

French Leave

By Jane Tesh

"I tell you, Benny, it's a conspiracy, an evil conspiracy to destroy society as we know it." The elderly woman in the fringed shawl, kerchief, and beads leaned forward, stabbing a short red-nailed finger emphatically. "Fawn Hall, Donna Rice, and Jessica Hahn are all members of a secret communist organization that recruits lovely young airhead women to seduce public officials. It's 'Charley's Angels' gone haywire. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they were all the same person!"

"This looks great, Goldie," Benny said enthusiastically. "What else you got?" He turned to his companion, who gave him a weary look. "We always do a big article on the year's predictions. One of your best selling issues. Go ahead, Goldie. These look terrific."

Marigold Rumford put her hands to her head, hummed for a few minutes, and then said, "The Ayatollah will be granted political asylum in the United States. He will open his own chain of fast food restaurants and be the subject of a miniseries. I'm not sure which network. That part isn't clear." She closed her eyes to summon the answer.

"That past isn't clear," Jonathan repeated, sotto voce. "How unfortunate."

"Hmmm, the vide of Jim and Tammy Baker's appearance on 'Nightline' will go double platinum and pave the way for their triumphant return to TV evangelism. Joan Collins will marry Sylvester Stallone. Eddie Murphey will give up show business after revealing his sex change operation. Forks will become obsolete."

Jonathan became impatient as the woman droned on. He had never heard such appalling nonsense, and there was Benedek, taping every word. And thousands of people would read and believe every word because it was printed in the National Register.

Why do you let this get to you? He asked himself. There will always be people who believe whatever they read in the paper, any paper. Just because you have a passion for accuracy, for the facts. He sighed and looked at his watch for the tenth tie that morning. Couldn't this woman have called in her so-called predictions?

He thought what was really bothering him was the cavalier way Benedek used people. Here was this poor pathetic woman rambling utter nonsense and believing she was saving the world, while Benny took full advantage of her insanity. And it wasn't just Mrs. Rumford. Benny used all his bizarre acquaintances in order to get his stories. Call on one, drop in on another – Theo, for example. Jonathan had lost count of the times they'd gone to the alchemist, interrupting his experiments, his – well, whatever he did.

"Hmm, the Russians are working on an answer to our Star Wars defense system, something they call Blastnost. A tribe of Bigfoot creatures will be found in the Florida Everglades, where they have been mating with crocodilians to produce a race of super mutants."

"Big mouths, no doubts," Jonathan put in sarcastically.

Benny gave him an admiring look. "Not bad, Jon-Boy. Needs work, but it's a possibility."

Disgusted, Jonathan said, "Are you through?"

Benny turned to the woman. "Whaddaya say, Goldie?"

"Just a minute, just a minute," she said, one hand to her forehead.

"There can't be more," Jonathan said in an undertone to Benny. "She's exhausted every ridiculous story known to man."

"She's the best in the business," Benny said cheerfully.

Mrs. Rumford waved a hand. "Something for you Benny, my love."

Great, thought Jonathan. Set him off again, please. He needs so little encouragement.

Benny was delighted. "You see something ahead for me? What is it? Vanna finally answers my letter, right?"

But quite suddenly, Mrs. Rumford snatched Jonathan's hand, her little eyes bright. "Yes, yes," she said, pleased. "I feel it very strongly. You, young man. You will do battle today and win. But be careful. One little slip, and it's all over."

Startled, Jonathan pulled away. Benny chuckled. "Battle! That's no prediction, Goldie. He goes three rounds with his boss lady every day."

Mrs. Rumford's eyes narrowed. "This will be a different battle, a test of courage, a struggle to the death! A contest of cold steel and taut muscle."

Jonathan laughed self-deprecatingly. "I don't think you mean me, Mrs. Rumford. And this has all been quite fascinating, but we really must go."

She caught his hand again, and his was disconcerted by her piercing gaze. "You must be careful," she said. "When the time comes, feint right, lunge left. Have you got it? Feint right, lunge left."

"Yes, of course," he said, disentangling himself. "Thank you." With a quick dark look in Benny's direction, he indicated it was time to make an exit. "Benedek."

Once outside, he snagged Benny's arm and propelled him to the car. "Of all the ridiculous nonsense, this is the worst! Ten minutes, you said. We've been in there over an hour!"

