

2011 GAZETTE WRITING CONTEST WINNER

The Hunt for The Missing Mrs. Panzer

by Mary Shen Barnidge

In any but an all-male household, the question would have been addressed immediately and investigated until a solution was found, instead of remaining a mystery for more than a half-century. What happened to the woman identified as Saul's wife in 1948 (“staked to the ground and happy” was Archie's appraisal, or words to that effect), but who disappeared without trace or memory soon after, leaving Saul to be described — not as a widower or divorcé, but as a “bachelor” for the rest of the Corpus? How can a man be both a husband and a bachelor?

Easy — if he was never married to begin with.

The story begins long before Archie joined the band of regulars employed by Nero Wolfe, with a job that Saul accepted for a wealthy businessman concerned over his son, enrolled at Columbia University, but embroiled in some after-dark activities in Greenwich Village. Tracking the youth to lower Manhattan was no problem for Saul, nor was it difficult to locate the third-story loft where the object of his surveillance had taken refuge. But when Saul knocked at the door, it opened to confront him with the biggest, brightest, most beautiful brown eyes he had ever seen, peering at him from underneath — no, make that through — a roguish cloud of black curls.

Saul remembered his errand just long enough to look past this apparition into the room and catch sight of his quarry kneeling on a bare floor, with a hammer in one hand, absorbed in nailing a piece of canvas to a wooden frame. Saul mumbled something about having the wrong address and retreated, only then seeing the poster next to the entrance, emblazoned with *The Ghost Sonata* etched in jagged white-on-black letters, below which was pasted a date some two weeks hence.

Just to confirm his initial impression, he followed six of the Ghost chamber's inhabitants later that night to a small café where they shared a single pot of tea and an equally miserly plate of pastries, morsel by morsel. It wasn't easy, even for Saul, to concentrate on work in the presence of the alluring young woman whom the others called Angelina, but by the time they departed, he had concluded that they were some kind of dramatic society, that his client's son's attentions were focused on its

upcoming performance, and that despite frequent mention of a mentor named Stanislavski, Communist Russian influences played no significant part in their manifesto.

At the play's opening, Saul paid the requested donation and sat serenely through nearly three hours of filmy-draped figures wafting among the canvas screens, declaiming in voices bearing no resemblance to a sonata. What he was watching, however, was Angelina, stationed at the side of the makeshift stage with a clipboard and whispering from time to time to a boy standing next to her, who would then adjust the lights (not a complicated task, there being only three settings — blackout, shadowy, and blinding). Afterward, Saul caught up with the company at their café, where he praised their endeavor without venturing to guess at its intent, and treated them to a bottle of champagne from the proprietor's modest cellar.

Having thus introduced himself, Saul proceeded to drop in on rehearsals occasionally, bringing sacks of coffee and bagels from the deli. Upon learning that Angelina lived with her grandparents in the far reaches of Brooklyn, a long subway ride away from her theatrical pursuits, he gave her a key to his apartment on 38th Street and told her to use it as she pleased, with no questions or restrictions. Saul's family, seeing how happy this goyish girl made him, shrugged off his infatuation as a young **man's coming-of-age** rite.

They were wrong. Eventually, Saul asked Angelina to marry him, but she refused, saying that since no one knew where fortune might someday take them, she loved him too much to bind their destinies to one another. There came a day, nevertheless, when these two presented **Saul's landlord with some kind of paper assuring them legal cohabitation.** (Three years later, Saul would himself become landlord of the property, hiring a manager so that the other tenants need never know.)

This is how it came about that when Archie first made Saul's acquaintance, **the latter's domestic arrangements included a "lady of the house"** who answered the telephone at one of Saul's many numbers, and whom the arriving poker-night fraternity often saw leaving for a rehearsal, **artists' fundraiser, or some kind of cultural event. Having been raised by** his Midwestern aunt not to pry into other people's business unnecessarily, Archie assumed her to be a lawfully wedded Mrs. Panzer. (There was one occasion when Orrie — out of habit, mostly — made a casually **flirtatious remark to "the missus."** She smiled as she rebuffed his advance, but Archie, Fred, and Lon issued a stern warning to their comrade never to do it again.)

It was too good to last, however. The climate in America was changing. The opinions of Angelina and her colleagues may have been shaped by

literature, not politics, but long-ago affiliations of their supporters were suddenly viewed askance by a government increasingly suspicious of radical ideologies. A contact of Lon Cohen reported rumors (confirmed by **one of Dol Bonner's operatives on an unrelated job in the garment district**) of HUAC casting its eye on bohemian communities. The night that Saul spotted what was certainly a federal agent following Angelina home, he and his beloved had a long talk. Rather than allow her insecure status to interfere with the anonymity required for his livelihood, she announced that she would live abroad until the atmosphere of persecution passed. Within a week, she was gone.

Saul's loyal companions never questioned his now-celibate status. Nobody asked the circumstances of Angelina's disappearance or the date of her return. Never did they inquire whether he'd had word from her, nor did they speculate on his reasons for buying a house in Brooklyn when its elderly owners died. And from that day forth, in Archie's memoirs, Saul was granted bachelor status with no footnotes or explanations.

But could Saul and his expatriate Angelina have created a code to facilitate secret communication? Do they sometimes rendezvous in some remote country retreat far from the gaze of their persecutors? Does **Saul's status as a frequent customer of the airlines allow him to secure quick flights when Wolfe sends him to — let's say — Peru?** Do the shelves flanking Saul's library and piano sometimes sport a new curio posted from some exotic place? And is his accumulation of residential properties a way of ascertaining that he and his gypsy lover, wherever she may be, will have a home waiting for them on that day when their country is once more safe for lovers?

