

ONE

A bolt of lightning winked; thunder careened overhead. A rainstorm growled through Botolph and eastern Sagadac. “What a lot of noise,” I said as I looked out my office window, “It sounds like an unfriendly spirit is mad at us because no one pays attention to it.”

“Maybe so, Stephanie,” Michael Rainwater replied, “but friendly spirits speak to us, too.” I felt reassured. “And I like to be on the lookout for them.”

The lights flickered. Voices in the outer office were louder than normal for a moment or two. A phone rang.

Michael came to see me at Wakefield and Drew to confirm arrangements we’d made for a third season of half-hour TV documentaries about native history and native leaders. He also wanted to talk about a pile of manuscripts he’d brought me a few days before and that now sat on my desk – stories by a Sagadac writer about American history and our recent failed war in Kulon. “Why are you interested in this man Paul Kingsley? His writing seems ordinary.”

“He was a friend of my son George, who volunteered to fight in Kulon and died there.”

“Yes, you mentioned him.” Michael and I had wartime losses in common. My older brother, a bomber pilot, was killed during a mission over the northern part of the country.

“Mr. Kingsley’s stories seem to come from a servant mentality,” I went on. “Coarse-grained people, limited in scope. Readers like escape and a refreshing vision. No one will turn these stories into a TV series or a film, but if an idea comes to me, I’ll let you know.”

“Paul will be happy with whatever you do,” Michael looked at his watch..

I should tell you, by the way, that Kingsley’s modest writings form the backbone of the pages that follow. And if God is willing, I’ll put the rest of his stories in future volumes.

Michael had another meeting, so he left with rain pouring down, taking with him ideas I’d given him for his TV series, his talent, his dreams and disappointments, and his sense of purpose. I’d known him for years and could count on him as one of my few close friends. He was a fortunate man to have lived as long as he had and kept away from entanglements that might bring him down.

I looked out the window at the gray city below. A few people waited in doorways, others stood under an overhang that ran along the length of a department store. Some scurried to where they were going, most with umbrellas, a few with newspapers over their heads. Lines of traffic crept by on the street. We’re always on the move, restless, hoping to get somewhere.

I heard a knock on the door. A secretary came in with a bulky manuscript I’d been looking forward to, work that excited me from a man who had quite a bit to say about the past, the present, and times to come.

She also told me that Calvin Mitchell, the second native man in our history to gain national office, had been shot in Ohio. Mitchell had served in the senate during the last years of the war in Kulon and brought a calming presence to the scene whenever he was able to speak out. His popularity encouraged President Lockridge to choose him for his running mate.

Floundering in the wake of dreadful news, I believed I could foretell what would happen. The country would be stirred up and wallow in sentiment for a while. Though we'd survive more or less intact, we'd think poorly of ourselves again and millions would grieve along with the Mitchells, myself, too, of course, since I know the family. Awash in hypocrisy, people would ask what was becoming of us or what had we been all along. Every adult knew what we were. Laziness kept us from confronting the truth.

Many would take the news personally. We'd grope for large statements to sustain us, clichés would fly through the air: we live in vigorous times with perils as well as advances. We wouldn't find anything more reassuring than that. And then we'd pretend that nothing had happened.

An unfriendly spirit indeed. Where would the friendly ones come from that Michael had alluded to?

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The Provident Theatre, one of the oldest in the country, is a landmark in downtown Botolph – our publicists call it a “jewel”. A series of new owners has fixed it up three times and now it sports a chandelier and gold-colored wall-hangings, with a café in the basement. It has stuck with its commercial bias until now; a few long-lasting plays have opened there, along with plenty of duds. The latest management, sympathetic to a spirit of innovation that swept through the country and is now waning and that brought us nothing that will last, put on experimental plays for a month, one of which I went to with Michael Rainwater that evening. Along with his other interests, he was artistic director of the Dolphin Court Theatre in Port Marin on the west coast of Florida.

Not knowing what to expect I settled in my seat. Michael looked alert and thoughtful, eager to find out if the producers had taken suggestions he'd given them.

Paul Kingsley had put the piece together. Part fact, part fiction, it told about the life and tragedy, of the pestiferous ideologue Ludovic Brine, who's been dead for three decades, but whose influence wafts through sections of our culture like the exhalations from a storm sewer.

The play opened with a scene from Brine's teenage years, when he took hold of an insight, clutched it, and never let go – that evil is the condition of life on earth and that evil will swallow up everything, except for a talented, disciplined few who use it for their advantage.

We saw scenes from Brine's helter-skelter private life, including two confrontations with his mistress Marie, with whom he had an illegitimate child and who disappeared after telling him that he was a frightened man and that he ought to keep his fears to himself. He never saw his only son.