"Chill out, Jack," Benny said. "You got a free prediction."

"Which is just as preposterous as anything else the woman said." Jonathan jerked open the door on the driver's side. "Battle!" he said with a snort. "The only battle I do is with you."

"A struggle to the death," Benny quoted enthusiastically, hopping in.

"Don't tempt me," came the grim reply.

Benny tapped his tape recorder rhythmically. "Got some great stuff here, J.J. Oughta put me back in Jordy's good graces. The scoop on 1988. Sounds like a fun year. Soon as I call this in, I'll be free and clear for the party."

"Party?" said Jonathan.

"Yeah, the big society bash. You remember. Francis Aubert. You're supposed to go, too."

"I had completely forgotten," said Jonathan. "And that's tonight?"

"Big formal affair at his mansion. Remember Dr. Moorhouse told you to go and butter up some rich old toad, what's his name, Girauld? Said he might bequeath a mil or two to the Institute if he liked your looks."

"I am not going to a party tonight, and I'm certainly not going to beg for money," Jonathan said tersely.

Benny shrugged. "Suit yourself. When I hear the cry of free food, I answer."

"There is no way I am going to such an affair."

"Right. Meet you at the punchbowl."

It was with considerable satisfaction and a great deal of humor that Benny saw Jonathan, enter the vast main room of the Aubert mansion precisely at eight that evening. Apparently strong words had been exchanged between his partner and the redoubtable Dr. M. Jonny looked spiffy in his black tux, and there was a polite of somewhat lackluster smile on his face.

"Glad you could make it, chum," Benny greeted.

"Don't say another word," Jonathan replied through his smile.

"Hey, this isn't so bad," Benny said, grinning. "The food is terrific, the drinks are flowing, and there are several extremely attractive young debutant types floatin' around here someplace. After you hit the toad for some big bucks, we can take our pick."

Jonathan sighed, exasperated. "Why do you insist on calling Girauld a toad? I'll admit the man is overweight, but that's no reason to--"

"That's him over there," Benny interrupted.

The object of their discussion was a large stout man in flawlessly tailored evening clothes. He approached, smiling thinly at Jonathan. "Julianna told me you'd be here tonight, MacKensie. I'll tell you now you've been sent on a fool's errand. I've no intention of donating any money to anything as outlandish as a Paranormal Research Department." His small bright blue eyes gave Benny a quick curious glance. "This, I take it, is your associate, the infamous Edgar Benedek."

"Glad to meet you, too," Benny said cheerfully, shaking the large pudgy hand Girauld reluctantly offered.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Girauld," said Jonathan, "but your donation would not necessarily have to be to a specific department. The Georgetown Institute has many--"

"Yes, I'm sure it does," Girauld broke in, "but I'm not interested at this time. I've got several projects going, including the possible purchase of this house."

"What, you're thinking of buying the Aubert place?" Benny said. "Guess you can't have too many houses, can you?"

Girauld regarded him out of narrowed eyes. "This happens to be a fine example of early 18th Century French architecture. My ancestors were French, and I am intensely interested in anything of their era."

"You think a couple might still be wandering around in here?"

Girauld looked annoyed. "I don't believe in ghosts, Mr. Benedek, and people who do aren't worth my time. Good evening, MacKensie." He gave Jonathan a brief nod before returning to the buffet tables.

"And you didn't want me to call him a toad," Benny remarked.

"It's his money," said Jonathan. "He doesn't have to give any of it away."

"You think Dr. Moorhouse is going to share your tolerant view?"

Jonathan sighed. "I am not a fund raiser."

"Ah, Mr. Benedek! Dr. MacKensie," a cheerful voice called. Their host, Francis Aubert, came to greet them, his pale face alight. "So glad you gentlemen could come."

"Wouldn't have missed it," said Benny.

"Well, I must admit I had ulterior motives for inviting you," said Aubert, nervously smoothing his thin graying hair. "If we could walk over this way, I have a little matter I'd like to discuss with you." Jonathan gave Benny a puzzled frown, and Benny responded with a shrug. Aubert led them to a private corner of the room. "I'm sure this isn't quite orthodox," he apologized, "but you do have a certain reputation for your work in the, ah, other realms, shall we say? I mean, you do have some expertise in the area of, uh, ghosts?"

