

Truffles To Die For

By Alan Vanneman

Miss Rowan is the sort of woman, who, if she wants to make an impression on a man, will find a way to do so. With a woman I am not so certain. But when it comes to a man, I have no doubt.

I had noticed that, when she first entered the dining room, she had her handbag with her. It is not unusual for a woman to do this, but in the many times Miss Rowan has dined with us, I do not believe she had done so on any previous occasion.

I cannot, of course, deny Miss Rowan her place at our table. That is Archie's decision, and Mr. Wolfe's. Mr. Wolfe understands Miss Rowan as clearly as I do—though I think at times, for Archie's sake, he acts against his better judgment. We both understand that this is Archie's affair—though I wish the word were not so appropriate—and we must abide by his decisions, which we do, though again I feel that sometimes Mr. Wolfe goes beyond what would be acceptable to Archie and, thus, beyond what is in fact desirable.

The occasion, to the extent that one involving Miss Rowan can be, was innocent. Mr. Wolfe had concluded a major case with his usual aplomb, the conclusion redounding very much to the advantage of the family of a close acquaintance of Miss Rowan's father. Miss Rowan had played some small role in the matter, which she naturally chose to exaggerate, and in any event it was inevitable that she would join in the celebration of Mr. Wolfe's latest triumph. It is rare for Mr. Wolfe to seek company, but when he is certain of being the center of attention and applause, his appetite for recognition, however restrained in manner, manifests itself with a sort of quiet fire that will not be denied.

On such occasions it is of course necessary for everything to be sans flaw, an urgency only intensified by Miss Rowan's presence. Furthermore, the difficulty of the case caused Mr. Wolfe to simplify our menus, particularly for luncheons, to the extent that, I believe, he had lost as much as two pounds. So there was every reason to embrace a return to the grand meals, the main course in particular, *Vol-au-Vis de Veau Toulousaine*, what Americans, knowledgeable ones, at least, would call veal sweetbreads served in pastry shells with cream sauce, though to call *vol-au-vis* "pastry shells" is, one can only say, American.

I was just entering the dining room when Miss Rowan was retrieving her handbag.

"A wonderful meal as usual, Fritz," she told me, touching my hand with hers in her most elegant manner.

I said nothing, but was instantly on my guard.

"The marrow was particularly splendid," she continued. "I was so glad you chose to include it. I'm sure I've told you before that your marrow dishes are the best I've ever tasted! So beautiful, and so delicious!"

Her eyes sparkled as she said this. This is Miss Rowan's way, though whether she was more delighted with my marrow or her own cunning, it is hard to say. A simple guest will simply praise the meal; a cultured one will praise the most famous dish, the gourmet's choice. Miss Rowan, however, will praise the chef's choice. Through her mysterious powers, she will infallibly choose the dish which the chef regards as his finest creation. A man can have no secrets from Miss Rowan.

“The *Vol-au-Vis de Veau Toulousaine* were of course superb as well,” she continued. “Superb! It is so hard to find truffles worthy of the dish, but of course you succeeded admirably. You know, my chef has a fellow in Paris, and another in Alba, who are able to give exceptional service in obtaining just the very best truffles you can imagine. Shall I have Robert give you a call and provide you with a few samples? I think Mr. Wolfe might enjoy them.”

She gave me a most charming smile, and I have no doubt that she spoke the absolute truth. The market for black truffles in France and white truffles in Italy are controlled with an iron hand; the very best never leave the continent. The finest black truffles are only to be had in Paris; the finest white, in Alba, Asti, and Rome. But Miss Rowan, I had no doubt, had broken through these defenses. It was impossible for me to say no.

“I’m sure Mr. Wolfe would appreciate it,” I said, hoping to convey, through the formality of my manner, that I was not speaking for myself.

“Then it’s settled,” she said. “I love this room!”

And so she departed. Considering the lateness of the hour, it was impossible for me to confer with Mr. Wolfe on this matter. In any event, we had hired three assistants for the occasion and it was imperative for me to supervise their cleanup. I did not retire until after two in the morning, though I was able to sleep until eight, for on such occasions Mr. Wolfe does not breakfast before nine.

I arrived in his bedroom the next day pushing an elaborate cart, virtually a kitchen on wheels, that allows me to deliver Mr. Wolfe all of his favorite breakfasts at the proper temperature, working from behind a screen so as not to disturb him. I brought him his tray and poured him a glass of his favorite juice, a mixture of orange and apricot, which he leavens with mineral water. All this is kept very cold. When he finishes his juice I pour him a cup of coffee, hot and very black. Only after he has had his coffee does Mr. Wolfe speak.

