick, tan corduroy pants

with a dark green Welsh wool sweater under a tweed sport coat made from material actually woven in the Hebrides. A Barbour thornproof cap and a pair of real Wellies completed my outfit. What could be sportier than that? I was beginning to ask myself why I should help someone who did not recognize my sporting nature.

"Perhaps not," I mumbled. "By the way, do you know anyone with a black Mercedes sedan?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It's a common car. Why?"

"There's been one scouting your estate," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Probably a real estate agent. They're always trying to get me to sell this land. I usually run them off. I'm not interested in selling. This place is perfect for Concorde."

Nick led us into the Jennings Challenger. Al took the helm, started the engine and we were off.

"You don't mind if I catch up on some work, do you?" Nick asked. He pulled a stack of papers from a worn leather satchel.

"No, not at all. Are you still working on the Spectrum Pharmaceuticals deal?"

"Yes," he said with a trace of surprise. "Do you know much about it?"

"Only what I read in the papers," I said. "Rather messy isn't it?"

"They're always messy. This one is no different than the others. In most cases you've got to replace bad management, and bad management never wants to leave. Spectrum's CEO is trying to save the company, but it's too late. I think I have accumulated enough shares to win the fight. Besides, I'm offering a much higher price for the stock than its market value. Still, it's been a tough fight. Spectrum's CEO is putting up a very bitter struggle because he doesn't have a golden parachute."

"Golden parachute?"

"Yes. Severance pay, you could call it. Most high-ranking executives have clauses in their contracts that give them outrageous sums of money if they lose their jobs when their company is taken over. Spectrum's CEO wanted the job so bad that he agreed to accept it without a golden parachute. And of course no one likes to be removed from a leadership position. Spectrum's CEO deserves to be replaced, though. The company is worth more broken up and sold than it is as an ongoing business. That's his fault. I'm going to sell off the entire company after I buy it."

"Leaving Spectrum's CEO unemployed."

"That's the law of the jungle, Mr. Churchill. We're talking about competency and value to the shareholders. It's been a very messy fight with lots of bad press. But in the end he'll lose. In my opinion, he'll get what he deserves."

"I suppose so."

"I just wish Concorde would get back to normal. That bothers me more than anything. I can't understand what's wrong with him, and I hate things I can't understand. I don't suppose you understand."

"I understand."

"It's funny," he said. "Sport is supposed to take my mind off work. Here I am working to take my mind off sport."

He said nothing more about the merger and spent the rest of the time talking about dogs.

"Did you know, Mr. Churchill, that the forebears of the modern hunting dog came to England from Spain?"

"No, I didn't."

"That's how the spaniel got its name. The spaniel's a good dog, but I prefer pointers. You see, spaniels are bred for a different purpose. When a pointer finds the game, he points at it, keeping it down until the hunter gets there. The spaniel flushes out the game. The spaniel, therefore, is a smaller dog, better able to penetrate thickets.

"You know, I've got a two hundred year old print of an English Pointer. I bought it in England. The dog in the print looks just like Concorde. These dogs haven't changed in centuries. The sport has stayed the same too. I guess that's part of its attraction. I spend all of my time changing things, acquiring and merging. The stability of this sport is a welcome diversion."

Nick lapsed into thought and didn't speak again until we had reached a privately owned wooded area near the Mendocino National Forest, far north of San Francisco. Motor homes and horse trailers filled the parking area the way bees fill a hive.

"I didn't know the sport was so popular," I said.

"Yes, the competition's getting fiercer every year. But I don't mind it. Competition and comradery, that's what it's all about."

Al pulled the transporter into a vacant space then immediately opened his door, jumped out and attended to the horses. Nick went to Concorde.

"Why don't you have a look around, James," I said.

"Yes, sir."

We stepped out of the transporter and into the brisk air. Al had already removed the horses from the transporter and was leading them in a wide oval to

loosen their muscles. Concorde raised his nose and stretched his legs. After many hours of confinement he was happy to be in the fresh country air. So was I. Nick attached a leash to the dog and they marched toward the registration table.

"What happens next?" I asked Al.

"We wait our turn."

Al did an excellent job of mounting saddles on the two horses.

"Been working with horses long?" I asked.

"Since I could walk. My father had stables." He did not look at me.

"It shows."

He nodded.

"How long have you worked for Nick?" I asked.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Several months."

"What do you think is wrong with Concorde?"

Al looked at me the way an established pro looks at an upstart.

"There's nothing wrong with Concorde," he said.

"Then why isn't he finding quail?"

"There's nothing wrong with Concorde," he repeated. "Will you be riding?"

"What?"

"It's the best way to view the event. You follow along behind."

"No, I don't think I'll be riding."

He appeared to be relieved that a neophyte wouldn't be abusing one of the horses.

"It's your choice," he shrugged.

James had brought along some high-powered binoculars and I planned to watch the activities from the top of the transporter. I was adjusting the focus when Nick returned from the registration table.

"All set?" I asked.

He nodded and was unable to hide his nervousness.

"I'll watch from the top of the transporter," I said. "I'll get a better view of the entire surroundings from up there."

"I hope so. This isn't a single field event."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that this entire area is open." He swept the horizon with his arm. "The birds aren't planted. They're out there somewhere in their natural habitat."

We can go anywhere to find them. Spectators will follow on horseback."

"Yes, Al told me about that."

"But if you want to stay here, fine."

"I've got these," I held up the binoculars. "James will wander around."

"You know best," Nick said.

I climbed up to the top of the transporter. Nick handed me a folding chair.

"Want something to drink?" he asked.

"Thank you, but I have my own." I pulled a leather-covered flask from inside my tweed coat. It was filled with Aberlour A'bunadh single malt scotch. In case you don't know, Aberlour A'bunadh is a cask strength scotch whiskey – distilled just like it was in the old days.

"Save some for me," Nick said. He mounted his horse and rode off with Concorde.

I settled into my chair, took a sip from my flask for fortification, and readied my binoculars. The event started and I must admit that it was interesting. Each contestant took off on horseback with his dog running several hundred yards ahead. If the dog found a quail he would suddenly turn into a statue, tail pointed skyward. It was as if you were looking at a stuffed animal. Exciting in a reserved, controlled sort of way.

When Nick took to the field the same thing happened. There must have been fifty spectators, all on horseback, following him. Concorde ran with poise and confidence. Then he too froze. He had found a bird. Well, he should have found one. Nick dismounted to stir the quail but there was no quail to be stirred. The mounted spectators groaned. Concorde had failed again.

Nick was shattered. The judges, who had also followed on horseback, shook their heads. Nick remounted and started back. Concorde trotted triumphantly ahead of him. The poor dog didn't realize he had failed. I climbed down from the transporter and waited for Nick's return. James soon joined me.

"Sad, isn't it?" I said to him.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see anything suspicious?"

"I can't say for sure. I did find this in a clearing." He held out an aspirin-size bottle, empty except for several drops of clear liquid clinging to its sides.

"What does it mean?"

"Perhaps nothing. But it wasn't there the first time I had passed through the clearing." He put the bottle into his pocket.

"Has anyone seen Al?" Nick asked, bringing his horse to a halt behind the

transporter.

"No," I said.

James shook his head. Then Al rode up and quickly dismounted. His horse had been ridden hard. He must have been following along with the spectators.

"Bad luck," he said to Nick.

Nick glared at him.

"Luck had nothing to do with it!" he yelled at Al. Then he looked at me. "Well, did you see anything unusual?"

"No. I didn't notice any difference between you and the other contestants."

"The other contestants found birds," Nick growled and turned away.

James helped Al remove the saddles from the horses.

"Don't give up yet," I said to Nick.

"I won't. I'm not a quitter." He stormed off and we didn't see him again until it was time to leave.

The drive home was quiet and tedious. Al parked the transporter in front of the barn and took the horses to the stables. Nick walked quietly into his house without saying goodbye.

"Sir," James said. He was in the groom's area of the transporter.

"What is it, James?"

"I think you should see this." He reached under one of the saddles and pulled out a pistol.

"What is it?"

"It's a pellet gun, sir."

"A pellet gun? I wonder what that's doing here?"

"Perhaps to scare off varmint."

"Perhaps."

The Rogue Goes to the Dogs - Part II



I remained convinced that the Spectrum Pharmaceuticals deal was behind Nick's field trial failures. With that in mind, I decided to learn more about it. Spectrum Pharmaceuticals, that is. That meant dinner with Harry Avalon.

We dined at the Pacific Union Club, Harry's favorite spot. It was the only place left in San Francisco that allowed him to cling to a past that had passed many years ago. A historic-looking servant seated us at "Harry's table" and we got down to business.

"There are two main players," Harry said over a steak the size of Rhode Island. "Nick Arthur and Lester Mospeete. Nick's attempting a hostile takeover. He's been acquiring shares and he's making an offer for more. If he gets his way he'll dismantle Spectrum and no doubt make a handsome profit.

"Lester is Spectrum's CEO. He, of course, wants to save the company and his job. He's cultivating this white knight image, good guy company man saving jobs and what not. He's made several impassioned pleas to the shareholders not to sell to Nick. It's been a standoff so far, with Lester claiming he's saving jobs and Nick claiming mismanagement."

"What about this Nick Arthur?" I asked.

Harry shrugged.

"He's aggressive and successful," he said.

There was something Harry wasn't telling me.

"And?" I asked.

"Well, this is only a rumor, mind you, but some people question the way he has accumulated his Spectrum stock."

"What do you mean?"

Harry shrugged again.

"They claim he has committed certain improprieties," he said.

"What do you think?"

"Me? Spectrum is a very desirable company. I wouldn't mind having it myself. It's been a bit mismanaged, but I think with a little help it could be a real winner."

"Then you wouldn't break it up?"

"You know I don't believe in that." Harry clipped the end off of a Davidoff Aniversario #1 and expertly lit it. He sat back and let the smoke create temporary, puffy castles over the table.

"You didn't answer my other question. What about Nick Arthur? Do you think he improperly acquired his shares?"

"My sources of information are good. I'd say he probably did. But I can't prove it. It's not really unusual to have a few skeletons in the closet in this kind of business. But it would take some very good investigating to find any evidence of wrongdoing."

"I see," I said. "You know, Nick doesn't seem to be that type."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's a dog fanatic. Animal lovers are typically good people. He also seems to be a real sportsman with a strong sense of fair play."

"You've been around long enough, Winston, to know better than to believe outward appearances. There's a difference between animal lovers and fanatics. Nick Arthur is a vicious competitor. He'd do anything to get what he wants."

"I just wanted to hear you say it, Harry," I smiled. It figures that someone who doubts my sporting nature would be involved in such behavior.

"So now what happens with Spectrum?" I asked.

"Maybe Lester and Nick will knock themselves out and allow a third party to sneak in and take the company."

"Yes, that would make a good story. Do you think it's possible?"

