

“FIRECRACKERS”

by Archie Goodwin

VII

At Police Headquarters, I was immediately hustled into an interview room where both Cramer and Stebbins hammered away at me as though I were the criminal rather than the Knight in Shining Armor. With growing skepticism, they kept asking the same questions in a hundred different ways:

“Who tipped you off, and why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who were the hi-jackers?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who owns the warehouse?”

“I don’t know – a guy named Jablonski manages it.”

Cramer turned to Stebbins and told him to get hold of Jablonski and find out if he knew anything. I could have told him that would be an exercise in futility. Then, he resumed with the questions.

“What’s stored in the warehouse?” (They hadn’t bothered to check.) “Precision Machine Parts.”

The only question they didn’t really care about was that last one. By this time, I’d come to realize that the NYPD had no inclination to help the Feds enforce the 18th Amendment.

Finally, I had to remind them, “Hey, I’m the good guy, remember? The guy that was doing the job he was hired for? The guy who took on a couple of hoods? I’m not looking for any medal but I don’t need this. How about knocking it off?”

By the time they gave up, I was thoroughly annoyed. That's when they turned me over to a Lieutenant Rowcliff, a nattily dressed individual who some people might even consider handsome. To me, that illusion was spoiled by his fishy pop eyes and a voice that came out in snarls. It was hate at first sight, on both our parts, and the years have only strengthened it. I soon discovered one weakness and was quick to exploit it.

He began with a little different tack which he'd never have taken if he had any idea how I reacted to threats. "Goodwin, is it?" he snarled. He waved my Colt .45 under my nose. "You got a license for this gun?"

I told him the gun had belonged to my father who left it to me when he died. "It served in the war and it's been in the family for two generations," I said, "I guess that's license enough."

He grinned and rubbed his hands together. "On the contrary," he said. "Under the Sullivan Law, I can put you in jail for twelve months. Keep that in mind while you give me some straight answers!"

The questions were the same I'd been hearing for the last couple of hours. So were the answers. That was when I noticed that Rowcliff had a tendency to stutter. I started to s-s-stammer m-m-my answers. In five minutes, I had him stuttering completely out of control. Kind of mean, maybe, but he gave me plenty of provocation.

It's anybody's guess what might have happened if it weren't for the entrance of still another law official. He was well-dressed, well-groomed and well-spoken. Still, inwardly, I groaned, "Here we go again."

He dismissed Rowcliff, introduced himself as District Attorney Dick Morley, and offered me a cigarette which I accepted. What next, I wondered, the blind-fold and the firing squad? Fortunately, he had other ideas. He explained that he had talked with Cramer and Stebbins, whom he described as thoroughly competent detectives. Nevertheless, he wanted to hear my story first-hand. I gave him the laundered version. When I finished, he surprised me by saying he had no reason to doubt my account of what happened. He added, "I have an idea there are a few details you've chosen to leave out. You evidently have your own reasons and I doubt that these omissions are pertinent."

Then, he continued, "That was a profoundly stupid thing you did, taking on two armed gunmen all by yourself. It's a miracle you weren't killed." He paused. "On the other hand, I wish more of our citizens would act with that same courage and resourcefulness. Goodwin, I'd like to shake your hand." We shook. He asked me to drop in at his office on Leonard Street on Monday to dictate a complete report to a stenographer. He said they'd have to keep my gun as material evidence but that it would be returned when I got a license for it. He offered to get me a ride home but I decided I needed a walk in the brisk December air to clear out the cobwebs. It was 6:05 am when I walked out of the station. I'd evidently been tried and convicted of being a concerned citizen, and released on good behavior. Finally, my day was over. Or so I thought.

VIII

It was still dark when I walked out of the police station. 20th Street was deserted except for a lone figure who seemed to be waiting for someone. He was. For me. He stepped up and introduced himself as Harry Foster, a reporter for **The Gazette**, working the police beat. He'd heard about the shooting on Pier 64. The homicide dicks had refused to give him any details. He wanted to ask me some questions.

As a high school football player back in Ohio, I'd learned that it could be beneficial to cooperate with the news media. Do them a favor and later you could call in your marker. And who knew when I might need a favor? "Harry," I said, "I've just finished answering the same questions 196 times by actual count. Maybe one more time and I can get it right. But at this moment, my nether region, which is usually pretty complacent, is sending up complaints about being empty. See that restaurant across the street?" I asked, pointing. "It's probably a cop hangout but I'm going over there and order enough ham and eggs to keep two pigs and a flock of hens busy and enough milk to drain a herd of cows. If you want to join me, come ahead."

He was an eager young man and proceeded to ask the right questions. It was a relief not to be treated like a murderous psychopath. I gave him the same story I'd given the cops. He got a real kick out of the dummy, said it made a swell story, and showed his gratitude by actually picking up the check.