Kingsley also favored us with several brief colloquies between Brine and the devil, who introduced him to the remains of a cult that had been fumbling around for centuries in the shadows of public affairs.

The play mostly had to do with Brine's struggle to revive the cult. “Nations and their squabbles will keep on,” he told his followers. “They'll make an even bigger mess of the world unless an elite comes together and breaks through the artificialities of national boundaries to lead

us to sanity.” He outlined his scheme – give people something to induce their loyalty, raise an army, create a myth. “Even if you don’t believe in anything,” he was fond of saying, “you must pretend to have faith.

“What people call evil will always be present. Everyone is a part of it. We commit evil whether we want to or not. But everything will turn out well if you keep your eye on your goal and don’t falter. Remember that most people aren’t very bright.”

The second act began with the great man rejoicing like a lunatic when a group of scientists under contract to him brought him a sample of terridium, a substance mined from the earth usually near deposits of copper, that could be used to make weapons. Brine’s associates gathered a supply – the only stockpile in existence. He decreed that his growing band of confederates would manufacture enough weapons to hold the world hostage until political leaders agreed to reform the international set-up. His plan absorbed most of his time and produced few results because plans are easier to think up than they are to carry out.

Brine enlarged his approach to include political action as well as ideas. He made himself known to prominent people in and out of government in several countries, including the United States. He didn’t care if they were on the right or the left, for he could easily adjust his program, but the subordinates of powerful men always pushed him aside as a crackpot, a title he had more right to than almost anyone living.

He kept on. Overwork and lack of sleep took their toll, and signs of the madness that would claim him soon appeared. He wrote essays and spoke ceaselessly and to any group that would listen, arguing that the world needed to return to the conditions that existed when the Ostrogoths and Visigoths, the Huns and the Vandals began to feel their power and vexed the Roman empire. He avoided capture, but his life ended when a man he’d brought into his confidence poisoned him.

I would have said that the situation Kingsley described was the wildest of fictions if I hadn’t had brief contact years before with the group that Brine revived. Since I couldn’t tell how much Michael knew, I kept my uneasiness to myself.

“A workmanlike piece,” he said when we found a place in the Rue Pigalle downstairs afterwards. “I’d have liked it better if they’d taken my suggestion to put in a few songs and some good laughs. But it’s still in early stages of development.”

I looked around as people from the show drifted downstairs and mingled with what remained of the audience and recognized only Varvara Something-or-other with a harmless-looking escort. “You don’t suppose the author is trying to issue a warning, do you?” I said cautiously.

“Why don’t you ask him? He’s coming this way.” Michael looked at me with a faint flicker of concern, as if I’d sent a telegram begging for help.

Mr. Kingsley, a trim-looking man in his mid forties, asked what Michael had thought.

“You’re brave to tackle a controversial subject,” he said. “The script will have other productions. I’d love to work on it at The Dolphin Court. I’ll call you when I get home.”

“I was hoping you’d say something like that.” He broke into a smile, grasped Michael’s hand, and gave it a rough shake.

“You should also meet Stephanie Markham, the friend I told you about who’s looking at your stories.”

Kingsley shook my hand, too, and said he’d be grateful for any suggestions.

“We were wondering,” I said, “what message you wanted to give us.”

“It’s still rough,” Kingsley replied, “There’s a lot of weird things going on, dangerous things. We need to be aware so we can protect ourselves and stop the trouble before it gets worse. I’ll be interested in what you think of my stories. I’m open to most any suggestion.”

Kingsley looked like an earnest man, hard-working, but curiously simple for a grown-up and addicted to imprecise sentiments. “It’s so nice to see you both,” he said. “Please excuse me. I have another big day tomorrow.”

I reminded Michael that it was getting late and that I needed to be at work early the next morning and he had a plane to catch.

We continued our conversation as we walked the half mile to Michael’s hotel.

“I suspect my friend Paul’s situation is fairly complicated,” he said. “I’ll understand if you decide you don’t want to have anything to do with his stories.”

“Just a minute,” I replied. “Did he mean what he said about taking suggestions?”

“He’ll listen to anything sensible,” Michael said.

“An idea came to me,” I said, “Set his stories off with another narrative around them. It wouldn’t have to be true. Just interesting.”

“Build on his play, you mean.”

“Possibly,” I agreed. “And the cult he told us about. Plus the murder of the vice president.”

“Why don’t you go ahead with it?” Michael said. “I’ll mention it to Paul the next time I speak with him.”

We continued talking in Michael’s hotel room until after one o’clock, when I took a taxi home.