“Good morning, Fritz. I trust the kitchen has recovered from last night’s ordeal.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I was pleased.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

For Mr. Wolfe to say he was “pleased” after such an occasion means that he was entirely satisfied. He has no higher praise.

“By the way,” he continued, “did Miss Rowan endeavor to engage you in conversation when she disappeared after the conclusion of our dinner?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Indeed. We will discuss this at a more propitious time. I will not have that woman disturb my breakfast. Continue with my omelet.”

With that he switched on his computer, which Archie, who is of course so clever with these things, had designed for him. For as long as I have worked for Mr. Wolfe, he has been a great reader of newspapers, particularly while breakfasting, though he always complained of the manner in which the ink would rub

off on his hands and the counterpane of his bed. Though he is properly suspicious of the modern "improvements" that so often detract from the dignity and due measure of life, he has learned to control the computer through the device that Archie devised, reading from a large screen that swings into position while he remains in bed. In this manner he peruses newspapers from half a dozen countries each morning.

While he read I prepared him a cheese omelet, served with Virginia Smithfield ham, roasted whole hominy, and roasted tomatoes. Mr. Wolfe, like any true gourmet, cherishes the odors of fine cooking. When he leaves for the plant rooms his bedroom is ventilated, so nothing lingers.

Once I served Mr. Wolfe his meal I departed to the kitchen to begin preparation for Archie's breakfast, raised pancakes with corn meal, along with pork link sausages. I had beaten down the pancake batter earlier and was pleased to see that it had risen nicely. Archie arrived almost at ten. From his demeanor I could surmise that he had accompanied Miss Rowan to her penthouse, though of course I made no comment.

"Good morning, Archie," I said. "Last night was quite an evening."

"Good morning, Fritz. You outdid yourself. You know how Lily loves your marrow."

"Miss Rowan is always so very kind."

I am afraid that whatever I say about Miss Rowan amuses Archie, so I sought to change the subject.

"Would you like some juice?"

Archie nodded. He was already engrossed in his computer, watching some video about one of those sporting events in which he takes such interest. This is natural in a young man, but the videos he watches invariably feature announcers whose sole purpose, it seems, is talk as much and as loudly as possible.

"Too loud for you, Fritz?"

"Not at all, Archie."

He laughed.

"I'll use the earphones."

"Thank you, Archie."

I served Archie his pancakes with orange blossom honey warmed and mixed with orange juice, which both thins and flavors the honey. Archie ate with the wonderful enthusiasm of youth, which is always so charming to see. When he left for the office I immediately began preparing for lunch. Because of the lateness of the previous night, we were more than an hour behind schedule, and I had no time to waste. I was so busy that I did not even hear Mr. Wolfe's elevator and had no notice of the time until almost noon, when Archie suddenly entered the kitchen.

"I'm going out, Fritz," he told me, "so don't forget to fasten the chain. But I'll be back for lunch."

"Of course, Archie."

I followed Archie down the hallway and fastened the chain after he departed. As I was returning to the kitchen I heard Mr. Wolfe's buzzer, so I entered his office.

"Do you wish me to bring you a beer, sir?" I asked.

"I do, Fritz, but afterwards I desire conversation on the matter of Miss Rowan."

"Of course, sir."

I returned to the kitchen to obtain Mr. Wolfe's beer, looking forward to our impending conversation with both eagerness and, I confess, fear. I gathered from Mr. Wolfe's manner that, even knowing as little as he did, he took Miss Rowan's gambit with the very greatest suspicion.

I felt a special sense of obligation to Mr. Wolfe at this moment. I was first of all gratified that he did not ask me to sit. Although Archie is perfectly charming and admirable in every way, he is an American—that, of course, is in great measure the source of his charm—but, still, he *is* an American, and I feel a special freedom when he leaves the house, so that, when the occasion requires, Mr. Wolfe and I can speak as *Europeans*. And on this occasion, as no other, we did so.

I brought him his beer and watched as he filled the glass to a quarter inch of the rim and then drank a healthy swallow before putting the glass down with the slightest trace of a sigh.

"In times of stress," he said, with suitable gravity, "it is imperative not to neglect the quotidian pleasures of life."