"Not probable. One of them will falter. They're playing a tenuous game. The first one to get his reputation damaged will lose."

"And if they both get their reputations damaged?"

"I wouldn't mind making an offer for Spectrum myself," Harry smiled. He had that wistful look.

I grinned, more of a smirk, actually.

"Thanks, Harry," I said.

"I say, Winston, you aren't involved in this mess, are you?"

"You know me, Harry."

* * *

A week passed before I heard again from Nick.

"Have you reached any conclusions?" he asked.

I hadn't a clue.

"Well, I'm down in Woodside. How'd you like to come with me to another field trial this weekend?"

"Actually, I rather enjoyed the first one," I said. "Fresh air, beautiful country, sporting atmosphere. Yes, I'd like to."

"Would you?" he said.

"Yes, but I want to be there from start to finish, from the time you prepare the transporter to the time you return to Woodside."

"It's a deal."

I always become nervous whenever a successful businessman tells me we have a deal, but this time I figured it was all right.

"I'll see you Saturday morning," I said.

Under the circumstances I decided the proper thing to do would be to stay in Nick's Marina house. James carted me off to the place and I made myself at home. I sat down with a Bass Ale and watched the boats navigate the bay. It wasn't long before James entered the room.

"Any luck with your bottle?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. It came from Spectrum Pharmaceuticals."

"What!" James always finds a way to get my attention. He took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to me.

"The lab report, sir," he said.

I read it and gave him my best penetrating Bogart stare.

"I think it's time to visit Lester Mospeete," I said.

"I believe that would be in order, sir."

James found Lester's address and we drove to a cozy five-bedroom bungalow in Pacific Heights. A black Mercedes sedan occupied the driveway. James parked the Rolls next to the curb in front of the house.

"Interesting," I said, nodding toward the car.

"It could simply be a coincidence," James said. "They are quite common."

"Yes, they are."

We navigated a moss-covered winding brick walkway to Lester's house. He opened the door when we rang.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Winston Churchill."

"I haven't got time for jokes," Lester said. He began to close the door on us but James stopped it with his foot. Good chauffeur, that James.

"Do you have time to talk about Nick Arthur?" I asked.

Lester recoiled slightly like he had been kicked in the shoulder by a .410 gauge shotgun.

"Nick Arthur?" he said.

"Yes. And Spectrum Pharmaceuticals."

"Are you a reporter?"

"Of course not. Do reporters have chauffeurs?"

He looked at James and then at the Rolls. "Come in," he said. He silently led us into his home. It was a dark house with dark paneling, dark curtains, and dark furniture. It felt damp even though it wasn't. Lester led us into his study and plopped himself into a stuffed chair. His wiry eyebrows drooped heavily over his eyes. Tufts of thinning hair nearly obscured a once prominent widow's peak. His suit was off-the-shelf and was as droopy as his eyebrows.

I sat down in a chair next to a massive desk. James stood by the door. His desk was littered with fading photographs of people and horses.

"Now, why do you want to talk about Spectrum Pharmaceuticals? Are you a shareholder?"

"No, but I have proof that Nick Arthur illegally obtained his shares of Spectrum."

"What?" Lester tried to conceal his shock but he couldn't.

"You didn't know he had acquired them illegally?" I asked.

"Well, one hears many rumors." He hadn't known. No wonder he was on the verge of losing his company. "Do you want a drink?" he asked. His eyelids no longer drooped. But his suit still did.

"No, thanks."

"I think I'll have one," he said. He took a bottle from a bookcase that contained more bottles than books and poured some Black Label into a fine crystal glass. His hands shook and the bottle tinkled against the glass. He had the kind of look on his face that someone gets when their horse is about to come in first.

"What are you going to do with this proof?" he asked.

"Use it to stop Nick Arthur's takeover."

"How?"

"Not how, but when."

"Then when?" he asked.

"This weekend."

"This weekend?"

"Yes, at Nick's hunting dog event."

"Why there?"

"Because that's where the final piece of the puzzle is."

Lester looked at me with the kind of suspicion that all businessmen have. Maybe it's skepticism, not suspicion. Anyway, he was concerned.

"Where do you fit into all of this? You said you aren't a shareholder. Are you a lawyer?"

"You could say I'm a concerned citizen. I want to see Spectrum Pharmaceuticals continue as a going concern. I do not want to see people lose their jobs if it's broken up and sold off. I also want to see justice done."

"I'm not buying that silly story for a second. But if you can prove that Nick Arthur illegally obtained his shares of Spectrum Pharmaceuticals I don't care what your interests are."

"Good. I will meet you there this weekend. I'll have my chauffeur take you."

"I can drive."

"It's all right, I have a Rolls Royce."

"Oh."

"I don't want you arriving prematurely and spoiling everything," I explained. "The timing of your arrival is critically important."

"I see."

He didn't but the prospect of defeating Nick Arthur was overriding.

"A bit of fresh air will do me good," he said.

"That's what I always say."

* * *

Saturday morning dawned without fog. A crystal blue sky and a promising sun painted the bay. It was cool and wouldn't get much warmer until later on.

"Do you have everything, James?"

"Yes, sir," he said, displaying an envelope and a bottle identical to the one he had found at the last field trial.

"Then to the hunt, James."

"Yes, sir."

Forty minutes later James turned the Rolls down the lane toward Nick's estate. He parked next to the transporter, glided out from behind the steering wheel and opened my door. I emerged from the Rolls and walked toward the house. James

then left to pick up Lester.

"Hello, Winston!" Nick said. We were now on a first name basis.

"Good morning, Nick."

His face was puffy with enthusiasm.

"Where's James?" he asked.

"Running some errands. He'll drive to the event later by himself."

"I hope he gets there on time. I have a feeling Concorde is going to win today."

"I share that feeling," I said.

He smiled and led me into the Jennings Challenger. The drive to the field trial site, this time south, near Paso Robles, was electric. Nick was excited; Concorde was alert and bold.

"It's going to be a single field event today," Nick said. "All dogs will use the same field. They'll plant quail before each dog goes out."

I nodded and tried to doze but Nick kept babbling on about dogs. Concorde was immune to the chatter and slept peacefully. When he rose, stretched, and barked I knew we had finally reached the site. Al parked the transporter and began his usual tasks. James had already arrived. He knows all of the shortcuts.

"Ah, James!" Nick said. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're going to see the real Concorde today."

"Undoubtedly, sir."

"Well, I'm going to register," Nick said. "I'll be back soon." He led Concorde toward a long line of men and dogs.

"How was the drive, James?" I asked.

"Very good, sir."

"And the package?"

"Safely tucked away."

"Good. Now let's see how many quail we can flush out."

* * *

Contestants and spectators loitered about the parking area and got in each other's way. Sporting gossip and meteorological commentary filled the air.

"There's good competition today," Nick said. "But none are better than Concorde."

We watched several contestants perform but none of them impressed Nick. He pointed out little faults in each dog.

"Tail wasn't straight enough. And did you see him flinch when the gun was fired?" he said.

"I suppose one must know what to look for," I said.

"I'm glad you're not a judge," he joked. I think he was joking. It was obvious to me that he still hadn't seen my true sporting nature. He was about to.

"So am I," I said. "I couldn't stand sitting on a horse all day."

"It's our turn next," Nick said, petting Concorde. The dog rippled with energy and had the confident look of a first-rate hunting dog.

"Where's Al?" Nick asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't seen him."

"Never mind," Nick said. He mounted his horse. "See you in the winner's circle."

He rode to the starting area. Concorde trotted several paces ahead. When they hit the field Concorde bolted across the tall grass. Nick followed in full gallop. Concorde was on to a scent. He sprinted toward a clump of tall weeds then froze with his nose pointed toward the ground and his tail at a perfect ninety-degree angle. Nick rode to his dog and dismounted. Although he was quite some distance away, I could see his grin. He took out his pistol and fired a blank into the air. Concorde remained totally still as a quail flew off. Nick gave Concorde the signal to move and the audience greeted them with applause. A perfect performance.

Nick petted Concorde and started back. Then a disturbance broke out behind the spectators. All of the other dogs left their masters and ran in the same direction as if they were all on to a scent.

"Hey, what's going on?" someone asked. He jumped onto his horse and took off after the dogs. Everyone else mounted and followed. Concorde joined the chase. James pulled up in the Rolls. He left the driver's seat and opened the rear door in one fluid motion.

"The game is afoot," I said, climbing into the back seat.

James closed the door and slid behind the wheel.

"Tally ho, James!"

We followed the horses for several hundred yards to where the dogs had come to a halt. We found Nick and pushed our way through the crowd.

"What's happening?" Nick asked.

"Look," I said.

Lester Mospeete stood quietly, surrounded by dozens of hunting dogs, all of them pointing at him with their tails straight in the air.

"They think they found a quail," I said.

"That's no quail, that's Lester Mospeete," Nick said. "What are you doing here?" he asked Lester.

"I've come to witness your defeat," Lester said.

"But I won."

Al suddenly pushed through the crowd.

"Dad!" he called.

"Dad?" Nick stared at me.

"Yes," I said. "Al is Lester's son."

"Is that true?" Nick asked Lester.

"Yes, it's true," Lester said. "Now get these dogs away from me."

Nick turned to me.

"Not only is he Lester's son," I said. "He is also the person responsible for Concorde's recent failures."

"What?"

"On orders from his father."

"You double-crosser," Lester growled at me.

"What do you mean, Winston?" Nick asked.

"They've been using an imitation quail scent to trick Concorde."

James produced a bottle.

"Lester had it made at Spectrum Pharmaceuticals. He gave Al a bottle before every event. Every time you and Concorde went out in search of quail he would shoot a pellet of this stuff into the field. Concorde picked up the scent but of course there were no quail. The scent wore off after several minutes so the next dog out wasn't affected.

"James switched bottles today. Al shot water into the field and James discreetly put the imitation quail scent on Mr. Mospeete."

Nick's face turned crimson. He started toward Lester.

"You son of a..." I held him back. "What a disreputable thing to have done."

"Oh yeah?" Lester yelled. "You want to talk about disreputable behavior? What about your illegal acquisition of Spectrum Pharmaceuticals stock?" He waved an envelope in front of Nick.

Nick recoiled. It was time to go. A dozen reporters had arrived and they converged upon the two businessmen like hunting dogs following a scent.

"Thanks for the tip," one of them said to me as he hurried by.

"That goes for me, too," another said. "What do you think will happen to Spectrum Pharmaceuticals now?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "It's a dog eat dog world. Home, James."

Chocolate Covered Rogue



Have you ever been to a chocolate tasting? That's right, a chocolate tasting. Don't worry if you haven't because I had never been to one either. That all changed the day I received a hand-delivered invitation from Pierre Lupo. It was printed on paper so thick you could have built a house with it. The elegant tan envelope was hand-addressed in maroon ink and contained a tiny piece of chocolate wrapped in gold foil, a nice touch that told me Pierre had hired the best help in the City to throw his party. Very impressive, very expensive, very Pierre.