"Yeah, sure," said Benny, pleased. "So what's the problem? You got a phantom or two hanging around the old castle?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Aubert uneasily. "Only you must not repeat this to a soul, you understand. I would be ruined."

"What seems to be the trouble?" Jonathan asked.

Aubert looked around cautiously before he spoke. "Ghosts," he said, his voice a whisper. "I've seen them. In the upstairs hallway."

"What do they look like?" Benny asked. "Have they said anything to you? Made any sort of indication why they're here?"

Aubert shook his head. "I don't know what they want. One is a young man, the other is somewhat older. They fade in and out. Mr. Benedek," he said earnestly, "I can't have these things in my house. I have dozens of events planned. If anything should happen. . ."

"Sounds like you need an exorcist," said Benny, reaching into his pocket. "I can put you in touch with any one of six. Guaranteed results."

"No, no," he said, agitated. "I had hoped you could handle this yourselves. Please, would you come have a look? There must be something you can do."

The stairway was wide polished wood with an ornate carved banister. The upper hall was carpeted in rose pink, the walls lined with paintings. Dark faces with piercing eyes stared down from the portraits.

"My ancestors," Aubert explained.

"Could some of them be paying you a little visit from the Great Beyond?" Benny inquired, pausing to admire a rather zoftig princess in a low cut robe.

"I have no idea. Here. Here's where I saw them."

At the end of the hallway was an open chamber, moonlight streaming in from a round stained glass window.

"This used to be a dressing room," said Aubert. "It led to a bedroom which has been remodeled due to water damage from a leak in the roof and closed off from the hallway. I hated to move the window, so I just left this room as it is. This is where I've seen the ghosts, here, and in the hall."

The little room was chilly, and the light coming through the panes of blue, white, rose, and gold made oddly colored shadows on the walls and floor.

"Anything violent occur in the house?" Benny asked. "Any strange deaths or mysterious happenings? Any reports of ghosts before now?"

"No, no," said Aubert. "My family never had a hint of scandal – though there was a slight feud sometimes in the late 1700s. That couldn't have any bearing on this, could it?"

"You never can tell," said Benny. "What kind of feud?"

"Just that one of my ancestors, Jacques Clairveaux, had an argument of sorts with a cousin. It split the family for a while, but then all was forgiven when Clairveaux married the cousin's sister and settled the dispute. And the only reason I know about that is because of a wonderful discovery I made not long ago. Let me show you."

He led them up another flight of wide stairs to the third floor bedrooms. Spread out on one canopied bed was a beautiful array of antique clothing, jackets in rich brocade, satin vests with sparkling buttons, satin knee pants, white silk stockings, gowns of sprigged muslin and diaphanous cloth. Aubert pointed with pride to each item. "This belonged to my family. This was an actual ball gown worn by one of my ancestral aunts. The suit belonged to Jacques Clairveaux – look, I even have the shoes and some of his jewelry. I found them in the attic quite by accident."

Jonathan admired the diamond pin and silver rings glistening with sapphires. "You really should have these put somewhere safe."

“Oh, I have an excellent security system in the house,” Aubert said. “Look here: two foils in perfect condition. I plan to loan everything to a museum later in the spring.”

Benny carefully hefted one of the silver swords. “Quite a collection you’ve got here,” he remarked.

Aubert smiled. “Yes, I wouldn’t mind having my own museum some day.” His smile faded. “But if it’s a haunted museum –well, you see my problem.”

“What would you like us to do?” Jonathan asked.

“The ghosts usually show themselves very late a night,” said Aubert. “If you could stay, possibly communicate with them, anything.”

“Sure,” said Benny.

“Mr. Aubert,” said Jonathan. “You realize we can’t guarantee any sort of results. There could be any number of reasonable explanations for what you’ve seen.”

“I don’t care,” he said. “Just see what you can find out. Please, Dr. MacKensie. I’m at my wit’s end.”

Benny grinned, seeing the effect of the man’s plea on his friend.

“Yes, of course. We’ll do whatever we can,” said Jonathan.

“Thank you,” said Aubert. “Thank you very much.”

Benny snapped his fingers. “I got the perfect solution,” he said. “Just sell the place to Girauld. Let him handle the ghosts.”