"I agree entirely, sir."

"Yes. But now I have no choice but to forsake my safe harbor and embark on uncharted seas. I sent Mr. Goodwin on an errand that will occupy him for at least an hour. What did Miss Rowan say to you?"

"After a few compliments, sir, she praised the quality of the truffles served with the *Vol-au-Vis de Veau Toulousaine* and then implied that her own chef, M. Letty, had privileged access to the most superior truffles in Europe, both black and white. She said that she would have him call me, but so far I have not heard from him."

"You undoubtedly will," said Mr. Wolfe. "Confound the woman!"

"Yes, sir."

I could see one corner of Mr. Wolfe's mouth twist a little. I could see how fiercely he felt himself gripped by Miss Rowan's vise.

"The truffles," he said, tightly, "will be of the very highest quality. The very highest. As a young man, Fritz, I spent two weeks in Asti, a September I shall never forget. Were it not for Mussolini, I should have remained there forever."

"I know, sir. I spent six months working in the kitchen of the Hotel Alba, departing for similar reasons."

"And so I shall experience bliss once more, but at a price. Leave me, Fritz. Say nothing to Archie, of course. Do not inform him, once the truffles arrive, that Miss Rowan is their source. She will almost

surely release the feline from the sack at a time of her own choosing, but I can endure that. I wish to pursue this matter without arousing suspicion on his part for as long as I can.”

“Of course, sir. The prawns from Mr. Horowitz appear excellent.”

Mr. Wolfe nodded but did not speak, and I departed. Archie returned from his errand and I served the prawns, sautéed and accompanied by artichoke bottoms stuffed with tomato paste and roasted potatoes, along with a light salad, preceded by oxtail soup and followed by fruit and cheese. Mr. Wolfe did not appear preoccupied, which reassured me, while Archie continued in his brightest mood, which, I confess, caused me a slight irritation. It was not his fault, of course, but I could not help thinking that it would be some time in our little home before such ingenuous good humor would be justified.

M. Letty did not call until around 3:30, but when he did he assured me that I would receive a shipment of both black and white truffles on the following day sometime before luncheon. In fact, they arrived at 10:30 in the morning, and the mere aroma, through the sturdy packaging, was enough to evoke those remarkable six months, now so long ago, when I worked daily with the most beautiful truffles imaginable, happy hours and happy days disrupted so tragically by evil men. Those of us at the hotel, who wished for nothing more than to prepare fine food in peace and civility, were forced to endure the sight of terrible things, and even, on occasion, to do them, merely to live. I had escaped all that and found in Mr. Wolfe’s home not merely an island but a pinnacle of civility. And now, with these truffles—almost blessed, one might call them—there was no culinary masterpiece that I could not conjure. Yet over all this loomed the menacing shadow of Miss Rowan. There is, I suppose, no Eden without an apple, and without an Eve.

Once I unpacked the truffles Mr. Wolfe came almost immediately into the kitchen.

“My God,” he murmured, gently touching the magnificent fungi. “This means devilry indeed. Well, I will consume the bait, and await the hook.”

Mr. Wolfe chose to consume the truffles largely himself, enjoying truffled egg dishes every morning, while enjoying them on the luncheon and dinner menus more frequently than usual, but not at every meal, so that it might appear he was simply celebrating the conclusion of the case, and, in this way, avoid arousing Archie’s curiosity, which is so easily aroused. I myself had resolved not to lie to Archie, or even labor to mislead him, if he asked me outright why our menus had grown so extravagant. Fortunately, he did not ask. There were several of those “pennant” races to which he attaches so much importance occurring at that time, and, taking advantage of the situation, he frequently disappeared during both the afternoon and the evening to attend these matches. Furthermore, on the weekend he decamped entirely for some sort of jaunt with Miss Rowan. All of this was most convenient for Mr. Wolfe’s purposes, for he spent a great deal of time on the computer while Archie was out, and also had a long visit from Mr. Parker on Saturday. That evening, after dinner, he summoned me to the office once more, and this time he did invite me to sit down.

“Sit there,” he said, pointing to the big red chair before his desk.

I sat, and watched as he poured me a small glass of cognac. Then he raised his own.

“To your health, Fritz,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” I said. “And to yours.”

We drank, and set our glasses down.