With my stomach now mildly complaining about being too full instead of too empty, I felt fortified enough to walk briskly back to my rooming house. I needed a good eight hours sleep. I didn't get it. Before I could turn into the house, I felt a gun jammed none too gently into my back. Two gorillas escorted, if that's the right word, me into a long, black limousine. They frisked me expertly. One drove. The other kept me covered, warned me to keep quiet, and added that The Angel wanted to see me. Fortunately, he was not referring to St. Peter! Just about everyone had heard about The Angel, and I was no exception. I reached into the filing chamber of my mind and came up with a name, Giuseppe DeAngelo. He controlled the bootleg racket in Manhattan. His friends called him "The Angel". He had a reputation for being ruthless to his enemies, unbelievably generous to his friends. I wondered in which category I belonged.

It didn't take long to find out. The limo pulled into a reserved parking space right in front of the Plaza Hotel. With Tweedledee and Tweedledum on either side of me, half carrying me across the elegant lobby, we took the elevator to the top floor and into what was probably the most luxurious suite in the hotel.

The Angel was seated at a table by himself, working on a steak and egg breakfast. I expected to see Neanderthal Man disguised in a pinstripe suit, black shirt and white tie, smoking a cigar and talking out of the corner of his mouth. Instead, the most notorious gangster in New York could have posed for the Chairman of the Board of General Motors. Probably in his late fifties, he was impeccably groomed, with jet black hair slightly grayed at the temples. He was tastefully dressed in a maroon smoking jacket, light blue shirt, open at the neck, Ascot tie, and grey slacks.

One of the gorillas told him I was "clean". He indicated a chair, dismissed the two goons and politely asked if I'd had breakfast. This seemed like such a good

sign that I almost ordered a second breakfast but compromised on a cup of coffee. He carefully poured and handed me a steaming cup. I was beginning to feel like Alice at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.

"I understand," he began in a low, cultured voice, "that you killed two men who were trying to hi-jack my warehouse."

"Your warehouse?" I asked. "I never did know who owned it."

"My name doesn't appear on the deed," he explained, "but in order to control all the liquor in Manhattan, I own warehouses all over the city. Now, I want to know exactly what happened at Pier 64."

"You, the cops and the great unwashed public," I exclaimed. Then, I recounted exactly what had happened from the beginning. I explained that I hadn't mentioned Jablonski to the cops because I had a score to settle with him myself.

"Don't worry about Jablonski," he said. "I've known for some time that he was skimming off a case or two every now and then, just enough so he figured it wouldn't be noticed. I noticed, all right, but I could overlook minor transgressions. Evidently, he got greedy. I won't overlook that."

"Goodwin," he continued, "you did a damn' fine job, trying to keep that warehouse from being sacked. I doubt if the cops will bother to inform the Feds about the warehouse contents. Even if they were notified, I pay them enough to look the other way. Still, you may well have saved me several hundred cases. And I like the way you did it. I could use a man like you. How about coming to work for me?"

"Thanks, but no thanks," I replied. "I appreciate the offer but somehow I seem to have a keen desire to live out my allotted three score and ten. Meaning no offense, the life expectancy in your business seems considerably less than that."

For the first time, he smiled and I swear he was putting me on when he added, "OK, Goodwin. But I could let you have Jablonski's job."

"No thanks," I responded. "I'm not cut out for warehouse work." Then I added, "Not enough excitement."

This time he laughed out loud. "By the way," he asked, "did you ever get paid for your week's work?"

"Come to think of it," I answered. "I never did."

He opened his wallet, extracted a bill, folded it and tucked it in my pocket. "That ought to cover it," he said. Then, he added in a completely serious tone, "But I still owe you." He tore off a sheet from a notebook, jotted down a telephone number, and handed it to me. "I move around a lot," he said, "but you can always reach me through this number."

I examined it carefully, then tore it into small pieces. His eyes narrowed and his voice was ice cold when he asked, "You don't need a friend?"

I assured him that after all I'd been through, nobody needed a friend more than I. "However, I explained, "I seem to have a magnetic attraction for various officials of the law. I wouldn't want this number to fall into their hands. And I don't think you would, either." I tapped my forehead. "That number is locked in here - permanently. I may never need to use it but if I do, I can call it out next week, next year or any time in the future. You really don't owe me, anyway, but I sincerely appreciate your offer."

He rose from the table, shook hands and yelled for his two goons. "This man is OK," he told them. "Treat him right. Now take him home or anywhere he wants to go."

Home was fine. When I walked in the door, there was one more obstacle to overcome in the form of the wicked witch, otherwise known as my landlady, who stood with folded arms blocking my way to the stairs. Before she could utter a word, I said, "I know, I know, I owe you for two pillows. And, for the inconvenience, I'll double whatever they're worth."