I have another shard of information to share with you. I learned later that Paul Kingsley was the second cousin of a distant relative of mine, one Bertram Hungerford, who rose high and then fell quickly in flames of notoriety and according to reports tried to regain his footing by signing on with the cult group that Kingsley exposed in his play. I wondered what schemes for good or ill Kingsley was busily brewing behind a pose of shambling innocence. And did Hungerford know anything about the assassination of the vice president?

In any case, here’s the first installment of one of Kingsley’s writings.

Stephanie Markham, editor

Botolph, Wednesday May 7, 1681

On the day before we left with Joshua in his cart, I hurried to finish my chores.

I checked the supplies in the larder to make sure there'd be enough butter and eggs, beef and poultry – milk, cheese, bread – to feed the boarders for a week so Ralph wouldn't have to look for provisions right away. I try to make things easy for my son, because he's always been absent-minded and more so since the death of his father, which came not directly from a war injury, but because days on end out of doors in the cruelest time of the year made him susceptible to illness. As a result, he succumbed to pleurisy, which a stronger man might have resisted.

I closed the larder door and gazed out the window. The sunlight on the harbor seemed as yellow as lemon, as brilliant as a field of marigolds. I imagined a rainbow of fragrances – lavender, lilac, witch hazel, hawthorn – that used to please me when I was a youngster.

I visited Deputy Governor Drayton early in the afternoon. People like me, a child of the first pioneers to Sagadac, don't usually become friendly with representatives of the royal government for the same reason that we've stopped making friends with natives: we don't know what they'll think of us. I decided after my husband Cyrus died, however, to break through some of the restrictions we put on ourselves.

Major Drayton, who'd just come from midweek exercises with the militia, had on a handsome scarlet military uniform when I arrived at his workroom in the town-house. As I have lost my husband, so has he lost his wife. He has many fine qualities, but he has trouble sitting still for more than five minutes at a time. He moved about while we talked, picked up sheets of parchment and set them down across the room without looking at them, gazed out the window, and stopped to meditate before a portrait of the king. He finally gave me two pieces of foolscap covered with names of people and places, which had to do with an errand he wants me to carry out while we're traveling to New York.

"I should be going," I said.

"Can't you stay for another moment or two?" He went on to talk about the future with a boisterous flurry of energy. What will the country be like in a hundred years? What kind of government will we have? We discussed the weather, the crops and his children in England whom he hoped would join him in Sagadac.

He's a capable man with good understanding. He was in service in the Summer Islands during the war and had been with us only a short time. He had moderate ideas for a royalist, so that many of us hoped that if the king called the present governor away Major Drayton would take his place. But we could only hope, because we've lost the privilege of choosing our own leaders along with other freedoms that the first comers enjoyed.

"I know the country has suffered more than one trial," he said, "but the governor and I hope people will look beyond recent setbacks to a time of prosperity and growth. I don't like to hear you talk as if you're defeated, Mistress Latham.

He said a bit more to soften me up and then, "May I offer you a cup of sweet cider?" He brought a jug from a cupboard and filled two glasses. "I've grown to like you. We're well-suited

to each other. I've thought and prayed for guidance. I believe we could live happily together as husband and wife."

"Clarence!" I said, surprised. His offer cheered my spirits, though. He seemed serious, not thinking only of himself, but of me and what our lives might be together. "Marriage could be a blessing," I said, "but I want you to know that I won't live under anyone's thumb."

"I wouldn't envy the man who treated you in that way," he said.

I liked him and it would have been wrong to leave abruptly, but I couldn't make a decision about marriage just then and I didn't want either his strength or his kind words to overwhelm me.

Seeing my hesitation, he encouraged me to speak. "Have I made you uncomfortable? It may be that I've spoken too abruptly, but I wanted to tell you before you went away – before another man claims you."

"There are differences between us that would surely cause strife," I said. "The war brought us a lot of misery and the presence of a royal government increases our mortification. I want to know, sir, if you despise us."

"I like Sagadac," he said. He also liked his own ideas, so I got ready for a lecture. "You people are earnest and serious. You love to take on difficult tasks. But you see yourselves as the apple of God's eye and you judge others by standards no one can meet, so it isn't long before you point a finger at yourselves and become hugely disappointed. But you're gaining maturity and not so eager to say that what you prefer is best. You'll produce wise leaders – examples to other nations. No, I don't despise you, but I want you to do better than you've done."

I was ready to answer him but saved my rebuttal for another day because he'd found a way to soften me up again. He opened a drawer in his work table and gave me a book printed in London that he hoped I'd enjoy reading during the evenings while Annette and I were traveling – a volume of sermons on the book of Proverbs, written by one of our sort of preachers, not his. I put the foolscap he gave me inside the book. "I've enjoyed talking with you," I said. "You've given me plenty to think about."