"I have found the hook," he began. "I confess that Miss Rowan is never entirely out of my mind. It is in my interest to be aware of her activities, and for the past several months I had the very slightest suspicion of something amiss. You may have heard me remark to Archie that the most remarkable thing about Miss Rowan is that she is even more adept at making money than spending it. Her image in the popular press is that of a mere lady of fashion, who follows wherever fashion leads. Nothing could be further from the truth. Though she goes to great lengths to conceal it, she is an acute businesswoman whose endeavors are almost invariably crowned with success. You may recall the spate of stories last year crowning her as the city's newest billionaire, as well as her affectedly modest disclaimers?"

"I do, sir."

"Yes. In fact, she had become a billionaire several years before, but had managed to conceal that fact from the popular press, until recently.

"I however was aware, and I was thus struck when after years of constant activity and growth, there appeared to be a sudden stasis in her affairs. I surmised at the time that this merely indicated the application of another layer of deception, and now I find that I am correct. You are aware, Fritz, are you not, that the two most important words in New York City are 'real estate', and that the next two most important are 'river view'?"

"I suppose, sir. I am a chef."

"Yes, of course. I envy you, Fritz. You pursue perhaps the simplest yet the noblest of professions. I, however, concern myself with the grosser appetites. A scant two miles from this door the greatest orgy of glass and steel—glass and steel and greed—ever to raise its unholy head on this seething isle now proceeds apace. I refer to that grotesque conglomeration of ego and unwholesome profit known as the Hudson Yards. The extent of Miss Rowan's fortune first became known when it was revealed that she was, in her own person, one of the principal minority investors in that vast undertaking."

Mr. Wolfe paused, and finished his beer.

"She has been our guest on a number of occasions since the size of her investment first became known, but she always been singularly reluctant to discuss the project, despite its notoriety in the popular press. And, when I questioned her gently on the matter at our recent dinner, she lightly explained that she had significantly reduced the size of her investment, something I knew not to be true. She has, rather, significantly increased it, and intends to increase it still more."

Mr. Wolfe paused once more, and dropped his voice, but only to speak with greater intensity.

"I have followed this matter very closely," he said. "One of the principal investors has endured sudden and unsustainable losses in a number of its overseas investments. This of course has been denied as well—everything important is denied—but I know it to be true, and I also know that Miss Rowan is endeavoring to seize control of that investor, to join its share with hers, which would give her effective control of the entire enterprise!"

I could not follow Mr. Wolfe's reasoning here, but his emotion was unmistakable.

"You find that threatening, sir?" I asked.

"I do indeed, Fritz, I do indeed. Pride of place in these undertaking is always given to the premier investor. To the victor belongs the prominence. What would you say if I told you, Fritz, that Miss Rowan is planning to erect, not more than ten blocks from this house, a hundred and twenty five-story aerie overlooking the Hudson River, surpassing all the other structures in the project, the top five floors to be devoted to a penthouse to be occupied by herself, commanding an unequalled 360-degree perspective of the entire city, a modern-day palace filled with every form of luxury and self-indulgence of which the modern mind has conceived?"

"I couldn't imagine, sir," I stammered.

"Well, I can," Mr. Wolfe said, fiercely. "I can imagine Miss Rowan—that woman!—luring Archie to parties every weekend—the extraordinary convenience of it all, of course!—inviting every personage he might hope to meet. He would stay, at first, only on the weekends. But then, again, the convenience of it all! He would start keeping his clothes there, and then other possessions, and finally she would claim him whole, and we would be fortunate to enjoy his presence for the occasional lunch!"

Mr. Wolfe spoke with such a force of growing passion that I was speechless. I wanted to deny the picture he was painting, but it was all too convincing. I could manage nothing better than to express a helpless prayer.

"It can't be true!" I cried.

"Well you may wish," Mr. Wolfe said, with a nod. "Well you may wish. There are a thousand obstacles in her way—first to obtain control of the faltering principal investor and then to obtain the cooperation of all the others. Even as principal investor, of course, she will find it very difficult to construct a building that will be not simply first among equals but rather first without equal, but such is her intent. To obtain the necessary easements, permits, and acquiescences, both formal and informal, for such an undertaking is a Herculean task, and once word gets out, every other developer connected with the project—and every one not so connected—will be struggling to sabotage her efforts, to substitute their own. That is the main, but not the only, reason for her craft. For she fears me as well."

Mr. Wolfe turned restlessly in his seat. I am not sure if I have ever seen him so distressed.

