

## Chapter Ten

### The Fitting Room

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After I am back at the Lostwithiel Nick, leaving the preserved remains of Hereward McCarthy with Mort the Mortician and Son of Mort, I call the Widow McCarthy and tell her that I will be round at her place within the hour.

The fitting up of Lou the Lizard and his gang is uppermost in my mind, a policeman's mind, and has to start with the peat bog and any secrets it might conceal. Getting the Widow McCarthy out to the funeral home so she can identify the leather corpse and go on record that this home-cured stiff is, indeed, the mortal remains of Hereward McCarthy, must be my first priority. But I do not tell her about Hereward over the phone, hoping that Legs Eleven, her lodger, already does so. There's nothing like a little warm-in when you have to break sad news.

But when I arrive at the Widow McCarthy's house, driving the unmarked cruiser, the Widow McCarthy herself greets me at the door and she is full of the joys of spring and the darling buds of May thrown in as a bonus. I conclude that Legs Eleven only does a partial job in revealing the awful truth about Hereward and his re-introduction to the world of the living.

"Good morning, Sergeant Muldoon," the Widow McCarthy tweets at me, confirming what I always believe about her, that she's slightly twisted, because the fog is as thick as meat gravy on a hot pork sandwich. "It's good to be alive, which is more than I can say about my guest, who comes home just now and babbles about a corpse bobbing up out of the old peat bog. And what is more, my guest is saying that the corpse is like leather and resembles a beef steak when it's on special at the Krankenschist Arms - all tough and well done."

I take the Widow McCarthy by the arm and make her go back into the house. But when she is seated in her little parlor I realize that Legs Eleven takes himself off to bed with a bottle of sedative and does not tell the widow that her dearly departed comes back to her looking like a cobbler's apron and is, indeed, the stiff in question.

"My dear," I say, all embarrassed because I do not remember her first name. "My dear, there are certain 'developments' concerning the tragic disappearance of your husband, Hereward, these many years past. The remains of a body from the peat bog may be those of your dearly departed and you may be able to help us in the furtherance of our inquiries."

If the Widow McCarthy is surprised or not I cannot say. All I know is that her performance would get a standing ovation on Broadway or the Opposition benches in the Mother of Parliaments during Question Period, or maybe both. She clutches at her face with bejeweled fingers and swoons back into the safety of a well-cushioned armchair. But I notice a bright, steely look in her eyes, the look of a woman getting even with the past, a look which says, "That'll cure the bastard from chasing other women!"

I go through the necessary courtesy of bringing the Widow McCarthy a glass of water from the kitchen and patting her hand the regulation six times, a regulation intended to show sympathy to widows, even if they are widows of twenty-five years standing on the job as widows.

"Oh, Sergeant Muldoon," the Widow McCarthy blubbers in a steady drizzle of alligator tears. "I am having many dreams of my poor Hereward these many years, twenty-five to be precise, and I am always knowing that he will come back to me, but not as a stiff, I mean as one at rest."

I continue with a battery of hand stroking this time, ringing the changes from hand patting. Police regulations do not specify hand stroking as an aid to comforting grieving widows in times of stress, so I use this therapy in the private enterprise fashion.

I tell the Widow McCarthy that she must visit Mort's Funeral Parlor with me and that I have brought the unmarked police cruiser, which just happens to have tinted windows. Two Chiefs ago the department arranges tinted windows so the whole town knows that the Chief rides incognito when he is visiting Ms. Lovey (Sweetass) Lasalle every Thursday afternoon.

Naturally I am all concern for the Widow McCarthy and wish to say that I am most solicitous towards her feelings, even to the extent of offering her a black veil. This veil comes to me as evidence I keep in my filing cabinet and which I remove from Chief Thomas Steinbach's hairy torso while he is busy dying in front of the hospital croaker. And this all comes about after a little Thursday afternoon session of the Dance of the Seven Flails at Ms. Lovey Lasalle's whorehouse.

By this time, the Widow McCarthy is crying torrents like the runoff during the spring solstice, tra-la-la. She goes through several handkerchiefs, including mine, and a whole box of generic brand tissues. She holds my arm like I'm in a half nelson as we walk into Mort's Corpse Parlor and we are greeted by Mort and Son of Mort who keeps a respectful distance of two paces behind his dad.

