

The mystery continues

This is the continuation of Alan Doerkson's story "Mysterious castle of Baron von Gut" which originally appeared in the Nov. 5 issue. The Editor apologizes for the delay and inconvenience it may have caused for the author or readers.

Next morning, I got up dull and late, and stumbled down to the dining room for breakfast. Over French toast and coffee, I glanced through the London Crimes. The headlines screamed their usual quota of tragedies and filler material, but in the second section, on page 35, I found the comics. Also, there was a brief note about the disappearance of an obscure aristocrat somewhere in the Black Forest. So much for the emergency. However, I had noticed a headline proclaiming: "Monster Sighted in Forest Near Strasbourg", on the front page. Now I could see the connection. Perhaps the Baron had concocted a special brew, like that of Dr. Jekyll. More likely, he had created a monster which had done him in and then escaped. . . but wait, this was crazy. It sounded like the plot of a thirties horror movie.

Then it struck me. Not the monster, but an idea. If I went to Baden Worse briefly, I might find some prize material for a movie or book. Whatever the case was, haste was essential. Before some other conniver got his foot in the door, I had to unravel this mystery. With this in mind, I checked the schedule of events and found that it would be three days before "Freaking Out" was shown, and four before the showing of . . . my other film. If I didn't know better, I'd swear that the organizers were giving the attendees time to recover from "E.T.Z.M.B." Anyhow, I decided to call up Frank Coprolate (not Zapata or Xavier) and fill him in on the situation. I only told him as much as I had to, of course.

"But Alex," Frank protested, "I thought your Uncle Albert lived in Rome. . . ?"

"He moved a year ago. Said he didn't like the climate or the food."

"So he was staying in a spa when he got his latest heart attack?"

"That's right. He must have had too many massages from their female masseurs."

"Okay, Al, just get back as soon as you can. I don't want to take all the flak, I mean credit for our movies." (Frank had also produced "The Exorcist Meets the Teenage Ghouls of Ridicule High").

After this piece of creative formulation, I packed my bags and took a taxi to the train station. Within minutes, I was speeding on my way to Baden Worse. The train sped east to the French-Italian border (via Monaco), cruised the Italian Riviera and stopped at Genna.

All the way, the scenery was gorgeous, as could be expected. The Mediterranean shimmered in the morning sun, and colorful vineyards lined the hillsides on either side of Columbus's home town. I got out and had a plate of spaghetti along with a bowl of spumoni ice cream in a small restaurant next to the station. Then I reboarded the train, which headed north across the Apennine Mountains, through the Po Valley and into Milan. It crossed the border of Switzerland by way of a lengthy tunnel into the Alps, and then followed a zigzag path through the inspiring, majestic splendour of the mountains. Above rose the picturesque, snowclad peaks, and below lay the steep, rugged valleys and cliffs which delineate Switzerland so enigmatically. Glacial lakes and icy rivers blended into the montane landscape, and dotting the hillsides were dozens of skiers, bikinied and otherwise, Swiss chalets and mountain goats. Deeply moved by the scenery, I moved myself to the dining car and ordered a Swiss steak, some Swiss cheese and crackers, a mug of hot chocolate as well as a box of chocolates for dessert. Unfortunately, all they had was the cheese and crackers. So much for first-class service on trains.

In a few hours' time, we had left the spectacular Alps and spiralled down from their heights to the German frontier. We had come to the edge of the ominous, legendary Black Forest. Around the train stood looming, foreboding pines and cedars, some of them centuries old. The afternoon was drawing to a close as the train pulled into the Rhine River valley. The last streaks of sunlight shone upon the mighty river as it flowed sluggishly northward to the sea. Broken-down forts and remnants of castles swam into view on the crests of the rolling hills which made up the sides of the valley. Miniature villages clustered together, like so many ginger-bread houses and people. It strained my author's vocabulary to try to describe such a tranquil scene.

At last, the train arrived at my destination station, namely Baden Worse. I got out, along with two other people, a portly gentleman and his fat wife. The station was completely empty, except for the ticket seller, who was asleep in his wicket. I lugged my luggage to

the rear of the station, and looked for a cab to take me to a hotel. All I saw was a decrepit stagecoach, whose driver was a mis-shapen hunchback. Two pitch-black horses led the procession.

"Who are you, the local Hearse Rent-a-Car rep?" I quipped. In reply, the hunchback scowled in distaste and said,

"I am Quasimoran, servant to Baron von Gut. If you are Herr Zuma, I have come to take you out to the Baron's castle."

All this was in pidgin English, spoken with a German accent like that used by NAZIs on *Hokum's Heroes*. I answered in pure, unadulterated, Middle-Atlantic ghetto English:

"Hey, man, that's fantastic! What's the buzz about the baron?"

"He disappeared without a trace. Herr Xavier and the village police have been searching the countryside for the last day. Nothing has been found, they say."