"Confound the woman!" he said again, in a fierce voice. He seemed about to say more but then lapsed into silence.

"Is there anything I can do, sir?" I finally asked, though I could not imagine how I could be of assistance.

"There is, Fritz, there is. A great deal. In fact, you will figure largely in my response to Miss Rowan's intended coup."

"I will do whatever I can."

"I know that you will. Here is the matter, Fritz. Almost all that I have told you is conjecture—founded, I am sure, on truth, but depending largely on my intimate knowledge of Miss Rowan's character and capabilities. To convince intellects less informed and acute than my own requires proofs of a more conventional nature. The problem is, if I seek to gather such proofs, Miss Rowan will quickly become aware of my activities, and will seek to thwart or override them. There must be no trace of my interest

in these matters. Nor can I use the services of Mr. Parker or Mr. Panzer or anyone else known to be associated with me.”

“But if these people cannot make inquiries I do not see how I should be able to,” I said, confused.

“Of course, Fritz. You would not do so personally. There are in New York, people who will perform almost any task, in complete secrecy, if amply compensated for their efforts. This is particularly the case when real estate is involved. When Mr. Parker was here, I obtained from him a list of individuals, known to him by reputation only, who will form one of those silent corporations that so festoon our city, that will gather information on real estate transactions in this area. You will speak to one of these individuals. I have a list. Simply begin at the beginning. If you are refused, move to the next. You must go to one of those convenience stores—not in this neighborhood—and obtain a cheap phone.”

“But I have never been in a convenience store, sir. How shall I recognize one?”

Mr. Wolfe’s eyes flashed.

“Do not speak as a child, Fritz,” he snapped. “If you wish to serve Archie his breakfast every morning you must prove yourself capable of both extreme measures and extreme exertions!”

“Of course, sir. Of course! I was speaking foolishly. I am sorry.”

“Very well. I suggest you visit the area surrounding Madison Square Garden, particularly the area south of that arena. Proceed on foot. These stores advertise their wares. Buy half a dozen phones, from as many stores. I will give you the cash. When you call the people on this list you may find them reluctant to deal with you absent proof of your financial probity. I have established a discreet account containing \$2.5 million under your name. You must first, however, pay these individuals a substantial sum in cash. Mr. Parker assures me that an advance of \$25,000 will be sufficient. As you may know, a cash withdrawal of this amount is automatically reported to the government. To avoid such inconveniences, I have obtained from a certain source \$50,000 in cash, which you will use to conduct your initial affairs. Once you have formed the requisite dummy corporation that will allow us to make the necessary inquiries anonymously, the financial arrangements can be established in a more conventional manner—though, once again, without revealing our identity.”

“I, I am speechless, Mr. Wolfe.”

“I understand, Fritz. Mr. Parker has compiled a detailed list of instructions for you to follow, and you must memorize them. I will be pleased to supplement them in private conversations whenever necessary. Once you are sufficiently familiar with the instructions you must go to William Cullen Bryant Park, behind the library. You will sit outside and make your calls. You must not take your instructions with you. After each call, you will disassemble the phone with which you made the call and dispose of it in a discreet manner. I will show you how to do this. Always sit at a different table and always discard each phone in a different place.”

“Sir,” I protested, “I do not see how I can possibly remember all this.”

“We will discuss these matters again, Fritz, once you have purchased the phones, and again, if you like, before you make your first calls. But we will only do this in person. Never call me, or anyone known to be associated with me, on any phone. Never give this address, under any circumstance. If it is asked,

ignore the request. If the request is repeated, break off the conversation—discreetly, of course. Only on a few occasions will you be required to give your own name. I think this is enough for the time being. Since the weather is expected to be clement, I suggest you purchase the phones tomorrow.”

With that, Mr. Wolfe reached down behind his desk and handed me a plain, black attaché case.

“The money and the instructions are in this case,” he said.

“I shall do my best, Mr. Wolfe,” I said, grasping the handle with much trepidation.

“I have every confidence in you, Fritz.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He looked for a moment directly into his eyes, and then his focus darted away. I sensed that this discussion, charged as it was with such a vast urgency, and so unlike any conversation we had ever experienced in all my years of employment, had strained him almost as much as it had myself, and that now he wished to be alone.