He’d spoken in jest, but Aubert’s pale face set in grim lines. “Girauld talks too much,” he said evenly. “I’ve no intention of selling to him or to anyone. Allow me to get you something else to drink.”

“This is turning out better than I thought, Jack,” said Benny as they went back down the stairs. “Free food and a story. Let’s check out the debts.”

“Can’t you ever think of people as people instead of how you can use them?” Jonathan asked, frowning. “Aubert needs help. The man is deeply concerned about his home.”

“Remind me to buy you a new soap box for Christmas,” Benny replied and sauntered off. He wasn’t in the mood for one of Jonathan’s lectures, not now. This was a party! He accepted a fresh drink from Aubert and wandered the room, ears alert. He picked up some intriguing news about a senator’s wife and met a fellow reporter by the fireplace. They swapped tall tales for a while; then Benny decided to introduce himself to the tall blonde in blue silk.

He was half way across the room when he saw Girauld rolling toward Aubert. Sensing an interesting confrontation, he positioned himself where he could see and hear, but Aubert greeted the large man politely, and they chatted briefly about the house.

“I’m willing to increase my offer, Francis,” said Girauld. “Think about it.” “I must see to my guests,” Aubert replied, smiling. “Why don’t we discuss this later?”

“Of course.”

Benny frowned. Had he been mistaken? Hadn’t Aubert clenched his teeth and practically turned purple when he brought up selling the house to Girauld? Okay, so the guy had great party manners. Didn’t want to cause a scene. But he’d sure looked friendly and relaxed, not at all distressed.

Benny looked around for his blonde and found her clinging to Jonathan’s arm. In fact, there were two blondes and a redhead, all smiling invitingly at his partner and batting their eyes.

Using people. Hell, what did Jonathan think he was doing, beaming all that charm on helpless females?

Fortunately, there was an ample supply of blondes at the party, and Benny found several young ladies who were pleased to meet a famous author and television personality. He was in quite a mellow mood by the time all the guests had gone and Aubert showed them back up to the little chamber.

"I'll be at the Hyatt tonight out of your way," Aubert said. "Good luck, and again, thank you."

There were two elaborately carved and highly uncomfortable chairs in the room and a table. Aubert had left some food and wine, but Jonathan had had enough at the party.

"This is one elegant stake-out, eh, Jack?" Benny remarked, pouring a glass of wine for himself. "Wine, nifty snacks, enough atmosphere to choke a cow."

"Beautifully put," said Jonathan, stretching out in a chair in a vain attempt to find a soft spot. "If you see anything, let me know." He closed his eyes.

"Hey, don't conk out yet," Benny protested. "The night is still young."

"It's nearly two am," Jonathan replied. "I spent the morning with my students, the afternoon listening to a deranged gypsy, and the evening smiling politely at people I don't know. Good night."

Benny wedged himself into the other chair. "You can't tell me some of those people weren't worth knowing."

"I got Cecelia's number, if that's what you mean."

"Barbara's, too, I'll bet."

Jonathan opened one eye. "Everyone's. All right? Now shut up." He closed his eye and shifted in the chair.

Benny didn't mean to go to sleep, but he's had plenty to drink and soon felt drowsy. He woke with a start to find Jonathan's chair empty and cold moonlight gleaming through the stained glass window in eerie colors.

"Jonathan?" Probably had to make a pit stop, he decided, rubbing his aching neck. Or he probably decided to sack out in a more comfortable place. Can't say that I blame him, though he's supposed to be on Ghost Patrol. Ghosts must have got him.

Well, now, that wasn't too funny, come to think of it. Jonathan was highly susceptible to wandering spirits, no matter how strongly he denied it. Might not be a bad idea to see where he'd gone.

The hallway was dim in the moonlight, and Benny had the uneasy feeling the many staring eyes in the portraits were looking at him. When he saw the silent figure approaching, his first impulse was to dash down the stairs and out the door; then he saw it was Jonathan. A very different-looking Jonathan.

"Uh-oh," he said, aware of a sinking feeling inside. "Either you've decided to play dress-up, or I'm too late."

The man paused, eyeing Benny warily. "Que faites-vous ici?" he said sharply in remarkably clear French.