I reached in my pocket and pulled out the bill The Angel had given me. My eyes bulged. Ben Franklin was staring at me. It was a C-Note – a cool hundred simoleons! I'd never seen one before. Pretty good for a week's work. I hastily put it back, took out my wallet and paid her, suggesting that she could buy two pillows and still have enough left over for a broomstick. With that, on this memorable Sunday morning, I went up, flopped in my bed, and slept until late Monday morning. I didn't miss the pillows at all.

IX

It was early afternoon when I arrived at the District Attorney's office. A shapely receptionist with pert, heart-shaped features set off by long blonde hair, counter to the current style but far more attractive to my eye, ushered me into an empty room. I was immediately joined by a steno whose tailored suit and no-nonsense attitude discouraged anything but the business at hand. She competently typed my report as quickly as I could dictate it, handed me the finished copy, had me sign it, and witnessed it herself.

As I started to leave, and was wondering how to get the receptionist's telephone number (I had recovered quickly from a broken heart!) she informed me that the DA wanted to see me. He was seated behind a large desk, covered with papers and forms. I waited while he glanced at my report, then added it to one of the piles.

"Goodwin," he said, "I thought you should know that Michael Jablonski has dropped out of sight. We wanted to question him. Any idea of where he might be?"

My guess would have been at the bottom of the Hudson River, weighted down with cement blocks. But I didn't say so. "All I had was a telephone number," I replied. "I never even knew his address."

"He lived in a run-down rooming house in the Bronx," explained the DA, "but he's flown the coop. It probably isn't important anyway. We'll pick him up sooner or later."

Maybe his body, I thought. As far as I was concerned, it was justice well-deserved. After all, Jablonski had forced my girl out of New York and done his best to kill me. Of course, I didn't express these thoughts.

The DA then looked at me carefully as though appraising me for the first time. He said he assumed I was looking for another job. I assured him I was. He explained that an acquaintance of his, who had recently started in business as a private detective, was looking for someone to carry out a special chore. "It might be just a one-time job," he explained, "but who knows? It could possibly lead to something more permanent."

He picked up the phone, gave the operator a number, and spoke into the mouthpiece, "Good afternoon. Dick Morley here. I have a young man with me, Archie Goodwin, who I thought displayed unusual resourcefulness in preventing a hi-jacking the other night. You may have read about it. If you're still looking for a man of action, he might just be the man." He listened for a moment, hung up, made a notation on a slip of paper, and handed it to me. "He'll see you at 8:30 this evening." He rose from his desk as if ending the interview, then, almost as an afterthought, added, "He's a little, er, eccentric. Don't let that deceive you. He is unquestionably the most brilliant man I've ever met."

I thanked him. On the way out, I stopped at the receptionist's desk and said "I seem to have misplaced your telephone number." She smiled sweetly and replied, "What a coincidence. So have I." She turned and went back to her work. Oh well, you can't win 'em all. As I went out, I looked at the slip of paper the DA had given me. It simply read: "NERO WOLFE, 918 WEST 35TH STREET."

X

On the way back to the rooming house, I picked up the early afternoon edition of **The Gazette**. The hi-jacking didn't rate a front page article but in the first section Foster had done a creditable job of reporting. The use of the dummy was featured prominently.

After an uneventful dinner, I dressed carefully in my best blue suit, blue shirt, clean collar and striped tie, put a shine on my shoes, and brushed off my overcoat and felt hat. I then walked to 918 West 35th Street between 10th and 11th Avenues. No. 918 was a four-story brownhouse with similar buildings adjacent to either side. Incidentally, if you're ever looking for No. 918 you'll find it approximately in the middle of the Hudson River. For reasons which I'm sure are obvious, the exact location of Nero Wolfe's office must forever remain in the realm of "firecrackers".

It was exactly 8:25 when I mounted the steps of the old brownstone, rang the bell, and was admitted by a pleasant-appearing man of middle age who asked my name and introduced himself as Fritz Brenner. He was casually but neatly dressed in slacks and a sport jacket, the only incongruous article being a pair of worn slippers. He asked for my coat and hat. I assured him I was perfectly capable of hanging them up myself, and did so. Somehow, I've always found it slightly demeaning to be waited on. He led me into a large room, said that Mr. Wolfe would be with me shortly, and left. I'd never been in a room anything like this one. Spacious and high-ceilinged, the walls lined with shelves, it appeared to be a combination office and living room. The floor was covered with the largest, most colorful oriental rug I'd ever seen. A bright yellow couch adorned one end of the room. At least a half-dozen yellow chairs were scattered throughout. Yellow drapes were drawn over the windows. To my right was a globe that wasn't much smaller than the world it represented. It must have measured at least three feet in diameter. A huge, old-fashioned safe was in one corner. The shelves held more books than the entire Chillicothe Public Library.