I confess that I sought privacy as well, out of both confusion and fear. I seldom venture out in New York on foot, and certainly not in the vicinity of what Archie calls “the Garden.” I find that in times of stress the best solution is to embrace one’s duty. I took the case down to my room and secured it. Then I returned to the kitchen and deboned a lamb shoulder for Sunday dinner and tended to several other trifles that I had originally planned to do after preparing Mr. Wolfe’s breakfast. In that way I went to be late enough to fall asleep almost immediately, waking in the morning with a sense of foreboding that persisted as I prepared Mr. Wolfe’s breakfast. He made no mention of our discussion the previous night, as though the matter were now entirely in my hands.

Once I returned to the kitchen and disposed of the dishes I descended the basement stairs to my room and opened the case that Mr. Wolfe had given me the night before. I took out a large folder thick with the pages of Mr. Parker’s instructions, which lay on top of neat packets of one-hundred-dollar bills, accompanied, as I was soon to discover, by several packets of twenty-dollar bills, which I discovered with some relief, for I did not look forward to paying for everything with crisp new bills of a high denomination, which must inevitably suggest illegal activity. I put eight twenty-dollar bills in my wallet and, with some hesitation, five one-hundred-dollar bills in my pocket. Thus equipped financially, I put on a jacket and a light overcoat, a hat, and a walking stick. It seemed wise to have something to hold onto.

I entered the kitchen and passed through it to exit by the rear door. Leaving the house and descending the steps to our small backyard made me uncommonly tense. There are few neighborhoods in New York more proper and peaceful than ours, I believe, but the drop off is sudden and steep. I had barely crossed half a dozen streets before I found myself headed down 8th Avenue, surrounded by one can only call the masses, called forth from, it would seem, virtually every country in the world, and speaking, and speaking very loudly, in every conceivable language, with the exceptions of English and French. At length I passed that ponderous leviathan of a building referred to as “the Garden”, surrounded by a furious, honking swirl of traffic. I observed an establishment of sorts offering cell phones for sale, and after a good deal of confusion, managed to purchase one. I continued for several blocks, buying a phone on each block, and then crossed the street and worked my way back up, until I had accumulated ten of the devices. Mr. Wolfe had suggested half a dozen, but I had no intention of making a second trip.

Archie returned from his weekend trip in time for dinner. To soothe myself I prepared a cream of sorrel soup, along with a large oyster soufflé to precede the lamb shoulder, served with roasted potatoes and asparagus, followed by a tarte tatin with French vanilla ice cream for dessert. When I prepared breakfast for Mr. Wolfe the next morning—his favorite 45-minute scrambled eggs with truffles—he said nothing other than the usual pleasantries, as was indeed his usual practice, though when I removed his tray he could not help but remark, “these truffles are almost unendurably fine.” I thought he might say more but he did not, so I simply continued with my duties.

I felt it was wrong to deny Archie the magnificent truffles that had come to us under such conflicted circumstances, particularly since I feared that he might ask about that wonderful odor that now pervaded my kitchen, so I prepared the same dish for him when he arrived, along with some lamb sausages that I had prepared from a portion of the shoulder the night before.

“Those are truffles you’re putting in the eggs, aren’t they?” he said suddenly.

“Yes, Archie, they are.”

“I can smell them from here.”

“These are very fine truffles, Archie,” I told him, studying the curds as I stirred them while summoning the courage to identify their source.

“Miss Rowan provided them,” I said. “That is to say, she enabled us to obtain them. Her chef appears to have some very special contacts in Europe.”

Archie appeared amused at this news.

“She’s up to something,” he told me. “She’s been in a very good mood, and she won’t tell me why.”

He then laughed in a manner that I did not entirely like, though at the same time I felt reassured. It was definitely better for the news about Miss Rowan’s involvement to come from me than Miss Rowan, and it was a relief to have the issue now settled and done with. In addition, his clear interest in pursuing Miss Rowan’s “secret” would lessen the chance of his stumbling across ours.

After breakfast I repaired again to my bedroom, opening up the set of instructions that Mr. Parker had prepared and reviewing them with great care. According to Mr. Parker’s instructions, there were fifteen steps that I must complete. Mr. Wolfe had insisted that I not take the instructions with me, so I simply wrote a list of numbers, from one to fifteen, on a pad of paper, so that I could check them off. At last I summoned up all my courage and prepared for my first visit to William Cullen Bryant Park. I exited from the rear of the house once more, and walked several blocks before hailing a passing cab. I rode to the park, which proved to be quite charming, almost European, and indeed many of the people seated in the park were clearly what Americans would consider to be “foreigners”. I seated myself at some distance from the library but facing it and, with immense trepidation, dialed the first number.