Benny was still trying to get over his surprise at his friend's appearance. Jonathan looked frighteningly accurate in the elegantly brocaded clothes, lace foaming at his throat and at the wide cuffs of the turquoise blue jacket. Flashes of rainbow colors sparkled from the rings on his hands, the diamond pin, and on the hilt of the wicked-looking silver sword he wore at his side. There was a new alertness in his face and a very defensive posture.

"Uh, I hope you speak English," said Benny. "The only French I know usually gets my face slapped."

Jonathan's brows lowered. "You are English?" he asked in a heavily accented tone.

"Not as much as you are, but yeah, I am," Benny said, Relieved. At least he'd be able to communicate. "And you are?"

He was not surprised when the man said, "Jacques Clairveaux. And you, monsieur?"

"Edgar Benedek," he replied. "You may not remember, but we're old friends."

There was a startling change in the other man. His calm features hardened, and the sword was drawn with a hiss, causing Benny to leap back in alarm. "Benedict!" he growled. "That cowardly cousin of Andre's! How dare you come here?"

"Whoa, hold on!" said Benny, still backing up. "Benedek, I said, and I'm nobody's cousin."

Jonathan advanced, holding the sword as if he knew how to use it. "There will be no one of your miserable family in my house!"

"Okay, okay, I'm leaving," said Benny. "But before I go, tell me one thing. What's the big deal between my family and yours?"

Jonathan frowned. "Big deal?"

"The problem. What set this off. Why have you come back?"

He paused. "Come back?" he repeated, puzzled.

"Why have you taken over this body? What needs to be resolved?"

"I do not know what you are talking about," he said stiffly. "As to the quarrel, you are a fool to pretend you know nothing."

"Well, humor a fool and let me in on the story," said Benny, keeping his eyes on the gleaming silver sword. "Okay, so I'm Andre's cousin. I'm harmless, just got in from the country. You can see I'm not wearing any weapons. Who is Andre, by the way?"

The look Jonathan gave him was one of complete disdain. "Andre Girauld, of course, imbecile."

"Oh-ho!" Benny's eyes widened. "Let me get this straight, Jacques. You're mad at Girauld and his family because they took something of yours, a house, maybe?"

"He would dare attempt to claim this house as his own," Jacques said through clenched teeth. "It is ours!"

Benny whistled softly. "No wonder you've come back. Talk about history repeating itself. How come you're not Jacques Aubert?"

The sword whipped so close, it almost cut Benny's tie. "And you try to play the fool?" Jacques said angrily. "You know very well I am Jacques Aubert. Clairveaux is my title." He moved forward. "Out!"

"No, wait, wait," said Benny. "You may need my help. I don't think your descendant's been straight with us. He didn't mention the Auberts have been mad at the Giraulds, and he was pretty evasive about your name, too. And there's supposed to be another ghost around here. Any guesses?"

Jacques paused once more, and Benny caught a flicker of something besides anger in the dark eyes. Was Jonathan able to make a difference, or was he completely submerged in Clairveaux. The Frenchman pulled back a step and regarded Benny thoughtfully. "Is this some new trick of Andre's?" he mused aloud. "A ghost? You are saying someone else is in the house?"

"Just listen to me for a second," said Benny, taking full advantage of his hesitation. "You've come back for a reason. What is it? What do you need to do?" He saw the dark shape

before Jacques was aware of any danger. "Look out!" he cried, ignoring the blade to grab the man's arm and pull him from the path of a huge menacing figure. They tumbled to the floor, Jacques rolling and springing to his feet with uncommon grace, tense and ready. The dark eyes met Benny's in a wide wondering gaze. "I owe you my life, monsieur," he said and offered his hand. "I misjudged you. I apologize."

"No sweat," said Benny, grinning with relief as Jacques hauled him up.

The other figure waited, dark and grim, light bouncing off his sword.

"It is Girauld," said Jacques with satisfaction. "At last, we will meet."

"It is Girauld," Benny said with a gasp. The man had been transformed, just as Jonathan had, by the clothing and an alien spirit within. Now, instead of portly and pompous, he was a large glowering man with murder in his eyes. He spoke a few low words, which Jacques answered in a torrent of French, none of it complimentary, Benny surmised, from the way Girauld swelled.

