

Clerical **ERRORS**

Another Entertainment



BY **JAMES
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CLERICAL ERRORS
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PROLOGUE

NOAH'S CATCH

The first rays of the rising sun titillated the roof of the tallest building on Abigail Island in the western basin of Lake Katherine. The building houses the Edwin J. Skoch Marine Biology Laboratories, a fresh water biological field station for Thornton University. A research vessel, The Silver Stag, had just left its dock and is motoring into the rising sun. At the helm is Professor Noah J. Navarchus, an Aquatic Biologist on the faculty at Thornton. Noah knows the channels by heart and navigates them with casual confidence.

This is his tenth summer at the Skoch Labs. Truth be told, he feels more at home with a good ship under him than he does on land. He never lost his sea legs. Sailing is in his blood. His family lore suggested that, on his mother's side, he was a distant descendant of the legendary Sir Francis Drake. But, of course, History records that Sir Francis had no children or, at least, none to speak of. Noah was intelligent enough to treat such stories with a healthy skepticism. The tales came predominantly from two aged aunts who had delusions that they were of royal blood and that, one-day, they would come into fabulous wealth that they had done nothing to merit. Noah recognized that dementia may wear many different disguises. In the event that such dementia was contagious, he tried to maintain a safe distance.

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He breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the smells of the lake. This morning the water had a mild chop but he hardly noticed it. He felt the pulse of the engines through the soles of his feet. He is in his early fifties, of medium height, with brown eyes, sandy hair, a prodigious mustache, and a mischievous grin that suggests that, most of the time, he finds the human drama to be primarily comedy with occasional touches of tragedy. His skin is beginning to look like leather from many years of outdoor work. Clenched in his teeth is his ever-present pipe. At times such as this, he momentarily regrets that he does not have an eye patch, a wooden leg, and a parrot perched on his shoulder.

Yet Noah is no stranger to tragedy. He is a widower, having lost his wife, Esther, in an automobile accident after only a few years of marriage. Her Honda Civic was T-boned on the driver's side by a four-door Mercedes sedan. The driver of the Mercedes was a nineteen-year old woman, high on LSD, who had run the red light. Esther never had a chance. After a period of mourning, Noah dedicated his love and his life to his research. Yet, not a day went by that he did not think of Esther. He awoke each morning expecting to find her there beside him. He would look up from the dinner table and expect to see her sitting opposite him. He spoke to her each day and often. He stopped thinking that this was weird. It became as natural to him as the rising and setting of the sun. Even so, missing her was almost physically painful. It was especially acute at the time of holidays.

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When they reached open water, Noah set a course for the deepest part of the lake. Lake Katherine had a maximum depth of 220 feet with an average depth of 65 feet. Noah's research focused on studying the sturgeon population in Lake Katherine. This research was supported by a grant from The National Wildlife Association. The sturgeon had been reintroduced into the lake twenty years earlier in an attempt to establish a local caviar industry. Sturgeon can grow to be 18 feet long and weigh as much as 2 tons. They live mainly near the lake bottom in the Benthic Zone.

The Silver Stag had been acquired from the Irish government with grant money from the National Oceanic Foundation. In its previous incarnation, it had been The Celtic Mariner, a fishing trawler. Once refitted for research, it could accommodate 6-8 scientists with a maximum endurance of 14 days. The ship is 100 feet long and 29 feet wide. It has a gross tonnage of 350, with an average speed of 7.5 knots, but if pushed, it could make as much as 9.7 knots. It is equipped with echo sounder, sonar, and numerous other electronic bells and whistles. Noah's crew consisted of six of his doctoral students. They each receive a small stipend, free room and board for the summer, a wealth of research experience, and eventually a degree. It was the academic equivalent of indentured servitude. Most of the students welcomed it as an opportunity that they would never have been able to afford without this support.