A voice answered on the first ring, flat and direct, not vulgar and not refined, with a trace of a Slavic accent. To my surprise, the conversation proceeded almost perfectly according to Mr. Parker’s instructions, almost as if the man were reading from a similar document. Despite occasional awkward moments, I was never asked a question I could not answer, and never asked a question I did not want to answer. The matter was brought to a head so briskly that I was almost afraid that something had been

omitted, but as I surveyed the checklist before me I saw that we were done in less than half an hour. The first great hurdle had been completed. The second, and most awkward—the transfer of the attaché case containing \$25,000 in cash—would occur that afternoon. I disassembled the phone according to Mr. Wolfe’s instructions and unobtrusively discarded it in a trash can that was half full. Then I returned to our brownstone, feeling both immense relief and continued agitation. Once again I sought to calm my fears by embracing routine, preparing a lunch of trout with truffle butter and beet and endive salad with walnuts and goat cheese. Later, as I served the meal, I was amazed at the ease with which Mr. Wolfe spoke with Archie, particularly when the subject of truffles came up, as it inevitably did, thanks to the menu. I cannot deny that Mr. Wolfe is an unusual gentleman, but that he is a gentleman of true distinction no one can deny, and he praised Miss Rowan’s gift with seemingly simple and genuine candor. I had almost thought not to prepare that dish, but the trout, so fresh and succulent, almost begged to be cooked, and to be served with the noblest of truffles for the pleasure of a gourmet of the distinction of Mr. Wolfe and for such a uniquely charming young man as Archie is surely the most glorious fate a trout could wish for.

Yet I confess that I shook a little once the meal was done and everything was cleared away, for now I had no choice but to venture forth with my weighty attaché case, a burden indeed for a man of my character. I made my way out of the alley and walked several blocks before taking a cab to my destination, the Pennsylvania Hotel, a large, hulking building swarming with people of the most casual attire and the most casual of manners, and forming a contrast with my own person so striking that I felt unnaturally conspicuous. But it was soon clear that in such a place no one pays the slightest concern for anyone else, and so I soon lost all fear of attracting attention. I made my way to an elevator and rode to the eighteenth floor and soon found the room number given me, 1823. I knocked and the door opened. My heart beat fiercely now, more fiercely than any time since my days as an apprentice at the Hotel Alba.

But again, it transpired that my fears were exaggerated. Two large men greeted me, with no pleasure but without intimidation. I handed them the attaché case and the smaller of the two immediately set to counting the money, without speaking a word. When he was finished he looked up at me.

“We’re good. Do you need the case back?”

Mr. Parker had advised to retain possession, since his secretary had purchased the case, so I answered in the affirmative.

“Call tomorrow,” he told me. I was almost sure that this was not the man I had spoken to on the phone.

“Yes, of course.”

And then we were done. I left with the now-empty case, swinging it a little as I walked. As I exited the building I stared at the busy street in wonder, suddenly conscious that I had absolutely no idea where I was, but I then realized almost immediately thereafter that my confusion was no matter, because the street before me was clogged with cabs. I took the first that presented itself and rode a few short blocks to 35th Street, where I exited so as to complete my journey on foot, once again marveling at how close Mr. Wolfe’s brownstone is to New York’s restless masses, as full of energy as they are lacking in purpose, one must say. We are truly an island.

After I returned I felt compelled to take a shower, before beginning to prepare truffled stuffing for three glorious pheasants that Archie had bagged over the weekend—we never, so it would seem, would find ourselves free from Miss Rowan’s snares! They were excellent birds, and would only require a few more days before being sufficiently tender. The goose liver and pork kidney fat we had obtained from Rutherford’s was up to their usual high standards, almost matching the quality of the truffles. For dinner I planned a relatively simple though extravagant meal—fresh oysters with caviar, followed by tournedos Rossini, using the last of the foie gras that I prepared the week before, served with haricots verts and rice, with broiled grapefruit laced with dark rum and brown sugar for dessert.

The next morning, after breakfast, when Archie was conveniently out of the office, I made another call to the gentleman I had spoken to earlier. Once more, our conversation proceeded almost as though governed by clockwork. In less than half fifteen minutes, everything was settled. He informed me to call him in three days, also informing me that he would establish a postal box in the name of our newly formed corporation, for our mutual use, through which information, coded on those strange little objects that Mr. Wolfe wisely prefers to call “clés USB”, would be transferred. So now I had nothing more to do for the rest of the week but to adhere to our normal routine, which was a great relief to me.