Great. So the ghosts had to have human form in order to fight. Terrific. Why pick the one night Jonathan was here? Sure, he looked the part, and apparently, with a little help from Jacques Clairveaux, he was going to be able to fence, but, look at the size of the other guy! He could win on sheer brute strength.

"En garde," said Girauld.

Jacques calmly took off the brocaded jacket and white satin waistcoat and the scabbard. He tucked up the ruffles of his sleeves. Girauld did the same. After a few minutes of cautious circling, the fight began in earnest, Jacques lunging and recovering as Girauld countered and delivered a series of lightning moves. Jacques parried gracefully, a look of grim determination on his face.

Though not familiar with fencing terms, Benny could see some mighty fancy maneuvers as each man attacked and defended, their wrists working in smooth movements, graceful as dancers. Jonathan – or rather, Jacques, he had to keep reminding himself – successfully blocked each of Girauld's incoming thrusts, following with a counterattack that forced the larger man back against the row of portraits. Then Jacques pulled away, apparently leaving himself open, but when Girauld lunged forward angrily, his sword was whirled from his grasp.

"Whoa! Didn't see that one coming," Benny said admiringly as Girauld's sword clattered to the floor.

Jacques regarded his opponent coldly. "Monsieur," he said, indicating that Girauld was to pick up his foil.

"That may not be a good idea, Jack," said Benny, distressed to find that the Frenchman shared Jonathan's annoying sense of fair play.

Girauld, eyes livid, snatched up his sword. He growled something even Benny understood as a death threat and attacked with renewed force.

As the men fought, Benny looked around for a weapon of his own. Jacques appeared tireless, but his face was pale, jaw tight. The hallway had a remarkable lack of useful items. Usually there were large vases one could throw, but except for the paintings, the hallway was bare.

In the one moment Benny looked away, he heard a sharp intake of breath. Glancing back quickly, he saw Girauld pulling his sword from Jacques' left arm, saw blood well out on the white shirt.

"Jonathan!"

The man waved him off. "'Tis naught. A scratch." He resumed the fight, a wild light in his eyes.

I've got to do something, Benny thought, frantic. Jacques' skill is amazing, but this is a battle to the death, and Jonathan's stuck in the middle, as always.

Battle to the death. Holy cow! This is what Goldie was talking about! He realized. Now what exactly did she say? She said he'd win, didn't she?

He had to duck and swerve out of the way as the men clashed together, struggling to push each other aside. They broke apart; then they attacked with furious jabbing motions and huge swipes of their blades.

What did she say? What was it? Something right, something left. Feint right, lunge left. That was it!

"Feint right, lunge left!" he cried.

Instinctively, Jacques responded to the sudden instructions, and on his quick lunge, stabbed the larger man high in the chest. Girauld gasped and fell.

Jacques jerked his sword free. "My family's honor is restored," he said, panting. He wiped the blade clean and turned to Benny. "Thank you. Merci mille fois."

"It was nada, chum," said Benny, leaning over the fallen man. Girauld wasn't dead, but he was going to need help soon. "Let's check that arm."

In the small chamber, he took one of the large cloth napkins from the table and tied it around the injury. Jacques seemed unaffected by the gash, reaching for a glass and the wine bottle.

"Be right back," said Benny, taking several more napkins and attending to Girauld. The wound was not too deep and bleeding sluggishly. Obviously Jacques' honor did not need a death to be satisfied. Okay, first things first. Call an ambulance for Girauld and see if Jacques would vacate the premises.

"Now what, my friend?" the Frenchman asked when he returned. "Will you stay? I assure you, you are a welcomed guest in my home."

Benny paused. Now what, indeed? "I was kinda hoping you'd return to Georgetown with me," he said.

Jacques' eyebrows lifted inquiringly.

"You'll like it," Benny continued. "Really nice place." Only, what happens when we get there? Now that his honor is settled, is Jacques gonna let go?

"Your home is there?" Jacques asked.

"Yeah," said Benny easily. "Chateau du Benedek. I want you to be my guest."

"Very well," he agreed. "But only for a short while. I have obligations."

"As always," he grinned. "Where's your tux? Your clothes?"

Jacques looked at him, mystified, and indicated the shirt and satin pants.