Mort conducts us to his embalming room with Son of Mort bringing up the rear, and we see three sheeted stiffs lying on marble slabs. I wish to say that when Mort does a job he does a class job, right down to the piped music in the background of 'Lead Kindly Light,' which does much for the Widow McCarthy's weeping, causing her to snort and snuffle down my clean tunic.

By this time, the Widow McCarthy is close to swooning again. I am thinking of frog marching her to the slab, but think better of it, and eventually we are beside the remains, covered decently by a sheet stamped quite rightly with Mort's laundry mark.

I guide the Widow McCarthy closer to the slab like I'm Gordie Howe skating into the corner with a rookie, all elbows and butt end. Mort pulls back the sheet and the Widow gazes at the face of Hereward, the love of her young life.

"Can you identify the body as that of your husband?" I ask her, pointing to a large scar on his forehead I give him myself one practice session on the ice. I also point to a spot in the middle of this scar, the site of another scar resulting from a stick-swinging incident, but now where a gaping hole makes Hereward look like someone with three eyes. What is more, the two other eyes have taken on a decided squint, which is how Hereward looks in real life when he gets into the sauce.

The Widow nods. "Yes, that is the body of my dearly beloved husband, Hereward McCarthy," and I think she adds some qualification to this statement sounding like, "the sonofabitch." Naturally, I think this is a coincidence, probably something to do with the piped music in the background, although I never remember 'Lead Kindly Light' having such a qualification in the lyrics.

There are some forms to complete and I observe that the Widow McCarthy seems to perk up a bit, and when Mort pulls a bottle of Scotch from his filing cabinet, she knocks back a sizable belt and some of the color comes back into her cheeks.

The Widow McCarthy signs the forms, identifying the stiff as being one, Hereward McCarthy, and I think she signs the Hypocritical Oath because her light-heartedness comes back. Still, I perceive that a load is lifted from her mind, or what passes as her mind, and I wish to say

that the identification goes well and is the key to the 'Fitting Up' process in sending Lou-the-Lizard and his gang down to the pen for a long stretch.

Son of Mort drives the Widow McCarthy back home and I think she has a smile behind the black veil as I peer at her from the tinted glass of the unmarked cruiser. Son of Mort looks a much sadder young man because he has just witnessed a seamier side of life.

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It is twenty-five years since I take my medical degree at the State University of New York and have the privilege of hanging my name on the wall, Doctor Copernicus Gatacre. I am generally known as Old Guts Ache, and I feel the name is fully justified because I spend my entire career as the County Medical Examiner, where I keep my hands thrust deep into the guts of dead bodies.

I am originally from the area, born and bred in Lostwithiel. I am one of those with the sense to leave town and go to the Big City, but the call of the Marazions gets me by the curly roots and I return to minister over those of my fellow men (and women) who meet untimely and unfortunate ends.

One such untimely and unfortunate death becomes a most interesting set of notes in my casebook, destined to later become a chapter in my memoirs once I retire. This case concerns the death of one Hereward McCarthy, who comes to my post mortem table in a most interesting condition. I am also delighted to see that two other people, unknown and unnamed, are also

transferred to me and they look very similar, in a purely cosmetic sense, to the body of Hereward McCarthy, all three being tanned the color of people on a nude beach in Rio.

The post mortem of Hereward McCarthy is a most interesting case to me, partly because I have the pleasure of a police presence in the comforting shape of Sergeant Muldoon and the amusing condition of Officer Franglais.

I take a cursory look at the other two bodies and quickly conclude that they are out of my jurisdiction. In my opinion they are both candidates for carbon dating rather than the modern day scalpel and surgeon's saw. I'll leave those two on their slabs while I tell you about Hereward McCarthy.

My normal practice is to walk around the remains before making my detailed examination. Sometimes this walk around only takes a few minutes, but I like to take much longer if the body is that of a young woman. Call this professional voyeurism if you like.