I suppose you should know a few things about Pierre. Pierre Lupo was an importer of snooty gourmet foods and he also fancied himself to be somewhat of an gourmet chef. The verdict was still out on the latter. What he was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, was a passionate man and his invitation surely meant that chocolate was his latest passion.

I unwrapped the small piece of chocolate. What does one wear to a chocolate tasting? If you know me, you know that I always dress for the occasion. So Black tie and tails were definitely out, so too tweeds and plus fours. Perhaps one of Savile Rows more modern cuts or one of those expertly tailored suits from Naples - Italy, not Florida. I settled on Savile Row.

Such an occasion also required new footwear. I'm sure you know that the purchase of shoes should not be taken lightly. Lobb's in Paris have specific rules a gentleman should follow. These rules begin with the three levels of broguing: formal, town, and sportive. The more decorative the broguing the more casual the shoe.

"James, what kind of shoe does one wear to a chocolate tasting?"

"Brown, obviously," he said.

"Obviously."

In the end my choice was untraditional: a fine pair loafers with leather so soft you could sleep in them. Well, chocolate tasting is a rather adventurous event where even the most casual Oxford or Darby would be out of place. You'd understand if you had ever been to one.

* * *

James cautiously maneuvered the Rolls through San Francisco's financial district to Pierre's Washington Street condo. In case you don't know, Washington Street is a trendy avenue near the Bay within walking distance of San Francisco's financial district.

Pierre's condo was in a nouveau turn-of-the-century red brick building that slumbered over a two-block area like a sprawled lion. Vibrant pink flowers sprouted from green planters that sprouted from red windowsills. Quite elegant even though everything did look a bit too planned and a bit too perfect.

Parking, however, was far from perfect. It was impossible, as usual. James was forced to deposit me at the curb.

"Join me when you find the appropriate place to park the Rolls," I said.

"Yes, sir."

He drove off and I admired the Silver Cloud as it effortlessly sailed down the street. What a magnificent automobile!

I adjusted my tie, a nice Armani job - well I did say chocolate tasting was an adventurous event - and went searching for Pierre's home. One couldn't miss it, actually. Brown plaques with red arrows had been placed to direct guests to the tasting and they did not lead me astray. An attractive young woman stood guard outside of his condo and allowed me to enter only after checking my invitation.

"Enjoy the tasting," she smiled with the kind of smile you find inside the front cover of glossy magazines.

"Thank you," I said. I winked at her and entered the condo.

Pierre immediately greeted me.

"Winston, so nice to see you," he said. His beefy body betrayed his obsessive love of food and his rotund and puffy face was a small replica of his torso.

"Thanks for inviting me," I said.

"It wouldn't be the same without you."

"Am I to deduce from this chocolate tasting that your new interest in life is chocolate?" I said.

"Indeed. I aspire to become a member of the *Club des Croqueurs de Chocolat*, you see."

"The what?"

"The *Club des Croqueurs de Chocolat*. It is a famous organization based in France comprised of people who absolutely adore chocolate. I need two sponsors from within the organization and I must complete a 12-part questionnaire. It's a very difficult club to join but that is my aspiration. I will be entertaining two gentlemen from France later this month, both members of the

Club. Tonight's tasting is sort of a dress rehearsal."

"I wish you success."

"Mercí," he said. "The tasting is here in my living room. Come on in."

His body swiveled on its axis as he led me into a room the size of the Astrodome. It was filled with a long table covered with a white tablecloth. Rather reminiscent of the Last Supper, actually. Unsalted crackers and bottles of Evian water were strategically within reach of each chair. Each place setting sported a nametag. My place at the table was next to a man named Mort Canard. He and his wife had not yet arrived.

"I would offer you a drink but I don't want to damage your papillae," Pierre said.

"I understand," I said. I didn't but at times one must make allowances.

Pierre disappeared into his kitchen and I mingled with the other guests. My tablemate and his wife were the last to arrive.

"Got a drink, Pierre?" Mort asked.

"No!" Pierre rolled his eyes and returned to his kitchen.

Mort shrugged, grabbed his wife by the arm and sulked. He was a tall man with rough hands, gray hair, gray mustache, and scarlet skin stretched tightly over a strong jaw. His wife was thin and wore earrings that looked like the leaning tower of Pisa. Her comical face had a perpetual look of surprise and her hair looked as if she had had it done in a wind tunnel.

"We've never met," Mort said to me. He looked at my nametag. "Winston Churchill?"

"Yes."

"I see." He didn't. "This is my wife, Daphne."

"How do you do?" she said. Her voice was thin, almost squeaky, and each of her eyes appeared to move in different directions as she spoke.

"I'm fine, thank you," I said. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"What do you do for a living?" Mort asked.

"Dabble," I said.

"Dabble, huh? Well, I'm Pierre's business partner. I also own an investment house specializing in penny stocks. Quite a bit of money to be made in penny stocks."

"Yes, one penny at a time," Daphne laughed.

Mort glared at her with an impatience that had been cultivated over time and then returned his attention to me.

"You should stop by and see me," he said. "I can make your money really work

for you."

"We can't have lazy money," Daphne giggled.

"Oh shut up," Mort growled at her. "Well, Churchill, have you ever been to a chocolate tasting before?"

"No, I haven't."

"Neither have I. Sounds silly to me. But that's Mort. What's he going to do, serve us candy bars?" He laughed so hard I thought his tight skin would rip. It didn't.

"You may be pleasantly surprised," I said.

"I do have a sweet tooth," he stroked his chin.

"Many of them," his wife added.

Mort ignored her. Then Pierre reappeared with an army of assistants. He drifted into the room as if he were on a silent chariot.

"Please, everyone be seated," he said.

His assistants began placing large trays of chocolate on the table. Each piece of chocolate sat on a numbered card.

"This looks promising," I said.

"I'll reserve judgment," Mort replied.

"And I'll reserve a room at the inn," Daphne giggled. Mort shook his head and eyed the chocolate.

"The chocolate should be eaten in numerical order," Pierre instructed. "I will guide you."

Mort immediately took a piece of chocolate from a card numbered '12', studied it, and plopped it into his mouth.

"Good lord!" he screamed. "What are you trying to do, Pierre, poison us? You call this bitter ash chocolate?" He spit the chocolate into his napkin.

Pierre glared at him.

"You stupid oaf!" he yelled at Mort. "You stupid, stupid oaf! You started with number twelve! Can't you follow directions? I told you we would eat them in numerical order. It's obvious that you know nothing about chocolate. You just spit out Valrhona Guanaja 1502, the finest chocolate in the world!"

"I suppose it's an acquired taste," I said.

"Acquired indeed," Pierre said. He looked at Mort. "One must have highly developed papillae to appreciate such fine chocolate."

I interpreted this to mean he thought Mort had no taste.

"Why would I want to acquire that putrid taste?" Mort growled.

Pierre crossed his arms and struck a defiant pose.

"People around the world gladly pay top prices for that chocolate," he said.
"People of good taste, that is."

"People pay for this?"

"Yes," Pierre said. "It's very expensive chocolate. Of course, appreciation for such fine chocolate cannot be bought at any price."

"So people actually buy this?" Mort continued to stare at the chocolate in his napkin. The furrows in his forehead meant he was thinking.

"Now, if you would all pay attention to me and eat the chocolate *in order*." Pierre stared at Mort but Mort wasn't paying attention. He was still thinking.

Pierre recovered his poise and conducted a very successful chocolate tasting. James arrived at its conclusion.

"Ah, James, did you find a place for the Rolls?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Unfortunately, the tasting is over."

He let only a little of his consternation show.

"Here," I handed him some chocolate. "I saved some of the world's finest for you."

"Very considerate, sir."

* * *

The fog lifted early on Telegraph Hill. I was staying in a cozy townhouse with a nice view of Coit Tower. I could have spent the morning comfortably stuffed into a cozy armchair but I didn't. No, I went shopping. Caroline Avalon's birthday was approaching and fine chocolate from Pierre's shop seemed an appropriate gift.

James prepared the Rolls and we glided softly into the heart of San Francisco. The fog was quickly dissolving into an azure sky and the City's dampness began evaporating into the strengthening sunlight. James double-parked the Rolls in front of Pierre's shop on Union Square.

"I shall stay with the Rolls," he said. Good chauffeur, that James. One can never be too careful in San Francisco's perpetually gridlocked shopping Mecca.

Two tall windows tastefully accented with gold and black trim flanked the entrance to Pierre's shop. I entered and strolled through the aisles of gourmet food items. The place appeared unmanned but the store was logically arranged and I quickly found some elegantly boxed chocolate that I knew Caroline would adore.

I pushed a button that I hoped would summons a clerk but no such creature

appeared. Instead, a ruckus erupted in the back room.

"I will not do that!" It was Pierre.

"You will if you want to keep my financial backing!" It was Mort.

"What you're asking me to do is immoral!"

"What I'm asking you to do is good business."

"It's illegal to misrepresent a product!"

"It's only chocolate. Don't get so excited."

"You stupid oaf! You stupid, stupid oaf! It happens to be the finest chocolate in the world!"

"Listen, Pierre. If you want to stay in business you'll do what I say. That's final."

"I will not ruin that chocolate." Pierre crossed his arms.

"Gentlemen," I said.

"Winston," Pierre jumped. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to buy some chocolate."

Pierre shot Mort a glance that would have felled a fox at fifteen hundred yards.

"You'd better do it now before this philistine forces me to degrade the world's finest chocolate."

Mort snickered. You could tell he was going to look up the word "philistine" when he got home.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm leaving," Mort said. He pointed a nasty finger at Pierre's chest. "You just do what I told you to do or you'll be out of business!" Mort turned and brushed past me.

Pierre was livid. He shook his fist at Mort.

"I'll get you for this, Mort Canard!" he screamed. "You'll never get away with it. You're a dead duck!"

Mort was unfazed. He waved goodbye with his back to us. Very uncivilized behavior in my opinion.

"Calm down, old sport," I said to Pierre. "What's going on?"

"Winston, that man is impossible. That uncultured savage wants me to dilute Valrhona Guanaja 1502. He actually wants me to melt it down, mix it with cheaper chocolate, repackage it, and still sell it as Valrhona Guanaja 1502 at Valrhona Guanaja 1502 prices. We'll make more money but it's unthinkable! If anyone found out I'd be ruined. I'd never be admitted to the *Club des Croqueurs de Chocolat*. And the Frenchmen are arriving at the end of the month." Pierre

slapped his forehead.

"Then don't do it."

"You heard him. If I don't he'll withdraw his financial backing."

"Can't you make it without him?"

"No. I guess I spend too much pursuing my passions."

"Oh."

"Yes. It will just kill me if I have to ruin that fine chocolate. It's like painting over a Rembrandt."

"I'm sure it is."