"No, I mean – never mind. I'll find them." Benny sprinted up the next flight to the bedroom Aubert had shown them and found Jonathan's tuxedo, shirt, and shoes in a heap on the floor. Gathering them up, he returned to the chamber. Jacques shook out his ruffles, put on the turquoise jacket, took a last drink of wine, and followed him. He faltered on the stairs, murmuring something Benny didn't understand.

"What is it?" Benny asked, thinking the injury was finally kicking in.

"Your pardon," said Jacques. "All of a sudden, I am very tired."

"Let me give you a hand."

The further down the long staircase they went, the slower Jonathan walked, and his French accent began to fade. Halfway down, he said, "What happened?" in his normal voice, and a few steps further, he said, "Benedek?" in a puzzled tone.

"It's okay," said Benny, relieved. "No problem, Jonny. We're walkin' right back down to 1987. Just hold on to the banister. I've got you on this side."

"What's going on?" he asked. "My arm. . ."

"Tis naught. A scratch. You've been in worse shape, trust me. A few more steps. Atta boy."

"I went upstairs for just a moment," said Jonathan, confused.

"A moment was all it took for old Jacques to hop on board."

"And he did splendidly," said a new voice.

Aubert was standing at the bottom of the stairs, smiling a humorless smile that instantly put Benny on guard. "Glad to see ya," he said with a grin of his own. "How about phoning for an ambulance? Mr. Girauld's had an accident."

"Well, I hope so," said Aubert. "I certainly intended him to."

"Aw, now, this wouldn't by any chance by a set up, would it?" Benny asked pleasantly. "Decide to let the dead do your dirty work for you?"

Aubert acknowledged this with a nod. "Dr. MacKensie did an excellent job."

"What on earth is he talking about?" Jonathan asked, bewildered.

"Oh, just that he lured everybody over here tonight under false pretenses to get rid of an old rival," said Benny. "That about right, Aubert?"

"Very perceptive, Mr. Benedek," he smiled. "Of course, I knew you were perceptive, just as I knew Dr. MacKensie was quite receptive to spirits. I've followed your careers with great interest."

"And Girauld?" Benny asked. "How'd you get him to stay?"

"By agreeing to listen to his offer," said Aubert, "and then inviting him to spend the night. I was almost certain one of the ghosts would take him over, as he is, after all, a Girauld. Then I would not be directly involved."

"You're involved now, buster, because this is a story and a half."

Somehow he was not surprised to see the gun in Aubert's hand. "Oh, it will be quite a story," he agreed. "Girauld sneaks in to steal my antique clothing and jewelry. Imagine! A guest in my home sinking so low. You two, here to investigate ghosts, valiantly try to stop him. He shoots you both. I come to the rescue too late, killing him in self defense. Works out very nicely." He motioned with the gun. "Upstairs. I want to prepare my little tableau."

"Upstairs," Benny repeated with a surge of hope. "You're sure about that?"

"Go on," he ordered.

"Benedek," said Jonathan, dizzy. "Don't even attempt an explanation. I'll just die in a state of permanent confusion."

"With any luck, you won't die, at all," Benny said in an undertone. "I'm counting on this thing to work in reverse."

"What thing?"

"Just keep walking." Benny kept a firm grip on Jonathan's arm as they ascended the stairs. Come on, Jacques. Are you still up here? With a chill, he realized that the ghost had probably left, having fulfilled his quest. Then he took heart as Jonathan gradually straightened,

no longer needing his assistance. Behind them, Aubert snarled, "Hurry up! I haven't got all night."

"Jacques," Benny said in a low voice. "You've been betrayed by your kinsman. He plans to murder us, and he's got a pistol. I'll create a diversion and--"

To his surprise, Jonathan collapsed on the stairs, causing him a moment of sheer panic before he realized the trick. Aubert, also startled, found himself faced with the point of the silver sword as Jonathan swerved with lightning speed, knocking the gun from the man's hand. Looming up, a deadly light in his eyes, Jacques looked at his descendant with icy contempt.

"Miserable cur," he said, and jabbed the sword into Aubert's heart. With a scream of pain and terror, Aubert fell backward and down the stairs. Jacques turned to Benny and shrugged. "I seem to be leaving bodies lying about everywhere. It will be a great nuisance for the maids, non?"