Sergeant Muldoon brings his lunch with him and I know he does this to gross-out any young officer like Officer Franglais who may accompany him. There comes a whimper from Franglais as my two assistants turn the corpse over so I can see its back. There is nothing to see except a large, neat exit wound at the back of McCarthy's head and some peculiar marks across the shoulders. Franglais makes strangling noises as I probe the exit wound and a pint of lake water gushes out, draining rather noisily into the scuppers. Muldoon smiles and I commence my dictation into the tape machine.

"The body appears to be a well-nourished male approximately forty-five years of age, five feet ten inches and one hundred eighty pounds, with distinguishing marks on the forehead (a large scar consistent with a blow from a hockey stick). There is a tattoo on the left pectoral

muscle of a laurel wreath bearing the name 'Martha.' There are marks on the back consistent with whipping.

"There is a large entry wound in the forehead, consistent with an attack by a pickax or pole ax. The entry wound is round and would appear as if probed after death by a pithing rod generally used in an abattoir. There is evidence that the major arteries of the neck and thorax are severed to allow exsanguination. There is no evidence of powder burns on the skin, although this is difficult to establish due to the advanced tanning of the skin after immersion in peat water for a suspected period of twenty-five years."

I have my assistants turn the body on its back and I ask for an electric saw and rib spreader. The saw makes short work of McCarthy's thorax and I lay the chest open to get at the organs.

Officer Franglais shoots into the head and we hear reverberant sounds of vomiting. By the time that he emerges from the head looking like Edvard Munch's painting of 'The Scream,' I have the heart, liver and kidneys neatly contained in specimen dishes. Officer Franglais shoots back into the head as I show him the liver.

Sergeant Muldoon finishes his sandwich and starts on a container of raspberry Jell-O as Franglais rejoins us. Muldoon, being a generous man, offers Franglais some raspberry Jello-O, but the young officer appears to be sworn off dessert.

I conclude my verbal autopsy report. "Cause of death is due to a massive trauma to the skull and brain, together with extensive bleeding from the major blood vessels, brought about by person or persons unknown and by unknown means."

It is lunchtime, a working lunch in this case, and we dine on chicken nuggets. I offer some to officer Franglais, but he politely declines.

Chicken nuggets in hand I take a good look at the other two bodies. These two are ancient. These are not your run-of-the-mill Saturday night stiff, chucked into Lake Marazion for disposal. They are little men, quite bow-legged, but with large jaws and heavy foreheads. Their hands are massive and their chests look like barrels. It is easy to see that no local native band has body types like these, and I conclude that they have to be pre-Columbian.

I quickly dictate a preliminary report on these two as I finish my lunch with the second course of coffee and a stale chocolate chip muffin from the vending machine. I recommend that these two be transferred to the Smithsonian where they will be more at home.

Sergeant Muldoon thanks me for my speedy report and herds Officer Franglais through the door.

"You look a bit seedy round the gills," he tells Franglais. "You need a whiff of the barmaid's apron to bring you round. I find it interesting that Hereward McCarthy has 'Martha' tattooed on his chest. Because now I remember that the Widow McCarthy's first name is Enid. Interesting!"

They leave and I am left to the tranquility and peace of my own mortuary.

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In a county town like Lostwithiel, where speed is not a prerequisite of life, either official or unofficial, it was nothing short of amazing how quickly a coroner's court was convened to hear about the grisly death of Hereward McCarthy.

Bright sunshine greeted the court as it assembled in a drafty room in the Old Courthouse. It was generally thought that justice could be well served when accompanied by drafts because

such a condition forced the assembled court to deal with the case evidence as expeditiously as possible and then return to a normal, centrally heated or air conditioned environment.

And so at ten o'clock on this shining morning the Coroner for Runcible County entered the court and the clerk called everybody to rise and stated that the Honorable Daphne N. Duchesne would preside.

Madame Duchesne brought the gavel down and ordered the clerk, known to all as Nobby Clark, to proceed.

"Your Honor," the clerk commenced. "This inquiry comes about in the strangest of circumstances. On Tuesday last, a body was seen floating in a small inlet of Lake Marazion. The State Police were called and the body was recovered. It had been immersed in the lake for some considerable time, years in fact, and due to this and other reasons was handed over to the County Medical Examiner.