"But what can I do?"

"I'm sure there's something," I shrugged. "Let me think about it."

"Will you?"

"Of course I will."

I paid for Caroline's chocolate, not Valrhona Guanaja 1502, but not cheap stuff either, and returned to the Rolls. I explained Pierre's dilemma to James.

"Very unfortunate, sir."

"Yes, very unfortunate. James, I think we should learn a little more about Mr. Mort Canard."

"Yes, sir."

James drove us back to Telegraph Hill and I dispatched him to see what he could dig up on Mort. The situation was clear: I had to persuade Mort to change his mind about diluting Pierre's precious chocolate, or find a way for Pierre to raise enough money to buy out Mort's share of the business. Neither task would be easy. I opened a Bass Ale and decided to postpone any further thinking on the subject until James returned.

* * *

"In addition to selling penny stocks, Mr. Canard is also involved in initial public offerings," James said. "They're called IPO's in the financial world. When a private company wants to go public and sell stock they arrange an IPO. Investment bankers like Mr. Canard find investors and set up the initial sale of stock. Mr. Canard confines himself to low priced LBO's - penny stocks. He has two offices: his main office in the heart of the Financial District, and a branch office on the fringes."

"There is nothing wrong with that," I said.

"No, but it is the way Mr. Canard treats his clients that is worrisome. After he arranges an IPO, he pressures the investors who initially purchased the stock to sell it back to him when it reaches some higher price. His branch office

simultaneously pressures other clients into buying that same stock at an even higher price. Of course, these investors are unaware of the simultaneous buying and selling.

"For example, Client A buys a stock at \$1.00 a share. Mr. Canard pressures them into selling the stock back to him when it reaches \$1.50 a share. At the same time, his branch office pressures Client B into buying the same stock for \$2.00 a share based on predictions that it will rise to \$3.00 a share. Since it has already risen fifty cents a share in a very short time it appears to be a good investment to Client B. Client B buys at \$2.00 a share and Mr. Canard makes a tidy 50¢ a share profit on the transaction."

"But what if the stock doesn't reach \$1.50?"

"Through some clever manipulations, Mr. Canard ensures that it always does."

"Oh, I see. And the prediction that it will rise to \$3.00?"

"Fabricated by Mr. Canard."

"Does it ever reach \$3.00 a share?"

"Seldom."

"At least those who initially purchased the stock at \$1.00 come out all right," I said. "They make 50¢ a share selling it back to Mort."

"Well, not exactly. Mr. Canard then pressures them into using their profits to invest in other stock. They become the next victims, the next Client B."

"How unsporting."

"Very."

"But still, if we're talking of only pennies a share..."

"Do not be misled, sir. Often millions of shares trade hands. And then there are those who put their entire savings into penny stocks and end up with nothing."

"I get the point. Well done, James."

"Thank you, sir."

I sat back in my chair and took another sip of Bass Ale. The situation soon became very clear.

"James, I know how to get Pierre out of his chocolate mess."

"Very good, sir."

* * *

Do you remember Jacob Jepson? He was that pork chop eating, Cadillac driving, real estate scam chap. I remembered him well. And I was sure he would remember me. After what had happened in Nevada City I had a hunch he wouldn't be too happy to see me. I was right. My hunches usually are. Fortunately, James was with me.

"What are you doing here?" Jepson growled.

"Why aren't you mining gold in Nevada City?" I asked. I'll admit that it wasn't the most tactful opening line.

He glared at me.

"I don't know where that prospector got his gold," he said. "But it wasn't from your land. You sold me a bill of goods and made me buy back the land I had already sold. And what for? Nothing. I should have sued you. In fact, I still might. You misrepresented that property."

"I didn't make you buy the land. You were greedy. And I don't think you'll sue me. You and Davidson were the first to misrepresent the land. I don't think you're stupid enough to incriminate yourself."

Jepson took on the look of an irate monkey. James kept a close watch on him.

"What did you come here for?" Jepson asked. "Have some more land to sell?"

"This is no time for sarcasm, Jepson. No, no more land."

"Then why don't you leave. You've cost me enough money already."

"I have a way for you to get your money back."

"Ha! That's a laugh. You're the one who made me lose it in the first place!"

"Your greed made you lose it, not me."

"You cheated me."

"Like you had cheated the others. But let's let bygones be bygones. I can get your money back for you if you're interested."

"Why should I trust you? If you didn't have your goon with you I'd toss you out of my office."

He looked at James. James raised his eyebrows but remained cool.

"Just listen to my idea. Being a businessman, even a crooked one, you'll appreciate it."

He stared at me.

"I think you should form another company," I said. "Form a company to mine the gold on your Nevada City property."

"There ain't no gold on that property."

"You know that and I know that but no one else does."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know an investment banker in San Francisco who would arrange an initial public offering of your company's stock without asking any questions. His name is Mort Canard. Here's his card. When you get the money from the initial offering

you can leave the country like you were planning to do after you sold that worthless land."

"I wasn't going to do that," Jepson snapped.

"Of course not," I smiled. "Now what about this IPO?"

"You've got a big mouth. I shouldn't listen to a word you say." Jepson scratched his chin. He was thinking. He was mad but he was thinking.

"You've got to admit, it's a good idea."

"Sounds plausible. If it was anybody but you I'd probably go for it. How can I trust you? What are you getting out of this?"

"Satisfaction."

Jepson stared at me.

"What's your game?" he asked. "You get your kicks out of making people lose money?"

"I get my kicks out of justice," I said.

"Justice? There ain't no justice in this world."

"I'm offering you a chance to get your money back. That's justice. More justice than you deserve."

"I don't trust you. You're trying to play me for the fool again. Well, you won't do it this time."

"Listen, Jepson. You've got no money, just acres of worthless land. There's no reason to play you for a fool. You've got nothing to lose. I can't make a cent off of you."

He looked at me for a long time. He was hungry and still greedy.

"It's a good scheme," he said. "I still don't trust you, but I'll admit it's a good scheme."

"Just start a company," I said. "Make up some impressive records. You're good at that. I'll take care of the rest. Oh, and insist on a firm underwriting from Canard. That will minimize your risk."

According to James, a "firm underwriting" represents a very high level of commitment from the investment banker. The banker uses his own money to actually buy the stock from the issuing company. If the IPO is a flop and the banker doesn't sell all the stock at the initial offering price then he's stuck with it and has to try to sell the shares at a lower price. All very bad for his profits. On the other hand, if the IPO takes off...

"I don't know," Jepson said. "You put a bad taste in my mouth."

"It's your choice. You can make some money or you can stay broke. Once the lawsuits against Davidson Development and your other bogus companies are

settled you'll end up in jail unless you flee the country. Life abroad would certainly be more comfortable if you had some money."

Jepson's porcine face hardened. He pointed a steady finger at me.

"If you double-cross me this time I'll kill you," he said.

* * *

I will admit to you that finance was becoming more exciting than I ever thought possible. Rather sporting, actually. I'm far from an expert in the field, but I'm a fast learner. James, it seems, knows considerably more.

Exactly twenty days after my visit to Jepson I received a call from Mort (it takes twenty days for the Securities and Exchange Commission to approve a new stock issue - Mort was a real pro).

"Churchill, I have an opportunity for you," Mort said.

"You do?"

"Yes. I'm about to place an IPO for a company called Western Mineral Development. They mine precious metals, mainly gold. The initial price will be \$5.00 a share, a little higher than I usually deal with, but I see it hitting \$10.00 a share in no time at all. It's going to be a very hot stock. Are you interested?"

"It sounds risky," I said.

"Well, there's always a little risk. That's how big money is made. Of course, if you're not interested in big money..."

"I didn't say that."

"Good. Now why don't you come by? I'm in my main office and I'll be here all day."

"All right, I'll see you this afternoon."

"Good."

* * *

"Pierre, my friend, we're going to buy some stock," I slapped the old boy on the back.

"We are?" He looked at me as if he was wearing spectacles, but he wasn't.

"Yes."

"But I don't have any money," he said.

"Don't worry, I'll lend you some. You don't want to miss out on this investment."

"Really?"

"Yes. We're going to visit Mort this afternoon and invest in a new company called Western Mineral Development."

"Is it a solid investment?"

"It's worth its weight in gold," I said.

* * *

"Is that your Rolls Royce?" Mort asked, stretching his neck so he could see out of his ground floor window.

James had just deposited us at Mort's main office. I've said it before and you know I'll say it again: in my opinion the 1963 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud III is the most beautiful motorcar in the world. What else would one drive to the Financial District?

"Yes," I said. "That's my Silver Cloud."

Mort's jaw assumed a predatory pose.

"Very good," he said. It was only then that he noticed Pierre. It gave him quite a shock. "Pierre, what are you doing here?"

"I hope you don't mind," I said. "But I told him about Western Mineral Development. He wants in on it too."

"Really?" Mort scratched his chin. It was still predatory but slightly softened. "Do you have any money to invest?" he said to Pierre.

"A little," Pierre said.

"Well," Mort clapped his hands together. "I'm glad both of you came to see me. I'll make it worth your while."

"I'm sure you will," I said. "How many shares are available?"

"Here's the prospectus." Mort handed me the preliminary description of the Western Mineral Development IPO. It was a fine piece of work. Jepson had outdone himself on this one.

"This is a red herring," I said.

Mort looked at me.

"You are a savvy investor, aren't you?" he said. His eyes had become black marbles.

"What's a red herring?" Pierre asked. His eyes shot blanks and blinked a lot.

"A red herring is a document that is given to potential investors prior to Securities and Exchange Commission approval," I said. "The catch is that it may contain incomplete information."

"Don't worry, Churchill. The final prospectus is identical to this one. I haven't had time to print a new version. You don't want to wait do you? You'll have to act fast if you want to make big money on this one."

I pretended to study the red herring carefully.

"Let's see," I said. "Two hundred thousand shares are available."

"Yes," Mort said. "How many would you like?" His smile mimicked his jaw and became, you guessed it, predatory.

"One hundred thousand," I said.

Mort's body jerked backward as if an eel had crawled up his leg. He swallowed hard and loosened his tie.

"And I'll take twenty-five thousand," Pierre said. His mouth was so dry he could hardly speak.

"Twenty-five thousand?" Mort said. "That'll take a lot of money, Pierre. Where are you going to get it?"

I leaned over Mort's desk and spoke in a lowered voice.

"I'm giving him a bridge loan to cover the initial cost of his investment. If this stock's as hot as you say it is Pierre will be able to pay me back without any problem. And I'll make a little bit of interest on the bridge loan." I winked at Mort.

"Churchill, I like your style," he smiled. "Of course, I will have to check your banking references, but if you own a Rolls Royce then I'm sure everything will be in order."

I smiled.

"Have you ever handled an IPO this big?" I asked.

"No, this is my biggest." There was a sudden resemblance between Mort and Jacob Jepson hunched over a pork chop.