Benny chuckled. "You had me going there," he said. "When you fell--"

"A simple trick."

"Well, I guess we better see if he broke his neck," Benny said reluctantly. "And you're a lot of fun, Jack, but I'm looking for a partner who isn't quite as bloodthirsty."

Once more, Jacques' influence faded as they descended the stairs. Benny called for an ambulance and led Jonathan out to Aubert's car, which he commandeered. "In you go."

"What am I doing in these clothes?" Jonathan asked, confused. "What happened to Aubert?"

"You took a brief hike into the 'Twilight Zone,' Jack. Don't sweat it," he replied.

"And this is – good heavens! – a rapier! Benedek." This last was a plea.

"I promise to give you the full version in color," said Benny, starting the car. "Later. Right now, we need to leave the scene of the crime."

"My arm!" Jonathan gazed in growing dismay at the blood stained jacket.

"Old war wound," said Benny. "Very old."

Too weary to argue, Jonathan sat back, feeling a great lethargy overtaking him. He felt as if he'd run for miles. His arms and shoulders ached, but curiously, he felt a sense of satisfaction, as if he accomplished something important. This was absurd. He and Benedek had agreed to help Aubert with what appeared to be a routine investigation. Why was he so tired?

"Heads up, Jonny. We're here," said Benny cheerfully.

"Where?" he asked, blinking sleepily.

"The hospital. Our home away from home."

Jonathan resisted Benny's efforts to get him out of the car. "Benedek, I can't go in there like this!"

"Satin knickers are all the rage, Jack. You look great," Benny assured him.

Jonathan protested vehemently until Benny agreed to wait until he'd kicked off the buckled shoes and pulled on his trousers. "Would you mind telling me what went on?" he asked, tossing the satin pants and sword into the back seat. "I look like a refugee from The Three Musketeers."

"Close, very close, d'Artagnan. You went back a couple a hundred years to re-enact an old family feud. I'm pleased to say our side won." He helped him up. "No objections to the shirt?"

Jonathan grimaced at the ruffles. "It'll have to do."

"It's real dashing, buds. You oughta try it more often."

Benny tried very hard to keep a straight face during the proceedings, but the nurses' expressions were priceless. They were extremely curious about the wound – obviously a sword or knife slash – and as for the elegant 18th Century shirt, well, if Jon didn't already have their interest, this disheveled, romantic-looking outfit would have been more than enough to send them over the edge.

The cut required several stitches, then one smiling nurse neatly bandaged the injury and helped Jonathan back into the shirt. "And you're certain this was a fishing accident, Mr. MacKensie?"

"Absolutely," he said. "The, uh, reel slipped."

She grinned, showing an attractive dimple in one cheek. "I could've sworn you'd been fighting a duel."

"Slaying a dragon," said Benny, which earned him a glare and another glimpse of the dimple. "Come on, Lancelot. I'll take you back to the castle."

While they were at the hospital, the ambulance brought in Girauld and Aubert. Both were alive, Aubert just barely, and Girauld was conscious.

"What the devil went on in that house?" he asked Benny. "I'm invited to spend the night, and the next think I know, I'm in the hospital!"

"Welcome to the wonderful world of shadow chasing," Benny said with a grin. "Your pal Francis tried to get rid of you and us, too, just for fun. Ask him about it when he gets out of surgery. Come on, Jonny."

"Is that what happened?" Jonathan asked, getting back into the car.

"Yup. Only you saved the day. And I don't want to hear any more of this using people stuff, because if old Jacques hadn't used you, we'd be skewered or shot, and Aubert would be free as a bird, so mull that one over, Mr. Ethics. And," Benny continued, having thought of something else, "Goldie's prediction was right on the money. Saved your life. So no more of this scoffing."

Jonathan was silent, looking at him thoughtfully.

"Well?" said Benny after a long moment.

"All right," said Jonathan.

Benny stared at him. All right? What do you mean, all right?"

Jonathan sighed. "It's almost dawn, my arm is throbbing, I'm wearing a ruffly shirt and Aubert's sapphire rings – I think I'll just agree with you. It's easier."

"Oh," said Benny, mollified. "Well, okay, then." He started the car and glanced in Jonathan's direction. "You gonna argue with me later?"

"Violently."

Satisfied, Benny started for Jonathan's home.