By far, the most dominant feature was an enormous desk in the far corner. Its reddish-dark wood literally glowed in the lamplight. Behind the desk was a beautiful leather-covered chair that must have been custom-built for a giant. On the

desk was a vase containing a spray of exotic tropical flowers of a kind that never grew in my mother's garden. The Sunday edition of **The New York Times** was open at a half-finished crossword puzzle, a fad which had recently become fashionable, presumably among intellectuals. The only other item on the desk was a book with a foreign title I couldn't begin to pronounce, "Mein Kampf", by somebody named Adolph Hitler. In about the middle of the book was a dog-eared page, evidently marking the reader's progress. On the wall behind the desk was a non-descript picture of the Washington Monument, seemingly completely out of character as part of this tasteful, luxurious decor. Beside a small table in front of the desk was another yellow chair in which I was seated. It's actually taken me a lot longer to describe these unique surroundings than to experience the deep impression they made. I felt comfortable in this room. Somehow, it seemed that I belonged here, and I was fully relaxed when the giant entered.

As impressive as the room was, the mere presence of this man dwarfed everything else. If Paul Whiteman was known as The Prince of Whales, this man must be at least The King of Elephants. Yet, for all his bulk, his movements were smooth, efficient, even graceful as he walked into the room and lowered his corpulence into his chair. Even seated, he was a most dominating figure, a massive, well-proportioned body, big oblong face which could justifiably be called handsome, gleaming white teeth and dark brown hair neatly trimmed and brushed. He was conservatively dressed in a brown suit with vest. Why wasn't I surprised that his immaculate shirt was bright yellow?

I rose to greet him as he acknowledged my presence with a nod that must have moved his head a whole eighth of an inch. In a low, cultured voice, he said, "Please be seated. I like eyes at a level."

When I complied, he continued, "You are Archibald Goodwin?"

"No, Sir," I replied, "It's Archie. That's the way I was christened and that's the way it is."

"Good," he responded, "I appreciate exactitude. Tell me, Archie, how many steps lead to my front stoop?"

Of all the questions I might have been asked, this one would never have entered my fertile imagination. Yet, I didn't have to hesitate for a moment. "Seven", I replied firmly.

The folds of his cheeks pulled away slightly from the corners of his mouth. I took this to be a smile. "Excellent," he said, "I could ask that same question of a hundred first-time visitors without getting the correct answer. Nevertheless, I expected it from you. Having read **The Gazette's** account of your experience at Pier 64, and your ingenious deception with the dummy, it didn't take a genius to infer that you are a devotee of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. You evidently read books."

"Yes, Sir. When I was a young boy, the Sherlock Holmes stories were my favorites. I was somehow impressed with Holmes' chiding Watson for not knowing the number of steps leading from the downstairs hall to their rooms on the floor above. You undoubtedly recall that Holmes told Watson, 'You see, but you do not observe.' Ever since then, I've trained myself to observe most carefully, even in seemingly trivial matters such as the number of stairs."

"I am delighted to see that you not only read, you also learn," he said, "And I applaud your choice. I have a boundless admiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,

or for Dr. John H. Watson if you prefer. What other books do you read?"

"Certainly not the kind you do, Sir," I said, "if that book on your desk is any example."

His face darkened and his mouth grew grim. "It is indeed a pity," he growled, "that few people will ever read 'Mein Kampf', fewer will understand it, and even fewer will take it seriously. It is nothing less than a blueprint for the next World War, written by a madman. I know the Germans. I have fought them and killed many. But if we continue with this subject, it will only infuriate me, And I am furious enough already, being shamefully deprived of a decent glass of beer, incidentally the only worthwhile product ever imported from Germany. I have carefully sampled every available substitute, even including Pabst Dopples Beer, near beer. Pfui! I have also tried bootleg beer, so watered down that you might just as well take a bath in it. Prohibition! Bah! The very word is un-American!"

Well, the DA said he was eccentric.

He took in about a bushel of air and exhaled slowly. "I have read the brief newspaper article about the hijacking attempt. Now, in your own words, I want a complete report."

"Yes, Sir. You want every detail?"

"If your memory is up to it."

"There's nothing wrong with my memory, Sir." Then I proceeded to prove it by giving him every detail, including verbatim conversations from the warning I received from Dolores right through my meeting with the District Attorney. I omitted nothing except my session with The Angel. This did not seem pertinent. As I talked, he sat back in his chair, fingers interlaced over his ample middle, eyes half-closed. For a moment, I thought I was putting him to sleep but some sixth-sense told me he wasn't missing a single word. When I finished, he opened his eyes and asked: "Was it necessary to kill those two gunmen?"

"Necessary?" I asked. "Certainly not. I had two definite options. Either kill them or stand there and be killed. Somehow, although I am far from bloodthirsty, I preferred the former option."

"Understandable," he agreed. "Still, I am a little puzzled that, having been duly warned, you nevertheless chose to return to the warehouse and face a possibly fatal danger."

"Mr. Wolfe," I asked, "has anyone ever tried to make a fool of you?"

"Frequently."

"And you let them get away with it?"