"Do you have the resources to handle it?" I asked.

"Don't worry, Churchill. I know my business. Now let's celebrate our transaction with a drink."

* * *

Timing truly is everything in this world. Perfect execution depends on perfect timing. When it comes to finance one must know the proper time to buy and the proper time to sell. It also helps to be in the right place at the right time. Both places, actually.

James took us back to Pierre's shop then immediately left for Mort's branch office.

"Where's James going?" Pierre asked.

"He's going to buy some stock."

"Why isn't he going to buy it from Mort?"

"He is."

Poor Pierre was confused. Finance really isn't his forte.

"But Mort's office is in the other direction. Where is he going?"

"He's going to Mort's branch office."

Pierre's cheeks bulged in thought. He shook his head and went back to mixing a batch of chocolate. He tasted some and frowned.

"No good?" I asked.

"It's that diluted Valrhona Guanaja 1502."

"You won't have to do that once this stock deal goes through," I said.

"I've got to be prepared in case it doesn't. And the Frenchmen are arriving this afternoon. They're bound to find out what I'm doing. I'll be ruined. My chances of joining the *Club* will be zilch."

"Would you like me to pick them up at the airport?" I asked. "A Rolls Royce always makes a good impression."

"Winston, that would be super!"

I tasted a small amount of his diluted chocolate.

"Awful, isn't it?" he said.

I nodded. It wasn't that bad.

"Can I have some?" I asked.

"If you really want it," he said. He looked at me oddly.

"I do."

He poured some chocolate into a mold, let it harden, wrapped it in foil, and placed it into a Valrhona Guanaja 1502 package. Then the telephone rang.

"Hello," Pierre answered. "Oh, it's you, Mort. Yes, Winston's here with me." He covered the receiver with his hand. "It's Mort," he said to me. "Things are happening with Western Mineral Development. The stock has just hit \$7.10. He wants us to sell it back to him."

"Tell him we'll sell when it hits \$10.00," I smiled.

Pierre did as he was told and hung up.

"Now what do we do?" Pierre asked.

"Wait."

"What for?"

"For the stock to hit \$10.00."

"Do you really think it will?"

"I'm positive"

"When?"

"Soon."

Mort called again ten minutes later. He asked for me.

"I can't believe it, Churchill," Mort said. "Western Mineral is on fire. I've never seen anything like it. It just reached \$9.00 a share but I think you should sell now before everyone else begins to take profits. Don't take any chances. It's close enough to \$10.00. Take your profit now."

"I suppose you're right," I said. "We'll sell."

"Good," Mort said. "You're making a good move. I'll buy the stock back from you. You'll get your money quicker that way."

"What will you do with the stock?" I asked.

"I'll sell it to someone else," Mort said. "I may not be able to get \$9.00 a share for it but I'll make money off the commission. The important thing is for you and Pierre to take your profits."

"Yes, you're right," I said.

"Of course, we'll have to put your new profits to good use."

"I'm sure we'll find something."

"Yes, I'll help you find a good home for your money," Mort said. "I'll talk to you about it later. Goodbye, Churchill."

"Goodbye, Mort."

I hung up the phone and turned to Pierre.

"You now have one hundred thousand dollars, Pierre," I said. "Less the interest you owe me on your loan."

"What? I have how much?" The poor boy looked rather dazed. The weight of his lower lip pressed his jaw toward the ground.

"One hundred thousand," I said.

"A hundred thousand?" he mumbled. "I can't believe it. I really have that much money?"

"Yes, but don't spend it yet. You're going to need it."

"I am?"

* * *

"James, is the Rolls ready? We've got to pick up the Frenchmen."

"Yes, sir."

Have you ever noticed how Rolls Royces are allowed to double-park at airports? No, you probably haven't. Well, it's very impressive. James stayed with the Rolls while I went to greet our French visitors. You can always tell a Frenchman by the grandiose way in which he walks.

"Pierre Lupo sent me to greet you," I said to one of them.

The men looked at each other.

"That was very kind of heem," one of them said.

We shook hands like statesmen.

"My name is Winston Churchill," I said.

They looked at each other, muttered something in French, then turned toward me. I think they were a bit astounded.

"Weenston Churcheel?"

"No relation," I said.

"I am Claude Jambon."

"And my name is Georges Cochon."

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

They collected their luggage and I led them outside. James sprung into action and opened the rear door for them. They were quite impressed. Rightly so. My Rolls is impeccable and James is a first rate chauffeur.

"Beautiful automobeel," Claude said.

"Thank you," I beamed.

James smoothly placed the luggage into the boot and took his place behind the wheel. I sat in the front passenger seat - not a place I particularly care to be, but at times one must make sacrifices. Our guests were perfectly content in the luxurious back seat. They said something to each other in French that I couldn't understand but it seemed to me to be complimentary.

I took out the chocolate Pierre had given me, unwrapped it and put a piece into my mouth. The Frenchmen watched carefully. They couldn't sit still.

"Would you like some chocolate?" I asked.

"But of course!" they said in unison.

I held out two pieces. They were wrapped in gold foil and covered with black paper with a red triangle in the lower left corner.

"Valrhona Guanaja 1502!" Claude said, reading the label. "*Monsieur* Churcheel, your taste in chocolate is *tres bon*."

"Thank you," I said.

Each of them took a piece and adroitly unwrapped it. Claude sniffed his piece and a troubled look crossed his face. Then he tasted it.

"*Monsieur* Churcheel, this is not Valrhona Guanaja 1502!"

Georges tasted his piece of chocolate and nodded so emphatically I thought his head would fall off. It didn't.

"Really?" I said.

"Where did you get this chocolate?" Claude demanded.

"From Pierre Lupo. Why, is something wrong?"

"Wrong? It is a crime to sell this, this," he pointed to the chocolate in his hand, "this dirt as Valrhona Guanaja 1502. We shall have stern words for *Monsieur* Lupo."

The two Frenchmen remained quiet with their arms folded for the remainder of the trip. James eased the Rolls to a stop in front of Pierre's shop and opened the rear door. The Frenchmen emerged and marched into the shop. I followed.

"Gentlemen!" Pierre smiled. He offered his hand to them.

"What is the meaning of this?" Claude demanded immediately.

"What are you talking about?" Pierre asked. The poor boy was a bit stunned. It was not the kind of greeting he had expected from the French delegation.

"This." Claude tossed the chocolate I had given him onto the counter.

Pierre looked at it and knew immediately what had happened.

"Winston, you gave them some of that chocolate!" he said.

"Sorry, old sport."

Suddenly, Mort Canard burst into the shop. He looked like a man trying to avoid a runaway train.

"Pierre, how much money does the store have?" he asked.

Poor Pierre. Life was becoming far too complicated.

"Not much, really," Pierre answered. "Why?"

"I need money. Lots of it." Mort paced through the shop. The Frenchmen watched him as if he were a windup toy.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I've been had. That Western Mineral Development IPO was all a scam. It turns out there is no Western Mineral Development. It was all a fake. Those financial reports, everything."

"It's a good thing we sold," I said.

"Good for you, bad for me. After I bought the stock from you and Pierre, my other office sold it to another investor. That investor must have been part of the scam because his line of credit turned out to be phony. I found that out too late. Now I'm stuck owing you and Pierre the money for the shares I bought from you. I also bought back shares from other investors. Now I owe them, too. And I'm out the money that I was supposed to receive from this other investor. The man behind Western Mineral Development has, of course, disappeared. So, I need

money. Lots of it. This was the biggest deal I've ever done. I don't have the cash reserves to cover it. I'm ruined if I don't get some money."

"I'm sorry, Mort, but the shop account doesn't have much in it," Pierre said. "Maybe a couple of thousand at the most."

"That won't do. I'm ruined." The red skin over his jaw turned pale.

"Perhaps not," I said.

"What do you mean?" He perked up like an expectant puppy.

"I think perhaps we would be willing to buy your share of this shop with the profits you owe us from the stock deal."

I looked at Pierre. Mort stared at us. Pierre blinked. Yes, the financial world can make one dizzy.

"I'd lose the tax breaks from this business if I sold it," Mort argued.

"You'll lose both businesses if you don't," I said.

Mort frowned. He ran his fingers over his jaw. His skin returned to its natural red hue.

"Damn it, Winston, you're right," he said. "I don't have a choice. Would you really be willing to buy my share of the shop?"

"What do you say, Pierre?" I asked.

Pierre nodded.

"Then it's a deal," Mort said. "I'll draw up the papers this evening. We can sign them in the morning." Mort let out a deep breath and left the shop.

"Did you have something to do with all this, Winston?" Pierre asked after he had recovered his senses.

"I may have had a hand in the affair," I said.

"What happened to that Western Mineral company?" Pierre asked.

"The man behind it should be behind bars by now. I took the liberty of informing the authorities."

"What about this other man, the one who bought the stock but didn't pay for it?"

"*Monsieur* Lupo," Claude interrupted. "What about this chocolate?"

"I can explain that," I said. "The man who just left here was the former owner of this shop. He was responsible for this imitation Valrhona Guanaja 1502. Pierre discovered it and has just bought the shop from him in order to halt the sale of the imitation chocolate and to preserve the purity and integrity of Valrhona Guanaja 1502."

Claude stepped back and raised his head.

"What a noble thing to have done," he said. He then kissed Pierre on each cheek. "There can be no question now of your becoming a member of *Le Club des Croqueurs de Chocolat*."

Pierre nearly fainted. I gave my regards to the Frenchmen and returned to the Rolls.

"Everything concluded satisfactorily, sir?" James asked.

"Indeed. I'd say everyone got their just desserts. Home, James."

The Rogue Saves a Tree



If you remember Nick Arthur you'll remember his house. And if you remember his house you'll remember its views. The homes in San Francisco's Marina District have the finest views in the world - and Nick's house has them all. The San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the yacht club. What more could one want? All right, so there may be a few things, but not many.

Now, back to Nick Arthur. If you know Nick you know he's never satisfied. That's why he wanted Spectrum Pharmaceuticals. But he didn't get it and you may recall how he lost it. Some folks claim I was behind it. They are entitled to their opinion. What I will admit to being behind was his field trial victory. A fine bit of work that was. And that was why I felt justified in staying in his house while he was overseas. Well, someone had to take advantage of those views.

* * *

The sky was overcast and a blustery wind kicked up the waves and punched them back into the sea. The boats returning to the harbor bobbed on the water like giant corks. Occasionally, a blast of rain splattered against the window. It may not have been good sailing weather but it was, all in all, good weather for contemplation.

I sipped a Bass Ale in front of a crackling fire and contemplated my invitation to a fund-raiser sponsored by an environmental group I had never heard of. Now I'm as concerned about the environment as the next chap but I have never shown a penchant for supporting any group of any kind. Still, a party is a party, and I suppose there was a chance that it would be as good as a post-opera bash. But not much of a chance.