I left fairly soon after that, knowing the disapproval I'd bring on myself for making friends with a leading royalist. Some of our staunch men say Clarence and his like moved in on us because we made something of the country and that predatory hearts growl beneath a show of tolerance. If Cyrus were alive, he'd have spoken out against the royalists, too.

I went into the shops on King Street where I needed to settle accounts; I visited the ordinary to give final instructions to the man who will help Ralph look after the boarding house. Many people were outdoors, as is usual on pleasant spring afternoons – people of every age and most every occupation, but no natives.

Before the war with Sansonoit we could always be sure to meet several Indians on our streets. When the fighting was most intense, the government interned more than two hundred friendly Sagadacs in the harbor on Squab Island for their protection and to appease those of our people who feared all natives. Even then, several at a time would come to town for trade, but

now not one. The biggest argument Cyrus and I ever had took place after he found out that while he was away I gave shelter to a native family in our house.

There would be two natives in town the next day, however, when Joshua and his friend Little Fox brought Annette and me along Neck Way to the edge of town and beyond. I trusted that any who happened to be at work in their gardens or standing at the door watching and had failed to ask God's pardon for their sins would be able to withstand the shock.

I might have made a few stops on my way home but did not. I passed the candle makers without saying farewell to Goody Lawton and didn't visit the Wakemans, since old friendships in both places are strained. Nor did I call on James Denton, who fancies that we're having a romance. I'll be glad to have a respite from the gossip and rivalries of Botolph, with which I have lived and taken part in since I was a child. The dread of what our neighbors will say controls much of our lives. I'm looking forward to a few weeks away. A wish for new surroundings was the first reason for my travels.

A second was to escort my niece Annette to New York to visit her betrothed and his family. The youngsters met while Edward was a student at the college in New Hope and went to work as a lawyer with his father.

Another reason for my journey was to spend a day with my sister Jennifer in Westford, whom I haven't seen since before the war. A band of Toconocos took her and held her captive for several months, during which she spent time in the company of Sansonit himself. I grieved for her, of course, and regretted moments in our childhoods when we were not good friends to one another.

Still another reason concerned my late husband Cyrus. Even though he's been gone for several years, there's still a catch in my throat as I put down his name. Before he died, he compiled some papers about the fighting, in which he commanded a regiment. He begged me to finish this history, and I hoped that a look at the terrain would show me what I needed to keep the promise I made to him.

The final reason for my trip has to do with Clarence Drayton. He said that the governor had heard rumors about preparations among the Indians for another war, one that may involve the French, that might take place in Canada or nearer territories to the north of us. He gave me a list of names – the foolscap that I folded into the volume of sermons – of people to talk to who might know what the natives are thinking. He wants information about movements of Indians that he can pass along to the governments in the north.

I believed he gave me this assignment to help me feel useful. I liked the idea of being a spy for the country. A dash of risk, you see. Cyrus didn't approve of women who involved themselves in public affairs, but since a woman of a certain age knows how to keep secrets and is hardly ever suspected, she could be a profitable servant.

Mostly, though, I looked forward to getting away and to empty my brain of the detritus that comes with having lived for several decades.

I got to the boardinghouse in plenty of time to prepare dinner for my six lodgers. Ralph asked the blessing on the meal, as he has done since Cyrus died.

With one foot already on the road, so to speak, I felt a touch of impatience as I served the people sitting at the trestle table, but I conquered it and listened to their conversation.

I went to my room after they retired and the kitchen was clean again to finish packing my bags. Since marriages were on my mind – even slow-poke Ralph said that he and his friend Susannah were talking about making their lives together, I went over an incident that took place when I was fourteen or fifteen. My uncle Jonathan, a fur trader, took me to a wedding in an Indian village. He'd made friends with the bride's father. I remember drum sounds and an old man who played tunes on a wooden flute. How lovely the bride looked, and the groom, a warrior, seemed to wish for her happiness. The sun shone through the branches of pine trees; a breeze caused their fragrance to surround us; birds chirped, hidden in the branches. How splendid to be married under the trees, I thought, since our weddings take place indoors.

My uncle told me that the bride and groom had been betrothed since childhood – an old custom. Another custom took place after the ceremony, when the new husband and wife gave modest presents to the guests. I received a spoon fashioned from a gourd that I still keep on a shelf in the kitchen.

The children began to sing.

The couple's oldest son later became one of Sansonoit's lieutenants, killed in a battle somewhere. Sansonoit had three children, all still living, having escaped both death and the exile of Toconocos to warm-weather islands.

What cruelties we visit upon each other!

I read my Bible before I slept – a few verses from Proverbs, which will help me to gain wisdom and make up my mind about Clarence Drayton's offer.

I prayed that God would bless our wanderings.