A corner of his mouth twitched. I later came to realize this was about as close as he ever came to a smile.

"Archie," he conceded, "you have made your point." Then he continued, "District Attorney Morley, whose opinion I respect, assured me that you were resourceful and not without valor. From meeting you, I also conclude that you are inquisitive, observant, alert and impetuous. In short, you are a man of adequate intelligence and action. With a little restraint on impetuosity, I find these to be admirable qualities. Now, I shall outline my problem in the event that you are willing to perform a task which may require all of these qualities and may possibly be of some danger."

"I shall try." I replied.

"What did you say?" he cried.

"I said I shall try!" I replied.

"Great Hounds and Cerberus!" he exclaimed. "A man of quality who also occasionally uses the English language with precision!"

With that, he proceeded to outline the task he wanted performed.

XI

Wolfe began his explanation. "There is a restaurant called Rusterman's . . . "

"One of the best," I interrupted. "Their Tournedos Beauharnais are superb. I still have trouble pronouncing it but had no difficulty at all consuming a king-sized portion."

"Archie, you amaze me," he replied. But he seemed more amused than amazed. "Their restaurant serves the finest meals in New York, with one exception, those prepared and served here by Fritz Brenner who admitted you this evening. The restaurant is owned by Herman Rusterman, a fine gentleman of the old school. Now in his eighties, his body is still active, his mind still sharp. He puts in a full day every day at the restaurant, supervising the menu and chatting with long-time customers. He leaves the actual management of the restaurant to a man named Marko Vukcic, whom I have known since we were boys together in Montenegro and whom I value as my oldest and dearest friend. A monthly dinner at Rusterman's is among the few occasions when I venture forth from this house.

"On my last visit, a few days ago, it was evident that Marko was deeply troubled. Yet, being a man of fierce independence, he refused to confide in me. I am worried about him. In the field of haute cuisine, Marko has no peers. Unfortunately, in other areas, he is inclined to be headstrong, gullible, over-sanguine, volatile and naive. It would be no surprise if he were experiencing problems with some woman. But with him, this is constant. It would not upset him to the extent of his present agitation. I believe the problem concerns the restaurant in some way. To investigate and attempt to determine the exact nature of the problem requires a continuing surveillance of the operation at Rusterman's.

"You are indeed observant enough to realize that my anatomical structure militates against the degree of mobility necessary for my continuing presence at Rusterman's. That is why I need a man of intelligence with a potential for action, someone in whom I have complete confidence. On occasion, I employ experienced independent operatives when I require outside assistance. But they are all known to Marko. And I don't want him to have any indication that I am spying on him. "Archie, do you have any talent for dissembling?"

"You mean acting? Playing a part? Well, Hollywood never came knocking at my door as a result of my performance in a few Shakespearean plays in our High School Dramatic Society. But I don't think my acting had old Will spinning in his grave. Come to think of it though, he might have been shaking with laughter. Anyway, I do go along with his premise that 'all the world's a stage' and I do not wear my heart on my sleeve."

"You will not need the thespian talent required at Stratford-on-Avon. Do you own a tuxedo?"

"A monkey suit? No, and I'm afraid I left my Rolls Royce at home." He ignored this.

"Rent one. A good one." I assumed he meant a tuxedo, not a Rolls. "Then re-

port to Rusterman's tomorrow at noon. In the meantime, I shall inform Marko that you have been recommended to me by a friend as someone who is planning to open a high-class restaurant in, say, Chillicothe. I shall explain that you would benefit greatly from observing the operation at Rusterman's, in all phases, with special emphasis on the business end. That will give you access to the offices above the restaurant where Marko spends most of his time. You will put in long hours, from the time the restaurant opens at noon until it closes long after serving late-night meals to the Broadway theatre-going crowd. You can pretend to be helping the Maitre D'. Keep an eye on the patrons. Wander in and out of the kitchen. Spend time in the business offices. You will see. You will observe. You will report. And, while I have no logical reason to fear for Marko's safety except for a certain instinct I have learned to trust, you will look out for Marko as best you can without his realizing it. Can you do all that?"

"If I can navigate through the maze of your multisyllabic vocabulary, I infer that you want me to be a combination actor, diplomat, detective and bodyguard. Yes, I can do that."

"Congratulations, Archie. The number of people who use the word 'infer' correctly can be numbered among those who observe such details as the number of stairs. If your dramatic teacher is as competent as your English teacher, you will have no difficulty in performing the task which is basically as I implied and you inferred."

He reached into his desk drawer and brought forth a .38 automatic. "I doubt very much that you will need this," he said, "Nevertheless, I assure you it is in good working order. I shall make arrangements with Marko for you to be at the restaurant tomorrow noon. I am not sure how long your surveillance will be necessary. Your pay will be commensurate with the job. Report to me by phone at 11 o'clock each morning. Of course, if there is any emergency, report at once."