"The evidence which we will hear indicates death due to foul play, as your honor will doubtless conclude." The clerk adopted his best courtroom demeanor in the hopes that he might be photographed by a press photographer during recess.

"Then don't keep us all in suspense, Mr. Clark," the Coroner beamed, smiling because of the sunny morning. "Kindly call your first witness and let the mystery unfold."

"I'll call Mr. Lev Elevkin, Your Honor."

When the first witness enters the Coroner's Court we see that it is none other than our old friend Legs Eleven and remember, because we are dutiful readers, that the Widow McCarthy has given him this handle.

Legs is duly sworn, but there is a slight delay when he calls for an Old Testament.

With the formalities out of the way, Nobby Clark proceeds with his questions.

"Mr. Elevkin. Were you at or near Lake Marazion last Tuesday?" The clerk smiles in Legs' general direction, making the smile look more like a stricture of his windpipe.

"Yes, sir, I was." Legs replied simply.

"And can you tell the Court under what circumstances you were out by Lake Marazion?"

Nobby Clark appears to have a stricture of his sphincter muscle due to a sense of loving himself so much.

"He means, why were you out at the lake!" Madame Duchesne translates for Legs and smiles at him. Legs smiles back his thanks.

"I rode my mountain bike out to prospect one of the peat bogs. I have an exploration agreement with Ms. Evelyn Pantorelli, formerly O'Grady. I am testing the depths and qualities of peat in the swamp areas owned by Ms. Pantorelli.

Legs almost mentions that he went to the lake because it was his own darned business to do so, but thinks it would not be a smart thing to say.

Nobby Clark seems to develop another stricture somewhere in the region of his lower intestine because he appears to suffer some discomfort at Madame Duchesne's sarcasm.

"What did you find of interest to this honorable court?" Nobby Clark asks, wondering where the next stricture might strike.

Legs Eleven warms to his subject, mainly because Madame Duchesne favors him with another smile.

"I was checking a place in the peat bog where I had previously taken boring samples using an increment tool."

Clearly, the clerk might benefit from the aid of an increment tool to ream out his stricture, but Legs puts that thought to the back of his mind lest he laugh in open court.

"As I checked the previous borings I noticed something bobbing up and down in the water."

"And what was this 'something' bobbing up and down in the water?"

"It appeared to be somebody's rear end. A matched pair of gluteus maxima!" Legs lets this sink in and offers no further explanation to the clerk.

"He means he saw somebody's ass a-floating in the water, Mr. Clark," Madame Duchesne says. "How unusual."

"Yes, quite, Your Honor."

"And then I saw a pair of heels, and the back of a head, and then I could see that it was a complete body floating face down."

"What else did you see, Mr. Elevkin?" the clerk inquires, trying to get a little revenge for Madame Duchesne's sarcasm.

"The corpse appeared to be made of leather. It was leather from head to toe."

"Leather, eh?" and Nobby Clark lapses back into the local dialect, a form of speech hated by his wife who comes from the Big City.

"And it suffered badly from flatulence," Legs adds, attempting to keep the proceedings as dignified as possible.

"What on earth do you mean by flatulence, Mr. Levkin?"

"It made noises. Sort of bathroom noises, only they weren't muffled like you hear from a bathroom."

"Do you mean this corpse you found floating in the peat bog passed wind?"

"Yes, I do. It passed wind and kept passing it."

For some obscure reason, Madame Duchesne feels it is her duty to clarify matters yet again for Nobby Clark.

"I do believe the witness means that the corpse farted, Mr. Clark."

There was a shocked silence while the clerk gathered his wits.

"I have no further questions for this witness, Your Honor. You may step down."

Legs smiles at Madame Duchesne.

"Your Honor," Nobby Clark manages to utter. "I must request an urgent recess."

Madame Duchesne, being a merciful woman grants the recess and Nobby Clark flies to the bathroom.

When the court reconvenes, Sergeant Muldoon is called to give evidence. The clerk is about to address the court when Her Honor speaks to the Old Sarge.

"How's the lumbago, Muldoon? Moira tells me your back's playing up."