James had my Rolls ready at precisely 7:30 PM and we rolled off into the San Francisco night. The streets sparkled with rain and automobile taillights reflected off the pavement like neon signs. The blustery wind that had shaken the waves now shook the traffic signals and blew bits of paper against the curb.

Our destination was the Portman Hotel, a ritzy hotel if one could call such sterility ritzy. It was all brilliant metal and sparkling glass, trendy furniture and snooty staff. James glided my Rolls up to the hotel's covered entrance. A doorman reached for my door but James beat him to it. The doorman retreated.

Good chauffeur, that James.

Over-dressed, out-of-town guests huddled like mannequins in the lobby while they waited for transportation to take them to long awaited engagements that could not possibly meet their expectations and would undoubtedly require embellishment when related to the folks back home. I shrugged and looked for a place to check my top hat, coat and scarf. Yes, top hat. Fund-raisers at expensive hotels demand top hat, white tie and tails. Anything less would be positively uncivilized.

"Winston!" someone called from behind me.

I turned and was delighted to find not one of the mannequins but Greta Hutchins. Her formal attire was quite stunning, fitting for a fund-raiser at an expensive hotel. I must say that she looked much younger than her fifty-plus years.

"Greta," I took her hand and kissed her on the cheek. Have you ever noticed how a slinky, black Versace dress accented with elegantly simple gold jewelry can make any woman look as if she had just stepped out of a Jordan Playboy? If you have then you obviously move in the same circles as I do. If you have not, don't fret, I'll keep you informed.

There was no doubt that Greta looked as if she had just stepped out of an elegant and sporty speedster. She had been a good friend of mine many years ago before she abruptly gave up a successful law practice and moved to the country. I recall her saying something about peace of mind and wanting to be alone.

"My dear Winston," she said. "It's been such a long, long time."

"It certainly has." We then experienced that pause that long-separated friends experience when they attempt to reconstruct that something special that had made them friends in the first place. Don't worry, I'm not going to psychoanalyze it.

"You look as if you're going to this fund raiser," I said.

"Going to it? My dear Winston, I'm throwing it!"

"Throwing it?" I'm not easily startled but I will admit that this was one of those rare occasions.

"Yes. Follow me." She took me by the arm and led me toward her party. She stopped after a few steps, took a step back and looked at me.

"My dear Winston, how have you been?"

"I've been fine." I stepped back and looked at her Versace gown again. "You look terrific and you look as if you've been doing well."

"It's rented," she laughed. "Hideous thing. You know this kind of costume is no longer me."

"Then you haven't given up the solitary country life?"

"No. Sorry to disappoint you."

"It's a relief, not a disappointment."

She then studied my tux.

"And I see you haven't changed. You always were the kind of man who dressed for the occasion."

I smiled. There was a time when that would have been the supreme compliment. These days I'm no so sure.

"Tell me about your fund-raiser," I said.

"I will." She retook my arm and we walked on.

"I of course hope to raise a lot of money."

"That is typically what fund-raisers are for. Who or what are you raising funds for?"

"Have you ever heard of a company called California Logging?"

"It sounds familiar but it's not an institution I track on a daily basis."

"Someday I'll ask you what institutions you do track on a daily basis. Anyway, they are the largest logging company in California. The business press refers to them as Cal Log. They're based in Mendocino County where I've been living for the past ten years. Cal Log used to be one of the most responsible logging companies in the business, harvesting only as much timber as the forest could grow back. They treated their employees well, did not go into debt, and had lots of cash. They were true friends of their environment and community."

"What happened?"

"Because of their conservative logging policies, Wall Street felt they were not reaching their full profit potential. Naturally, their stock was undervalued. And with all of that cash sitting around they were a perfect takeover target."

"Let me guess, they've been taken over."

"Yes, by a San Francisco man named Harold Buster. He's what the magazines refer to as a 'veteran takeover artist'. How would you like to be called that? Anyway, his purchase of Cal Log was typical of his style. He borrowed heavily through his holding company to finance the acquisition and now he is selling Cal Log assets to pay off his debt. In this case the assets are trees. Buster has accelerated the pace of logging to alarming proportions. He's mortgaging Mendocino County's future to pay off his debt, not to mention what he's doing to the environment. That is unacceptable, Winston, and he must be stopped. I've formed an organization to stop him and I'm throwing this party to raise money to save the trees."

"A worthy endeavor," I said.

"I knew you would think so. We have filed lawsuits against Cal Log but of course lawsuits take time. Too much time I'm afraid. And money, way too much money."

"There must be other ways."

"Yes, there are other ways, but they would require a man of extraordinary ability." She gave me that film screen femme fatale look. "It would require a man like you."

"Cut the ticker tape parade, baby." I said.

"All right, I'll get to the point. I've known all along that unorthodox methods would have to be employed to stop Harold Buster. Of course, I thought of you immediately. I've heard about your business dealings in Latin America and a few other escapades here in the Bay Area. You never could turn down a good cause. Now I'm asking you to join another one. Will you help me?"

"I was wondering how I had gotten invited to this affair," I smiled.

"You're not the only clever person in this world, Winston Churchill. Will you help?"

In case you don't know, I'm a hopeless romantic, always compelled to come to the aid of a damsel in distress.

"Of course I will," I sighed.

She smiled like a cat that had just eaten the family parakeet.

"Good, I knew I could count on you."

"Now tell me about this Harold Buster fellow."

"He's an ass."

That was Greta all right, direct and to the point.

"I'm sorry, Winston, but he is."

"No apology necessary. I would, however, like to know more about his business affairs."

"Yes, of course. I have a file in my car. You can have it after the party. Now I must mingle and raise some cash – you may need it." Greta kissed me on the cheek and went to work her quests.

I roamed the room in search of someone I knew but all of the guests were strangers to me. This wasn't the kind of party that acquaintances of mine would attend. Pity. I could lecture you on the importance of supporting worthy causes but I'll spare you. The next time you may not be so lucky. When the crowd thinned Greta reappeared at my side.

"How did you do?" I asked.

"About as well as could be expected. Everyone claims they want to protect the environment, but when it comes to putting their money where their mouth is, well..."

"Yes, I can imagine. And I'm sure Buster has a few friends in this town that would like to see you fail and would discourage attendance at this event."

"He also has a few enemies who would like to see me succeed. A few of them wrote checks on the spot. Others committed to sending their money. We'll see about that."

I smiled.

"Come on, I'll give you my file on Harold Buster." She took me by the arm and led me out of the hotel to a beat up VW bus. That was more her style. The vehicle's two-tone white on dark orange paint scheme reminded me of an ice cream cone.

"Excuse the mess," she said, opening the side door. "This is a work vehicle."

A work vehicle, indeed! It was filthy! Imagine if the seats had been covered with Connolly hides. In my opinion, the soiling of Connolly hides is a tragedy and one that should be dealt with severely. But you didn't ask for my opinion, did you?

Greta shuffled through a pile of boxes and removed a thickly stuffed file folder. She considerately wiped the dust off of it before handing it to me. A classy gesture.

"Here is everything I know about Harold Buster," she said. "You can probably find out more if you happen to know a good stock analyst. Public information will not be hard to find. Private information will, of course, be harder."

"And more useful," I winked.

"Call me if you come up with anything," she said.

"Where are you staying?"

"At some flea bag hotel down the road. I'll give you the number."

"Flea bag hotel?" I said. "We can't have that. I'm staying in a large house on the Marina. There's enough room for both of us."

"I should have suspected," she said. She gave me a sly grin.

"Leave your bus here. James will take us."

On cue, James drove up to the curb in my Rolls. Greta looked at it and grinned.

"You always did have class," she said.

* * *

Greta woke late the next morning. I had already spent several hours studying her Harold Buster file.

"You get up early," she said, dragging herself across the room to my desk.

Then she looked out the window. "My God, what a view!"

"Yes, I rather like it. A good view is not to be wasted."

"Don't you find it distracting? I think it would take my mind off work."

"Not my mind. I find it peaceful. Helps me think. James can get you some coffee if you'd like."

"Yes, I'd like that." She pulled up a chair and sat down. She had that dreamy kind of look on her face.

"Tell me," I said. "Isn't it lonely up there in Mendocino?"

My words ignited a fireworks display of surprise in her face.

"What do you mean?"

I looked at her the way a trainer looks at a young thoroughbred who's first training session was quick enough to win the Derby.

"Well, a little," she frowned. "But I do a lot of fishing. I've always loved fishing. Now I have the time to do it. And I've got my books. And there's always something to do around the house."

I continued to look at her.

"My dear Winston," she shook her head. "You always could see right through me. Yes, at times I am lonely. But I choose to be. Now what do you think of Harold Buster?"

"Changing the subject won't help," I said. "But I'll let you off the hook." I turned my attention to the papers scattered on the desk. "The name of his holding company is a bit pretentious."

"Top Group," she giggled. "You don't get to Harold Buster's position without being a little pretentious."

"I suppose not."

"What else is interesting?" she asked.

"Everything appears to be fairly typical. At the time Buster made his offer of \$32 a share, he, through Top Group, already owned 26% of Cal Log's total stock. Lucky for him. Thirty percent ownership would have triggered an anti-takeover provision. Owning less than 30% gave him time to arrange his financing without anyone knowing of his intentions. As it was, he had to pay \$39 a share. He financed the purchase through junk bonds underwritten by the investment banking firm of Hamler Brothers. That gave him \$900 million in additional debt. He's paying off that debt by cutting down and selling trees at a staggering pace. That, I presume, is where you come in."

"Precisely. We must stop him before he destroys all the forests in Northern California."

"He won't be easy to stop. He hasn't done anything illegal that I can see."

"On the surface it looks kosher, but there are always skeletons in the closet when something like this happens. Even if his deal is legitimate we must stop him." She turned away and stared out the window. Her gaze crossed the bay and went all the way to the forests of Mendocino.

"Have you talked to him about this?" I asked.

"I tried to, but he sent his lawyers after me. I didn't even get a foot in the door."

"Not very hospitable."

"I told you he's an ass."

"Yes, well, I need to know a little more about him other than his being an ass." I turned my attention back to the file. "If you're going to topple someone like Buster you have to know what makes him tick."

"He collects books," Greta said.

"What?"

"That was my reaction, too. It doesn't seem like the kind of hobby he would have, does it?"

"It does if you think about it."

She thought about it.

"Yes, you're right," she flashed me a knowing grin.

"So Harold Buster collects books," I said after a short pause. "You were quite a bookworm once, too, if I recall."

"I've always had an appreciation for fine books, if that's what you mean." Her words bit like an immature whiskey.

"Well, well, you and Harold Buster have something in common," I teased.

"We have nothing in common," she snapped. "The man is an ass. We must stop him!" She turned her back to the window.

"Don't worry, I'll dispatch James. If there are any skeletons in Harold Buster's closet, he will find them."

"Who is this James?" she asked.

"He's my chauffeur."