He rose and offered his hand. At the time, I had no realization of the full significance of that magnanimous gesture. I shook his hand warmly, rescued my hat and coat, and left.

XII

All dolled up in my rented monkey suit, white shirt, black tie and spats, I could have been ready for the Junior Prom! But I sure didn't have a ball as I danced through the tragic events of my first day as a restaurateur.

Before that first day was through, I felt like the schoolboy who told his teacher he learned more about whales from reading *Moby Dick* than he cared to know. My lessons in the food business convinced me that all I ever wanted from a restaurant was a good table, competent service and a gourmet menu. At that, I was given the specialty of the house not only in dining but also in education into the mysteries of haute cuisine. You don't need the details but, in view of what took place later, you ought to be familiar with the stage and the cast of characters.

Rusterman's was a relatively small restaurant, located on East 54th Street, occupying the first two floors of an attractive brownhouse. You enter past a small cloak room into a large, comfortable lounge with a gleaming mahogany bar at one end. The shelves behind the bar were empty because Rusterman's was one of

the few eating establishments in New York that did not serve bootleg booze. I was given to understand that both Mr. Rusterman and Mr. Vukcic, as proud naturalized American citizens, felt a genuine debt to their adopted country, including responsibility for strict obedience to the laws of the land, even those like Prohibition, which they felt made no sense.

The lounge led into the main dining room, elegant, spacious, luxurious in decor. The kitchen was off to one side. The floor above included private offices in front for Rusterman and Vukcic, a business office for general bookkeeping and accounting, and three small private dining rooms in the rear. Vukcic occupied the apartment above the restaurant.

So much for the stage. The main cast of characters included Herman Rusterman, tall and lean, whose white hair and unlined features belied his eighty-plus years. He was every inch a gracious gentleman, with the courtesy and cordiality of old-world charm. In contrast, Marko Vukcic was huge, not fat. His swarthy features were framed by a dense tangle of dark hair, reminiscent of a lion's mane. Impressive and competent, he was one of the world's greatest chefs.

The rest of the staff, whom I met that day, included Felix Martin, Maitre D', Pierre Ducos, head waiter, Vincent, the burly doorman, Joe, Leo and Antonio, waiters, and Suzanne, fair and buxom bookkeeper.

It was almost 2 AM before things had quieted down enough for me to consider packing it in. A couple of waiters were still cleaning up downstairs. I was in the office with Vukcic when he said, "Archie, aside from the obvious talent of the chef and the service of a competent staff, the key to any restaurant's success is in the quality of food it serves. I take pride that we, at Rusterman's, pay closer attention to this principle than any restaurant in New York. For example, in the next hour or so, the few hardy deep-sea fishermen who still brave the seas in winter will begin bringing in their catch to the Fish Pier. Many's the cold night I've spent waiting for them to come in so I could select the best and freshest fish. Now, I leave that important chore to Felix. He'll be leaving soon. This is a part of your education you must experience personally. So here's your chance to accompany Felix this morning."

His manner was disarmingly pleasant. Suspiciously so. Could this be his sadistic idea of getting back at Wolfe for saddling him with me as a neophyte? Standing at the Fish Pier at 3 AM on a cold, wintry night in December was the last experience I wanted. So, naturally, I reached into the depths of my dramatic talent (was Hamlet ever thus harassed?), smiled sweetly and lied, "I'd like nothing better."

As I passed Mr. Rusterman's office on my way to the back stairs, I could see he was still working. Vukcic, evidently headed for his upstairs apartment, whispered to me that Rusterman liked to review the day's activities and make notes of any suggestions for the next day before leaving for home.

The rear entrance led into an alley where Felix was loading the back of a truck with two huge copper tubs filled with cracked ice. I helped him and explained that Mr. Vukcic wanted me to go with him. He seemed glad of the company. On the way, I used whatever tact I had left over at this hour of the morning to pump him about whatever might be troubling Vukcic. He told me it all started a couple of days ago when he heard the sounds of a loud argument coming from Mr. Rusterman's office. He said that Rusterman and Vukcic were behind closed

doors with a third man, evidently a stranger, whom he did not see come in. Ever since then, he said, Mr. Vukcic had seemed very much on edge.

After selecting and packing our catch of the day, I could sympathize more with the schoolboy and the whales. Felix offered to drop me off at my room on the way back. I could see that he hoped I'd stay with him to help him unload. Inasmuch as the whole night was shot anyway, I figured I might as well buy a little good will.

When we drove up to the restaurant, I was appalled to see flashing lights and a couple of police cars parked in front. Even at that late hour, a small crowd had materialized. They always seem to emerge full-blown at a crime scene. And I was afraid to think what this crime scene might be.

We parked the truck in back of the police cars. A uniformed cop tried to stop us from entering but let us in when we convinced him we were employees. The lights were on both downstairs and upstairs. We rushed up to Mr. Rusterman's office where we were stopped by a burly plain clothes detective. I recognized Sergeant Purley Stebbins but before I could speak, he snarled, "Hold it! I know you. You're Goodwin! What in hell are you doing here?"