This is a normal part of conversation in the Marazions, what is generally called opening salvos. It is the introductory gambit to what can develop into a full half-hour of gab, natter, chat, yammer or just plain verbal chicken-poop as to clog the cyber communications of worldwide cellular-phones. What a pleasant thought.

"It's about time I hang up the uniform for good, Your Honor." Muldoon talks figuratively. Hanging up the uniform means like Gordie Howe hanging up the skates. "But just one more kick-at-the-cat before I go."

Muldoon says this with meaning, which is not lost on Madame Duchesne.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Clark," Her Honor breathes upon the clerk, with controlled sucrosity, "you want to ask Sergeant Muldoon a few questions?"

Nobby Clark just takes a kick in the balls from Her Honor, which is enough to tell him that he's relatively unimportant. And also because this is the Marazions, the outcome of this inquest is a foregone conclusion because anybody with half a brain knows that Hereward McCarthy is croaked by an unknown croaker. Just who the croaker might be is also relatively unimportant because Hereward McCarthy is never a loved man when he is alive and full of life, or life as it is known in the Marazions. And furthermore if the unknown croaker is ever identified, then the people of the Marazions might insist on some award for him, like the Order of Merit.

"Please proceed, Mr. Clark."

Nobby Clark clears his throat, which is unnecessary, but he has seen this done in television courtroom dramas many times.

"Sergeant Muldoon. Please tell the court what happened on Tuesday last."

"Well, I just finish a late breakfast. I have a strenuous night, you understand." Nobby Clark nods impatiently and Her Honor stifles a giggle behind a well-manicured hand. "I get this here call from some ass...., er, officer over at the State Police. They tell me about a stiff, er, corpse, they see out at Ev's peat bog. That's the bog owned by Ev Pantorelli, you understand."

By this time, Nobby Clark experiences another stricture, somewhere in the vicinity of his gall bladder, but it could be in the appendix. Strictures in this area are often wrongly diagnosed and appear in certain medical records maintained in the Marazions as 'a fart caught crossways.'

"And what did you do when the OPP called, Sergeant Muldoon?" Nobby Clark commences grinding his bridgework in frustration.

"I go right to the scene and take a look at the body. I never see anything like it."

"And what did you observe that you never see before?" Nobby Clark nearly loses his trend of thought because of the confusion caused by the Old Sarge's dialect.

"This 'ere corpse is leather. It's like General Patton appearing in his own movie; all boots and Sam Browns."

I leave this splendid mental picture of a cavalry general in all his glory to the reader's imagination.

"And?"

"I see it's none other than that jackass, Hereward McCarthy, who plays wing for the Marazion Rinky-Dinks (the Old Sarge is being sarcastic for Nobby Clark's benefit), the senior hockey club in the Rural Lumber League."

There is a pause while that sinks in with all present that may not be privy to the mysteries of rural hockey.

"How did you identify the corpse, Sergeant Muldoon?"

"He wears the club sweater, number eleven, and we retire that number when he disappears, on account that nobody wants it."

"Perfect. And what did you do after you identified the body?"

"Nuthin'. Mort the Mortician brings it into town and keeps it until Doctor Gatacre can take a gander at it. He's very busy, the Doc, you know. He don't even go out this trout season on account of being so busy." Muldoon's eye twinkle at Her Honor and she seizes her cue.

"That's a shame, Muldoon," Her Honor says. "Maybe you can get the Doctor out in a little bass water. I hear it's a good season for bass, and fishing is such good mental relaxation."

"Do you have any further questions, Mr. Clark? No? Then we'll recess for lunch and come back at 2:00 p.m. for the medical evidence. I do so like medical evidence after a good lunch."

Nobby Clark's strictures come together all at once, and he struggles to the bathroom for a relief as dramatic as lifting the Great Siege at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge.

Madame Duchesne does, indeed, lunch well. Her monthly ration of cholesterol is due in the form of braised calf's liver with bacon, mashed potatoes, Harvard beets and dark brown meat gravy. It is just the stuff for the inner man, or woman, before an afternoon's medical evidence.

It is surprising that truth does not sell unless it is sensational truth. Anybody, who has worked in a newspaper office or merely sharpened pencils for the editor, knows that good news is bad news. If America had the equivalent of the Yorkshire Ripper the newspaper business would be a happier one. Editors feel that they are filling a need by publishing horror for their readers. So, it comes as no surprise that the presentation of medical evidence in the case of Hereward McCarthy was greeted with such enthusiasm.