* * *

"Jenkins McCoy?" I asked. "Who is Jenkins McCoy?"

James stood before me with an open notebook.

"A shady character. No one seems to know him well. I am told is a close friend of Sid Hamler," he said.

"Of Hamler Brothers?"

"Yes, sir. Actually, Sid Hamler is the only Hamler at Hamler Brothers. I am told Mr. Hamler thinks Hamler Brothers sounds more important than simply Hamler."

"I suppose it does. And two days before Buster made his offer, Jenkins McCoy purchased 250,000 shares of Cal Log?"

"Correct."

I looked at Greta. "Looks as if someone gave him a hot tip," I said to her.

"It sure does," she said. "Of course it's all circumstantial."

"You're right. We have no evidence that a crime has been committed."

"And we need hard evidence," Greta said. She rose and paced across the room.

"Still, it gives me enough of a reason to continue investigating the Hamler-Buster connection," I said. "Sid Hamler's records might be interesting."

"Yes, they might prove insider trading or something like that," Greta said.

"Quite possibly. James, any ideas?"

"Yes, sir." He closed his notebook. "I think we should obtain Mr. Hamler's records. All of his records."

"Excellent idea!" I said.

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, then. Have at it."

James nodded and departed.

"If there is anything to be found, James will find it."

"Who is this James?" Greta asked.

* * *

We waited for James at the Petit Cafe, a nice little neighborhood restaurant away from the more bustling parts of the City. We settled down at a cozy little table in front of a large window and enjoyed a fine dinner.

"What will you do if James finds something?" Greta asked.

I shrugged. A slice of French bread topped with brie, roasted peppers, olive oil and garlic occupied my attention.

"You know, once one tastes seventy percent brie one never settles for sixty," I said.

"What does that have to do with Harold Buster?"

"Nothing."

"I see," she said but she didn't.

"One must always maintain one's civility even when one is pursuing a formidable villain."

"Winston Churchill, you are the most singular man I have ever known," Greta laughed.

"Is that a compliment?"

"Sometimes." That femme fatale look returned.

"I suppose this means you want to return to talking business."

"I'm sorry, but do you really think there is something we can do to stop Buster?"

"If a crime has been committed then justice must be served," I said.

"What if a crime has not been committed?"

"That's harder. Now eat your brie and enjoy the wine."

Greta smiled and did as I suggested. We had just ordered desert when James floated my beautiful Rolls to a rest in front of the restaurant.

"Here's James now," Greta said, jumping up from the table. The girl was a bit excited.

James emerged from the Rolls with a large file folder under his arm.

"Looks like he's found something," she ran to the door.

"You can always count on James."

"Who is he?" she looked back at me.

James entered the restaurant and she escorted him to our table.

"James, have a seat," I said.

"Thank you, sir." He sat down and placed the folder in front of me.

"What have we here?"

"Information, sir."

I smiled and opened the folder. I had no need to go beyond the first page. A nearly invisible grin crossed James' face.

"What is it?" Greta asked.

"At the time of Buster's offer to purchase Cal Log, Hamler Brothers, Buster's investment banker, secretly owned 25% of Cal Log stock. Hamler had masked his purchase of the stock through several holding companies controlled by Jenkins McCoy."

"So?"

I quickly put 26 and 25 together.

"That means between them Buster and Hamler owned 51% of Cal Log."

"So?"

"Thirty percent ownership would have triggered the anti-takeover provision that would have virtually prevented anyone from acquiring Cal Log."

"How so?" Greta asked.

"Before any single investor could acquire over 30% of Cal Log stock, the purchase had to be approved by a majority of Cal Log shareholders. Buster was Hamler's client. Together they owned 51% of Cal Log stock, a majority and enough to guarantee approval of Buster's purchase of more stock, enough stock to control the company. Buster and Hamler must have been secretly working together. That's how they engineered the takeover of Cal Log. This smacks of collusion. And the 250,000 shares Jenkins McCoy purchased must have been his payoff for running the holding companies Hamler used to shield his holdings."

"Winston, what are you going to do?" Greta asked.

"Throw the book at him."

* * *

George Thomason, a London bookseller, collected 23,000 books and pamphlets published in England during the troubled years of conflict from 1640 to 1661 in order to preserve them for posterity. I know this because I researched the subject. Book collecting, that is. A man's passion can also be his weakness.

"Oh, you're a book collector?" the secretarial voice at the other end of the phone said. "Then I'm sure Mr. Buster will have time for you. What was it you said you had?" As I had suspected, the way to Harold Buster's heart was through his books.

"A collection of Shakespeare once owned by Henry Clay Folger," I said.

"Just a minute." She put me on hold. A minute and fifty-three seconds later she was back on the line. "Yes, Mr. Buster will be glad to meet you. Shall we say two o'clock this afternoon?"

"Let's say two-thirty." An extra half-hour of anticipation never hurt anyone.

"Two-thirty it is, Mr., ah, what did you say your name was?"

"My name is Winston Churchill."

"Is it really?" There was a smile in her voice.

"Yes, but no relation."

"Oh."

At two-thirty I was in the heart of the financial district. Even in San Francisco's money mecca a 1963 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud III attracts attention, particularly one as well-maintained as mine. I must say I was well-maintained, as well,

snappily attired in a gray, double-breasted suit, an azure tie and pocket square, and impeccably polished, black business shoes. No broguing. Today, I meant business.

James eased the Rolls to a halt in front of 460 Montgomery Street. Buster's office was on the twenty-fifth floor. The elevator took me there in silence. Not even the doors made a sound as they opened. The hallway was hushed, like an empty church at two o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon. Have you ever wondered how they can make modern office buildings absorb so much sound? Maybe you haven't. Well, I have, and I find it almost unsettling.

I located the Top Group offices and found Buster's secretary sitting behind an expansive, dark desk.

"Hello, I'm Jenny McCoy-Barrett, Mr. Buster's personal secretary. She was dressed, well-dressed I might add, in a solid black, Ralph Lauren dress that made her look more like a CEO than a secretary.

"Ralph Lauren?" I asked her.

"Why, yes. How did you know?"

"I know these things."

She studied my attire and her face lightened with mild admiration.

"Yes, you look as if you would."

She led me into an office with a panoramic view of the city. Pictures of fishermen up to their hips in water adorned the walls.

"Mr. Churchill, I presume." A delicate man stood behind a sturdy desk and held out his hand.

"Yes." I shook his hand.

"I am Harold Buster." His face radiated enthusiasm. He did not look at all like I had expected him to. I had expected a slightly overweight torso, balding egg-shaped head, and the demeanor of a piranha. What stood before me was a man with a thin long face and black curly hair cut short and firmly in place. Eyeglasses with perfectly round lenses clung to the bridge of a small, sharply defined nose. He must have been in his early fifties although at first glance he looked much younger. And, he wore a bespoke suit – a nice charcoal pinhead from Henry Poole of London. Quite impeccable. A man with such fine sartorial taste deserves some respect even if he is playing loose with financial rules.

"I always enjoy meeting fellow book collectors," he said. "Please sit down."

I did. The leather chair was comfortably stuffed.

"Are you a fisherman?" I asked, nodding at the pictures on the wall.

"Why, yes," he smiled. "Next to book collecting fishing is my greatest passion. But please tell me about these books. I've been thinking about them all day and

haven't been able to get any work done."

"I have a collection of Shakespeare once owned by Henry Clay Folger. The books are filled with his annotations."

His eyes brightened. A book annotated or marked by a prominent owner is particularly desirable to some collectors.

"Really?" he said. "My collection is modest, but I specialize in books once owned by the great financial tycoons. Henry Huntington, J. Pierpont Morgan, those people. Most of their books are either in museums or in the libraries they founded. It is rare that one encounters one that isn't."

"That's why this Shakespeare collection is so valuable."

"Yes, Mr. Churchill, it is indeed valuable. You must be interested in selling the collection otherwise you wouldn't have come to see me."

"That is correct. The books have actually fallen into the hands of an acquaintance of mine. She is not a collector and therefore wants to sell them. Myself, I collect the works of Fitzgerald. Since they do not fit into my collection I agreed to help find a buyer. I have no interest in them apart from having an appreciation of their value as rare books."

"I see. Well, I am interested. When can I see them?"

"We could show them to you tonight."

"Excellent. Why don't you come to my home? Then I can also show you my collection."

"Very good."

"Here's the address." He scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to me.

I rose to leave.

"Your wife?" I asked, looking at the picture of a woman on his desk.

"My late wife," I said.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's all right. She was a good woman. I've never remarried. Books and fishing fill my time now."

I turned to leave, then stopped. "Oh, there is something I'm curious about," I said.

"What is it?"

"Didn't your company recently purchase California Logging?"

"Yes, why?" His face soured.

"I read about it in the papers."

"Don't believe everything you read in the papers. I'm getting a bum rap. They say I'm depleting the forests. Nonsense. There's enough timber up there to last us in perpetuity. I've also put in \$12 million of my own money to build a new power plant up there. I'm in it for the long haul, contrary to what the press says."

"It has been a messy fight, though, hasn't it?"

"Messy? I'll tell you about messy. Those environmentalists are putting large metal spikes into the trees. The spikes are meant to destroy saw blades, but they injure saw operators. I like a good fight as much as the next man, but fair is fair."

"I didn't know about the spikes."

"No, no one does. The press doesn't print that sort of thing."

"There is one more thing I'm curious about," I said.

"What's that?"

"Jenkins McCoy purchased 250,000 shares of Cal Log just before you made an offer for it."

"Who's Jenkins McCoy?" Buster asked.

"You are asking me to believe you don't know who he is?"

"Yes, because I don't know who he is."

"You do know Hamler Brothers, don't you?"

"Yes. They're my investment bankers."

"At the time you made your offer for Cal Log, Hamler Brothers owned 25% of Cal Log stock. You owned 26%. Together you owned enough to control the company but not enough individually to trigger the poison pill."

"What do you mean Hamler Brothers owned 25% of Cal Log?" I almost believed his surprise.

"I suppose you didn't know that, either?"

"No, I didn't."

"I find that surprising," I said.

"So do I." Buster lost himself in his thoughts. I must say he had a way of oozing sincerity. Perhaps it was the bespoke suit. But I've been around enough of these high-finance types to be wary of any outward display of emotion no matter how convincing. Acting must be part of every major business school's curriculum.

"I suppose you read that in the newspapers, too," Buster said.

I shrugged and decided to drop my pursuit of the truth for now. I knew I could count on James to dig up the real dirt.

"Well, Mr. Buster, fortunately for book collectors such as ourselves, printing

presses have been used to print things other than newspapers."

Buster regained his smile.

"You're right, Mr. Churchill," he said.

"No hard feelings?" I asked?

"No, no hard feelings." He rose from his desk. "I look forward to seeing you this evening."

"It will be my pleasure," I said. We shook hands and I left.