I looked past him into the office. The stark scene is etched into my mind, as clear today as it was then. The body of Herman Rusterman was lying in front of his desk, crumpled in the unmistakable posture of death. A small trickle of blood had stained the carpet beside him. Vukcic was seated, his body slumped, head bowed, hands shackled. Sergeant Cramer was standing beside him. Antonio, the waiter, stood aloof in the corner.

"I work here," I replied to Stebbins, the simplest explanation being the best explanation. "What happened?"

Cramer motioned for me and Felix to enter. In answer to his question, we explained how we had just returned from the Fish Pier. Again, I asked, "What happened?"

Vukcic looked up. "Mr. Goodwin! Archie! You will tell Nero?" Cramer growled, "Who's Nero?"

"A friend of Mr. Vukcic," I replied. For the third time, I asked, "What happened?"

It was Vukcic who replied. Intuitively, I felt it might be best if he kept quiet but I had to know the facts. Cramer was content to let him talk. The slight accent I'd noticed before became more pronounced. "Those Cossacks!" he cried. "They do not believe me. I tell them the truth. When you and Felix leave, I remember I have not made out tomorrow's menu. I come back from upstairs and go to my office. In a few minutes, I hear a shot from Mr. Rusterman's office. I rush in and grapple with the hoodlum who shot him. But that slippery devil breaks loose. I pick up his gun, which he drops in the struggle, and chase him down the back stairs into the alley toward the street. I do not dare shoot for fear I would hit some innocent passer-by. I fire in the air to scare him but he gets away. When I come back, Mr. Rusterman is dead." His voice broke but he continued. "That's when that fool, Antonio, comes in. I tell him to call the police. Then we wait. I do not know he is a Brutus! When the police come, Antonio, that liar, tells them he sees me shoot Mr. Rusterman." He paused and looked up at me, tears streaming from his eyes. "You will tell Nero? He will help!"

"Did you recognize the one who did shoot him?" I asked.

"Recognize him? Of course! You think I forget that slimy bastard? I tell these policemen. He was bootlegger who come last week and want to sell booze for the restaurant. I tell him no, no, no! He say he not only sell booze, he sell protection. I say we need no protection. He say I may change my mind and he will come back. I throw him out! You see what he did. You tell Nero?"

Here Cramer interrupted. "This Nero better be good. First, Vukcic here tells a cock 'n' bull story about the little man who wasn't here. No one saw him. And he gives us a description that would fit most of the male population of New York. Then, we find the murder weapon. It will undoubtedly have Vukcic's prints all over it. A paraffin test will show he fired the gun. But he invents another story about shooting in the air. Balls! Finally, we have an eye witness who saw him shoot Rusterman. And, Antonio tells us it's common knowledge that Vukcic inherits the restaurant on Rusterman's death. It's an open and shut case. Motive, opportunity, murder! That's more than enough to book Mr. Vukcic and send him to the hot seat. Tell his friend Nero that!"

I said I would and left. Felix came downstairs with me. "That liar, Antonio", he said, "he's no good. I should have fired him long ago!"

That seemed to call for further questioning. I made a mental note to follow up. Right then, I was anxious to get my thoughts together before reporting to Wolfe. When I walked out the door, the dawn of a gray December day was just beginning to break.

XIII

The small crowd outside had begun to break up. Only a few stragglers remained. As I walked past them, a voice called out, "Hey, Goodwin! You shoot somebody else?"

The speaker stepped forth. It was Harry Foster of **The Gazette**. "This is getting to be a habit," he said, "finding you at the scene of the crime. Can you fill me in on what happened?"

"You better put me on the payroll," I replied. "Better yet, I'll tell you what happened in exchange for a little information. Deal?"

"If I can," he answered. "Let's do it over breakfast."

An all-night diner was open about a block down Madison Avenue. While I dug into sausage and pancakes, I pondered just how much to tell Foster. I decided to make no mention of Wolfe, and to stick with my story of getting a job with Rusterman's. Otherwise, I gave him the bare facts as I knew them. Then I added, "I've only known Mr. Vukcic for a short time but I'm a pretty darn good judge of character. Also, he was decent enough to give me a job when I most needed it. So I feel I owe him. There's no way he could have killed Mr. Rusterman. I'm convinced of his innocence."

"Now, you know and I know the bootleg business in this area is controlled by The Angel. But this doesn't sound like his type of operation. First of all, Rusterman's is too small for him to bother with. In addition, he's too smart to call attention to himself by having a prominent restaurant owner killed. So what's the answer? Someone's trying to muscle in on his racket. I want to know who. You cover the police beat. You must have some idea of who's trying to break in."