Doctor Copernicus Gatacre was no newcomer to the art of presenting medical evidence. One might rightly assume that Old Guts Ache was a frustrated actor who mentally strutted and fretted his hour upon the stage, and then, thankfully, was heard no more. Actually, Old Guts Ache did appear on the boards as an amateur while at medical school in some awful improv farce called 'Lady Chatterley's Liver.' Happily, there is no record of the script in the Library of Congress.

Precisely at 2:00 p.m., after Madame Duchesne had lunched well, she took her seat at the bench and fixed a piercing and cholesterol-laden eye onto Nobby Clark. Such a gaze was designed to create a condition called wilting, and Nobby Clark wilted visibly.

"Call your witness, Mr. Clark," Madame Duchesne grated, with a voice of finest Toledo steel.

Old Guts Ache was called and sworn. I will say that our County Medical Examiner knows how to make an entrance. I suppose that comes from being a frustrated actor.

Old Guts Ache was an experienced hand at this game. He strode the length of the courtroom so that all could witness his coming. He wore his best summer suit with a soft shirt and collar, and his tie looked quite regimental, although it came in a dollar ninety-eight sale at Walmarts. With highly polished black shoes and well-coiffured hair, possibly darkened from the gray from using his boot brush, Old Guts Ache was a credit to the croaker's profession.

Nobby Clark took a sip of water after clearing his throat. He had not lunched well, but had downed a dose of baking soda chased with a glass of tonic water. The tonic water tasted heavily of quinine.

"Doctor Gatacre," Nobby Clark commenced, only to be interrupted by Madame Duchesne.

"Howarya? Copernicus. As the actress said to the bishop, 'Long time no See.' What have you been up to?"

Please bear with us, dear reader, Cher Leteur, but this is how things are done in the Marazion Lakes. I know it upsets people from the Big City, but you'll just have to lump it.

Doctor Gatacre reported to the court that he was in the best of health except for an unseasonable touch of dandruff, but far better than those poor stiffs stretched out on his slab. And he intended to keep in good health, always provided that the Good Lord would go along with it and that the creeks didn't rise too high.

"Please proceed, Mr. Clark," Madame Duchesne smiled like a crocodile lining up on Bambi at the water's edge.

Nobby Clark bowed slightly to Madame Duchesne and then addressed himself to the medical examiner.

"Doctor Gatacre. On Tuesday last, were you called upon to perform a post-mortem examination on the remains of one, Hereward McCarthy?"

"Well, you know darned well I was." Old Guts Ache glared at the clerk. "Do they teach you how to ask stupid questions at law school these days?"

The good doctor is, of course, referring to the Hallowed Hall through which all liars and lawyers have to pass before practicing in the Great State of Minnesota. It is believed that the minister of information in the former Iraqi government, Hassan the Liar, also attended this school.

"Just answer yes or no, Doctor Gatacre," Nobby Clark said, wearily. There was a definite hysterical edge to the clerk's voice.

"In the interest of moving things along, Mr. Clark, let us take it as read that Doctor Gatacre said, "Yes."

Madame Duchesne just steamrolled the clerk.

"Good, Doctor Gatacre. Then in the interest of moving things along, please present your medical evidence and findings."

"The deceased was murdered." The medical examiner said, still glaring at the clerk. "He died from a massive great wallop on his brainbox, which was followed through with a sort of rod punched through the brain and out the back of the head. Somebody had also cut his throat and

stabbed him deep in the chest. If he wasn't already dead from the hole punched through his head then he bled to death from the carotid and aorta."

To be murdered and chucked in a peat bog is unfortunate, but to have a multiple choice of how the murder was actually performed looked like an embarrassment of riches. The court buzzed with excitement while these juicy pieces of information were mentally absorbed.

"And do you have any idea who murdered Hereward McCarthy?"

"Sure I do. He was murdered by person or persons unknown."

The court went into riot mode as Madame Duchesne hammered with her gavel, declaring, "This inquest stands adjourned."

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