Today, the Silver Stag is headed for the northern basin of Lake Katherine, one of the deepest parts of the lake. Noah had used a grid system to divide the lake bottom into a multitude of

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equal sized “gardens”. Each day, they would sample one garden in the morning and another in the afternoon. With a five-day workweek, and a ten-week summer program, they expected to survey one hundred gardens this summer. They had worked a nearby section on their previous trip and had left marker buoys. Their sampling method was demersal trawling, dragging a net close to the lake floor. Otterboards kept the mouth of the net open. The catch was transferred to the first of the two pools on the Silver Stag. Any sturgeon among the catch were moved to the second pool. After the contents of the first pool were flushed back into the lake, the sturgeon were counted, tagged, measured, and weighed. Also recorded were the coordinates of the site, the day and time, and the depth and temperature of the water, and its salinity. The statistical analysis was reserved for the academic year. After the researchers had collected their data, the contents of the second pool were released back into the lake. Then the ship moves to another nearby part of the garden and makes another pass. The work is repetitive and physically demanding.

Noah’s crew was careful to do as little damage as possible to the wild life and to the environment. But, no one is perfect, and on occasion, the trawl would dig into the lake bottom. Such was the case on the third pass of Wednesday afternoon. After the fish had been taken care of, there remained a substantial pile of mud and debris. They hosed it down to make the disposal easier. Several of the students hoped that the pile would contain valuable artifacts. They were horrified to find that what remained, after the mud was washed away, was a

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human skeleton, largely intact. At first glance, Noah thought that the cadaver featured a hideous grin. A second, longer look told him that he was mistaken. Skeletons don't smile. It was only his imagination playing tricks on him. Not a nice thing to do to an old salt! Close examination of the remains revealed that the deceased had been bound hand and foot with wire. Also, around the corpse's neck, attached by wire, was a round stone about 2 feet in diameter and 2 inches thick. The stone had a round hole, about 5 inches across, through the center.

Noah fetched his camera and took numerous pictures. This ranked high on his list of strange experiences and cried out for documentation. He was rather sure that the body was not Sir Francis Drake. Historical records report that Sir Francis died in 1596 and that he was buried in a lead coffin, at sea, off Portobelo, Panama. The bindings pretty much ruled out accident and all but the most bizarre suicide, leaving foul play as the logical conclusion. The stone was obviously intended to keep the body from surfacing when the decay gases increased the bouyancy. This was clearly a police matter and it put their surveying research temporarily on hold. His students got an unexpected holiday and a story that they could someday tell their grandchildren.

He radioed ashore, notifying the authorities, and charted a course for Abigail Island. They were scarcely halfway there when they received a message to divert to the mainland, to Port Jefferson, the seat of Algonquin County. Noah smiled to himself. The authorities did not relish the prospect of a trip out to the Island. They much preferred that he bring the body to

them. He had to admit that it made sense. Port Jefferson had the medical examiner and the laboratory facilities. Noah had no reason to object. He was eager to unload his gruesome cargo and resume his research.

In Port Jefferson, the reception committee at the dock consisted of the Coroner, his two assistants, the County Sheriff, and three of his deputies. The Coroner took possession of the remains and his assistants loaded them into their meat wagon. The Sheriff questioned Noah at length and then insisted on a detailed written report. Meanwhile, his students passed the time swimming, sunbathing, or taking several hours of unplanned shore leave. Before the Silver Stag cast off to resume its research voyage, Noah and the Sheriff agreed to keep in touch. As they motored back to the northern basin, Noah meditated on the incident. *Presuming that the victim was still alive when he went into the water, it was a horrible way to die. Whatever happened to the good old days when flogging and keelhauling were all the rage? I wonder what was the nature of this person's sins that they would warrant this type of execution. Then, of course, one had to consider the executioners. They were guilty of further polluting my lake. I would set a high price on Absolution.*

There is one bright spot in this whole scene. With my photographs and my gift for blarney, I have a story that, properly handled, will keep me in free drinks for at least a month when I return to Harrison and Thornton. He could already taste the Irish Whiskey.

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