* * *

"James," I said. "I think we may have to change our approach to Harold Buster."

"Sir?"

"There are always two sides to every story. I have just heard an interesting other side to the Cal Log story. I believe further research is in order."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

"These are fabulous," Greta said, carefully browsing through the Shakespeare editions. "Where did you get them?"

"Never mind," I said.

She gave me the kind of glance an experienced investor gives to a neophyte with a hot stock tip.

"All right, I don't want to know."

"Harold Buster will pay a lot of money for those books," I said. "You can sell them to him and use the money in your efforts to defeat him."

"Wonderfully ironic," she smiled.

"I knew you would appreciate it. By the way, we're going to his home tonight to show him the books."

"What?" Her smile dissolved.

"We're taking the books to him. I told him they belonged to a friend of mine. You are that friend."

"But Winston, I despise that man!"

"You've been trying to see him. Here's your chance."

She frowned.

"You can pull it off," I said. "You like books."

"I used to like books. Now I like fishing."

"So does Harold Buster."

"He does?"

"Yes," I said. "Next to book collecting fishing is his greatest passion. You see, you two have a lot in common."

She gave me a nasty look.

"We have nothing in common," she growled. "The man is an ass."

* * *

Harold Buster's home was in San Francisco's Cow Hollow district, an area full of finely manicured manors. His house was a splendid structure neighboring a foreign embassy. James glided the Rolls to a halt in the driveway. We were high above the bay, above the trees and buildings, closer to the stars than to the ocean. The lights of Marin County glittered across the bay.

James rang the doorbell.

"We shall soon see how much you and Buster really have in common," I said to Greta.

"Winston! Don't tease me."

"Relax," I said. "You're about to slay your enemy with his own sword."

Buster opened the door himself. He held it open and motioned us inside.

"Mr. Churchill, I'm glad to see you again," he said. He shook my hand.

I glanced at Greta. She too was surprised by Buster's physical appearance.

"This is my friend, Greta," I said.

"Pleased to meet you," Buster said. He looked at her and smiled.

Greta nodded demurely.

"Are those the books?" Buster pointed at the bundle under James' arms.

"Yes," Greta said. She took a book from James and handed it to Buster. He opened it and flipped through the pages.

"This is fantastic!" he said. The words took him to a different world and we followed him into it. We arrived at his library, a spacious room larger than many bookstores. All of the walls were covered with dark wood bookcases filled with real books. A fire blazed in a Victorian fireplace surrounded by two sumptuous leather wing back chairs. A large antique wood table occupied the center of the library. All in all, the room was stunning enough to be the subject of a feature article in an architectural magazine. James put the remaining volumes of Shakespeare on the table and quietly left the room.

"Please, sit down," Buster said to Greta.

She sat in one of the chairs by the fire; Buster sat in the other. I stood by the

table. Buster could not take his nose out of the Shakespeare. He sifted through the pages for several minutes before speaking again.

"Greta, this book is exquisite," he said. He pulled his chair closer to hers.

"Yes it is," she said. She successfully overcame the urge to pull away.

"Look at the condition of the pages," he held the book up for her to see. "They're almost in original condition."

"How can you tell?" she asked.

"Feel how smooth they are."

She ran her fingers over the page.

"Very little discoloration," Buster said. "Only a little around the edges."

Greta looked closer.

"Yes, I see," she said.

"You say these once belonged to Henry Clay Folger?" Buster asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"They're filled with his inscriptions," Greta said. "I was reading them before we arrived."

"Really?"

"Yes," Greta said. "Look." She took the book from Buster and turned through the pages until she found writing in the margins.

"Marvelous," Buster said.

"Read it," Greta suggested.

Buster read it and laughed.

"Incredible!" he said. "That's why I love annotated books. Not only are they more valued by collectors, but they also reveal things about their previous owners."

"That does make them more interesting." Greta caught herself smiling but she could not prevent it.

Have you ever noticed how lusciously mellow a Chateau Certan de May becomes as it breathes? No, you probably haven't. Trust me, it does. And that's exactly what was happening to Greta. Buster's infectious enthusiasm had uncorked her softer nature and she was doing a fine job of forgetting that he was the ogre who owned Cal Log.

"Winston may not have told you," he said. "But I only collect books that have been previously owned by famous financial tycoons. Few of the books I have are annotated. I don't think many of those old tycoons actually read anything but ticker tapes. That's why I find this collection so exciting."

"They are magnificent volumes," Greta agreed.

They browsed through the other books for quite some time and shared their opinions on the annotations.

"Mr. Churchill told me you enjoy fishing," Buster said after they had exhausted the topic of books.

"He did?" Greta turned and looked at me.

I smiled.

"Yes," Buster said. "I also enjoy fishing."

"You do?"

"Yes. I go whenever I can. I'm almost as fanatical about fishing as I am about books. Mr. Churchill may have told you about all of the fishing pictures I have hanging on my office walls." He kind of blushed.

"No, he didn't," Greta said. She turned and looked at me again.

"I find that fishing cleanses the mind, don't you?" Buster said.

"Yes, yes I do," Greta agreed.

"Where do you fish?" Buster asked.

"Streams and rivers," Greta answered. "I prefer them to ocean fishing."

"You do? That's wonderful! So do I."

"Really?" Greta asked.

"Yes!"

They exchanged fish stories for half-hour and acted like old chums. I wasn't too surprised, really.

"Where do you do your fishing?" Buster asked.

"In Mendocino County."

"That's terrific! I have business interests up there. Perhaps we could fish together sometime."

Greta suddenly tightened.

"Cal Log," she said grimly.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I know all about you and what you're doing. You're destroying the forests."

Buster reacted the way a horse reacts to a rattlesnake. His skin turned red.

"Don't believe what you read in the papers," he said. "I am not destroying the forests."

"Yes you are, and I'm going to stop you!" Greta rose and stared at her

adversary.

"What?" Poor Buster was stunned and confused. Greta's words socked him like a prizefighter's left jab.

"I tried to see you once, but your lawyers ran me off. Now I'm taking action."

"Who are you?" Buster asked.

"Greta Hutchins."

"Oh." Buster deflated.

"You're destroying Mendocino County to pay off your company's debt."

"Listen here, you people are no angels. Don't you know that those spikes you put into the trees hurt the loggers? I may hurt trees but I don't hurt people."

Greta blushed.

"You're mortgaging the future of Mendocino County," she countered. "You'll take the trees and run." She took a piece of paper from her pocket. "Look at this proxy statement," she shook the statement in front of his face. "It says Cal Log could consider selling additional timber lands in the future if it provides greater returns than holding and harvesting them, or if Cal Log is required to raise cash. All of that debt you've piled onto Cal Log makes it very likely that you'll have to raise cash to make the loan payments. Then there go the forests, there go the jobs, and there goes Mendocino County."

"Listen, I'm building a new power plant up there with my own money," Buster countered. "I wouldn't be doing that if I wasn't in it for the long haul."

"Until it's more economical to be in it for the short haul. And what about the way you acquired Cal Log?"

"I acquired it fair and square!"

"Ha! You and Sid Hamler conspired to avoid the anti-takeover provision."

"I did not!"

They fell silent and stared at each other.

"Ahem," I interrupted. "I believe this may be the appropriate time to inform you that James has discovered some information that may expedite your reconciliation."

Buster and Greta looked at me, then each other, then at James who had quietly re-entered the room.

"It's all yours, James."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Buster, did you ever wonder why your takeover of Cal Log went so smoothly?"

"I assumed it was because I had good investment bankers." He turned to

Greta, then to me, then back to James.

“It went so smoothly because an anti-takeover provision was cleverly circumvented.”

The glare returned to Greta’s eyes. Her initial distrust of Buster reappeared like wild weeds after a summer rain.

“How did that happen?” Buster asked.

“Yes, how did that happen,” Greta asked in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

“Your investment banker, Hamler Brothers, colluded with a certain Jenkins McCoy to secretly accumulate enough stock to control the company but fly under the radar of the anti-takeover provisions.”

“Who’s Jenkins McCoy?” Buster asked.

Greta was on the verge of igniting him with torrents of flaming anger.

“That was our question, too,” James continued.

Buster turned to Greta hoping to find a morsel of support. He found none.

“Well, what did you find?” Buster asked.

“I discovered that Jenkins McCoy does not exist.”

Greta nearly exploded. All of this was evidence enough to justify her original perception of Buster.

“What?”

“Jenkins McCoy is actually Jenny McCoy-Barrett.”

“Jenny McCoy-Barrett? That’s my admin!” Buster jumped.

“Yes, sir.”

Buster’s eyes widened until they became the size of his open mouth.

“She was using information stolen from your office to work some very lucrative deals with Sid Hamler,” I said.

“Very illegal lucrative deals,” James added.

“What? I can’t believe this.” Buster shook his head like a dog shaking off water.

“Winston, is this true?” Greta asked.

“All of it. We have indisputable proof.”

Buster sat down. The poor boy was a bit stunned.

“And Harold knew nothing of this?” Greta asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“I shall have to make amends,” Buster whispered.

Greta was genuinely moved. Tiny tears may have formed in the corners of her eyes or it may have simply been the light. Before I could determine which, Buster pulled himself together and sat upright.

"Look," Buster said to Greta. "Before the subject of Cal Log came up we were having a grand time talking about books and fishing. I felt as if I had known you for years. We really do have a lot in common. We may have some misunderstandings about Cal Log..."

"We most certainly do." Greta buttoned her lips and crossed her arms.

"But I think we can resolve those differences," Buster continued. "I have a better understanding of the situation now, don't you?"

Greta stared at him for a long time.

"Maybe I do," she finally said.

"See, understanding is the first step. I'm sure we can come to some agreements."

"I don't know," Greta said. "Perhaps we can." She uncrossed her arms.

"You were having fun, too, weren't you?" Buster asked.

"Yes, yes I was." She tried to hold back the words but they cascaded out of her mouth like water over Niagra Falls.

"There! Let's keep our minds open and work out our differences. After all, we're both fishermen."

"You have a point," Greta said. She spoke again after a long pause. "Maybe we can come to some agreement."

"Let's start by agreeing to dinner together."

Greta hesitated, but I knew her well enough to know she would agree.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt," she said.

"Good!" Buster smiled.

James entered the library.

"The Rolls is ready, sir," he announced.

"Thank you, James."

Greta turned to me.

"You knew this would happen, didn't you?" she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"You arranged the whole thing," she said. "You somehow knew Harold and I would hit it off."

"Haven't I been telling you that you two have a lot in common?" I said. "Now I

will gracefully withdraw and leave you to deal with Harold Buster. You no longer require my assistance."

"My dear, Winston." She came to me, looked me in the eyes, smiled, and kissed me on the lips. "You are a sly one."

I smiled and followed James to the Rolls.

"I trust that the trees have been saved, sir?" James asked.

"Yes. All's well that ends well. Home, James."

The End