"Well, how do I fit into this?" I asked, as I loaded up my luggage and climbed up next to the driver. He whipped the horses into shape and explained as the stagecoach rattled along:

"Mr., I mean Herr Xavier told me that you were to stay at the castle and look for clues while he was in Strasbourg."

"Sounds good to me. Is there anyone else at the castle?"

"Only me and Juliana, the maid."

"Sounds even better. I'll want to examine every inch of the castle and the estate."

"I'd be very careful if I were you," warned Quasimoran mysteriously. "Some strange things have happened there over the centuries."

"Sounds promising. Want to elaborate?"

"I mustn't. The baron and his family have always kept a veil of secrecy over their ceremonies."

"How about if I pay you a grand (in marks, of course)?"

"Absolutely not. If I did, the family curse would haunt me forever!"

"What about 2000 marks?"

"I'll give you a guided tour of the castle, and show you the Gut family's personal papers."

"That's better. How much farther is it, Quasi?"

"Just around this bend."

We went around the bend, and there, before my very eyes stood a towering, majestic castle of Herculean proportions. It was made of gargantuan blocks of stone and surrounded by an impressive

moat full of putrid water. The sky was dark except for the full moon, which shone an evil red from its position just above the horizon. I shuddered, but that was because of the chill of the night wind, blowing through the pines. The hunchback ushered me over the drawbridge, from which I observed a number of reptilian creatures swimming in the moat below.

"Don't tell me those are crocodiles," I commented.

"Of course not!" replied Quasimoran, alleviating my fears. "They're alligators. Baron von Gut imported them from the Neverglades ten years ago. They keep away burglars better than watchdogs."

"I'll bet they do! But what do they eat?"

"Did you hear about the travelling salesman who. . ."

"Never mind, I've heard it before."

We entered the ominous-looking doorway and walked down a wide, high-ceilinged hallway to the foot of a marble spiral staircase. Quasimoran pulled a cord which rang a series of tubular bells.

"Why did you do that?" I asked the hunchback.

"Do not ask for whom the bell tolls," he answered mysteriously. That phrase rang a bell to me. Just then, a girl appeared out of nowhere. She had long, golden hair, clear blue eyes and wore a blue silk dress which flattered her shapely body.

"This is Juliana, the maid," Quasimoran explained.

"Pleased to meet you, beautiful," I greeted her. She smiled and said, "Guten abent" in German.

"She can't speak a word of English," put in Quasimoran.

"Can you speak any German?"

"Enough to get by."

"Zerr gutt! In that case, I'll put away the stage-coach and horses, while Juliana shows you your room." He gave Juliana instructions in German and left by way of the drawbridge. Juliana led the way up the staircase, and I followed close behind with my luggage. Two hundred thirty seven steps later we reached a landing at the top. I sighed in relief and threw down my baggage. (not the stairway, onto the landing). Juliana opened the door at the end of the landing and let me in.

"You first," I invited, but when I turned around the maid had disappeared. The room was pitch black so I felt for a light switch on the wall. I should have known better. The

only thing I found was a big widow spider crawling up side of the wall. Snatch away my hand, I took out lighter and gave it a flick

the flickering light I examined the room. Just opposite was an old-fashioned poster bed with a canopy. Next to it was a bedtable with kerosene lamp, which I promptly lit up. Glancing around the rest of the room, I was struck by the odd assortment of antique furniture. Just at the foot of the bed was an ebony

dresser, carved elaborately and mounted with a gold-trimmed mirror. It was covered in dust, so I polished it up with a handkerchief. Pretty soon I could see a perfect reflection of the room, except for one thing. I wasn't there.

"Ha! It must be some sort of trick mirror," I thought to myself. I looked around for hidden gadgets, but turned up nothing. Puzzled, I flopped down on the bed and stared at the mirror ineffectually. Suddenly, the door in the mirror

opened and a girl stepped in. I glanced around, but saw no one behind me. Turning back to the girl in the mirror, I was struck by her incredible beauty. Her long, chestnut tresses of hair fell loosely about her shoulders and framed a poignant face with bright green eyes filled with longing and desire. She walked up to the mirror and stared blankly out into space, not seeming to notice me at all. This must be a one-way mirror, I thought. The girl had started to comb out her hair, and then began to remove her clothing. Acting on impulse, I reached for my handy Hell and Bowell stuper-eight camera and let it roll. Wait'll Frank get a look at this! I was so busy watching the girl that I didn't notice another character enter the refected room until a moment later. What I saw then was horrible, disgusting and totally depraved. An ugly, deformed "rhinoceros man" sneaked up to the girl and grabbed her by the . . . throat. A look of terror struck her, and she opened her mouth in a silent scream. Evidently, sounds didn't carry beyond the realm of the mirrored room. Desperately, the girl struggled to escape from the maniac's grasp, but unsuccessfully. At last she collapsed helplessly on the floor, and her deformed assailant fled from the room. I got up to take a closer look, but to my surprise the scene had changed to a perfect reflection of my room. Bamboozled again, I decided to hit the sack, and soon was fast asleep.