He thought for a minute. "Archie," he said, "there's been some activity of this kind among a few of the smaller establishments around here. But I honestly don't know who's behind it. It didn't seem important, at least not until this killing." He paused, then added, "There's one guy on our paper who knows more about what's going on in this city than the cops, the feds and the pols all put together. His name is Lon Cohen. He's an awful busy guy but I'll try and get you an appointment to see him. Where can I reach you?"

I thanked him and told him I'd call him at **The Gazette** later in the morning. Then, I figured it was time to get in touch with Mr. Wolfe. I wasn't looking forward to it. My watch said 8:15 when I stepped into a phone booth, parted with a nickel in the slot, and gave the operator Wolfe's number. Fritz Brenner answered. He told me emphatically that Mr. Wolfe was having breakfast and couldn't be disturbed. I finally convinced him that this was an emergency and he reluctantly put me through. Wolfe answered with one word, "Yes?" It sounded like a bear growling. I quickly outlined what had happened. His response was even more like a bear, "Grrrrhhh!" Then, finally, one more word, "Come."

I beat a little old lady to a cab and headed for West 35th Street. Fritz admitted me and led me immediately into the office. The bear was there waiting. Knowing his deep affection for Mr. Vukcic. I was apprehensive about what kind of reception I'd get. His first words both surprised and encouraged me. "Archie, have you had breakfast?" When I assured him I'd eaten, he simply uttered one word, "Report."

He leaned back, eyes closed to mere slits, as I'd seen him once before. The index finger of his right hand was slowly making circles on the arm of his chair, the only indication that he was awake. I reported my activities, including word-for-word conversations from the time I'd entered Rusterman's right through my conversation with Foster. Although my report lasted over an hour, he listened patiently without interruption. When I finished, I awaited his reaction with some trepidation. He took a deep breath, relieving the office of about a bushel of air, exhaled slowly and finally spoke.

"Archie, I can find no fault with your performance. Also, I express my gratitude for your obvious belief in Marko's innocence and in your desire to help. We must begin by accepting the accuracy of his account." My relief at his use of that plural pronoun knew no bounds! Then, he continued. "With the damning evidence against him, the only way to exonerate him is to identify the actual culprit and provide evidence of his guilt. Confound it! The police, with all their facilities, could locate him much more easily than we can. But it is so much simpler for them to make a quick arrest and consider the case closed. We can assume they will make no effort in that direction. Bah!

"My first step will be to engage Henry Barber, the best legal counsel available, for Marko's defense. We must get a better description of the assailant. And perhaps Mr. Barber can persuade the police to begin a search for the real murderer although that is a faint hope.

"I commend your action in seeking information from the news media. Follow up on that as soon as possible and report back to me. For the time being, you can use that empty desk and the phone. We should have no problem in proving that Antonio is lying. I shall have to see him. But that can wait."

I immediately went to the desk and phoned Harry Foster. He said that Lon Cohen had agreed to see me late that afternoon, after the paper had been put to bed. When I relayed this information to Wolfe, he suggested that I get some sleep while I could. "There is a guest room on the floor above," he said. "You might as well use it." He rang for Fritz and told him to make sure the room was in readiness. Then, he turned to me and added, "Archie, after being up all night, I realize you must be exhausted. However, it will be worth your while to take a few minutes to relax first. Come."

We walked into the hall and stepped into a small elevator that was never intended for two, especially when Wolfe was one of the two. I managed to squeeze in and we rose slowly to the floor above. It would be a gross understatement to say I was unprepared for the panorama of color and shapes which surrounded me as we entered the plant rooms. The initial impact was that I had stepped into a tropical forest. I recalled an article I'd read about long ago, entitled, "The Book of Life", a title Dr. Watson thought was over-ambitious, in which Sherlock Holmes claimed, "From a single drop of water, a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without ever having seen or heard of one or the other." Maybe. But if you've seen one orchid, or even a raceme of blossoms, it would be impossible to visualize the effect of hundreds of these exotic plants in full bloom. We moved slowly from the tropical room through a second room where the temperature was moderate into a cool room, each with hundreds of blossoms. I was not conscious of individual shapes or colors, only of a beauty I had never before experienced. And, as often as I have visited those plant rooms (which were soon moved to the rooftop gardens above) they never fail to create an emotion that's as indescribable as their beauty.

Wolfe introduced me to Theodore Horstmann, a dour individual who cared for the plants, even to the extent of sleeping in a small room in the corner of the plant rooms. Fritz, whose room was opposite the plant rooms (before he took over the basement) approached and said my room was ready. Wolfe instructed him to wake me at 4 o'clock.

Wolfe later told me that you don't look at color, you feel it. All I know is that I was thoroughly relaxed and at peace with the world. I walked to the floor below, undressed quickly, and never got to sleep faster or slept more soundly.

[ED. - This is a great tale and I'm really happy that Archie finally chose to tell it. You've just got to get the next issue of **The Gazette** to find the fascinating conclusion of the tale. It's very exciting.]