That weekend, Archie again forsook us for Miss Rowan’s company, journeying with her to Boston to observe a “playoff” of some sort. Naturally, she possesses a pied-à-terre in that city as well. During the entire weekend, Mr. Wolfe made no mention of our secretive campaign. On Friday evening we hosted a gathering of Mr. Wolfe’s fellow Montenegrins, semi-annual events that I always find quite touching. It is a fine gesture on Mr. Wolfe’s part. The Montenegrins who attend these affairs are all of some educational attainment, and not mere provincials, but none can approach the *haut ton*, if I may use an expression that is, I fear, too good for the modern world, of Mr. Wolfe. He comports himself on these occasions with both a special openness and a special reserve that these good-natured people appreciate without understanding. For the dinner I returned to tournedos Rossini, relatively undemanding yet sure to both awe and delight an unsophisticated palate, preceded by caviar and other fine hors d’oeuvres and followed by the sort of “grand” ice cream desserts which I always find easier to purchase than to prepare.

On Monday I called my mysterious gentleman a third time and discovered that our corporation, “Mid-Town Investments”, was an established firm, and that, barring an emergency, no more phone calls were necessary. I spent the rest of the morning boning a capon for a galantine later in the week before preparing mushroom and truffle tartlets for lunch, to be followed by sautéed pork chops charcutiere, with fruit and cheese for dessert. I planned quail for the evening meal, which cook rapidly, giving me time for another of my sorties.

Again I departed from our brownstone by the rear door, walking several blocks before hailing a cab, heading, fortunately, away from Madison Square Garden, before alighting to take the subway, traveling almost a dozen stops to an entirely unfamiliar neighborhood, certainly less crowded than the neighborhood of Madison Square Garden, but scarcely more promising. I found the post office, a small, busy, unprepossessing affair, and then the post office box. A small manila envelope lay inside, containing the clés, which I retrieved.

For the next month I repeated this errand perhaps dozen times, transferring the clés back and forth. During that time, Mr. Wolfe gave no indication of either relief or frustration, and I dared not raise the issue on my own. I remember that it was on a rather chilly Saturday morning that I journeyed to the post

office once more, Archie again being in Miss Rowan's company. I retrieved the package as usual, but as I did so I saw reflected in the expansive glass window at the front of the building the figure of a man who, though wearing dark glasses, seemed to be staring at me intently even though standing before a display of mailing envelopes. I was instantly struck by the conviction that the man was watching me. I suspect that my reaction gave me away, though he remained impassive.

I exited quickly, deciding not to head directly for the subway, though doubting he would follow me. But follow me he did, and quite aggressively. I was suddenly seized with the fear that he would attack my person and snatch the envelope from me. I looked with desperate hope for the sight of a policeman who might aid me but could see no one, nor was there a convenient cab on the street. I observed a man walking perhaps a dozen paces ahead of me head up the stairway to an apartment building and open the door, using some sort of electronic code to enter. I quickly followed, before the door could close, and then pulled it firmly shut behind me. But as I did so I observed a young woman heading up the same stairs, and the gentleman with the sun glasses close behind her.

I entered the lobby of the building. There was a single elevator, with an indicator light displaying the number "7". Immediately to my left was a doorway marked "Stairs". I entered and again pulled the door shut behind me, hoping my entry would not be observed. I walked quickly up the first flight and was half-way up the second when I heard the door open on the ground floor, followed by the sound of someone ascending at a rapid pace, so I increased my own. On reaching the third floor I tried to open the door, discovering to my discomfort that it was locked. I had no choice but to keep ascending, briefly attempting the door on each new floor, but without success.

As I passed the seventh floor I could see a door labeled "Roof Access". It seemed certain that this door would be locked as well, but this assumption proved to be incorrect, for the door opened easily and had no lock that I could discover. I ran out onto the roof, hoping to meet someone who could at least serve as a witness that would discourage an outright assault, but to my great disappointment I saw no one.

The roof was surrounded by a low wall, less than waist high, that ran around the entirety of the building. Near the far side of the roof stood a small shed. I ran towards it, hoping that it contained the entrance to a second staircase, though it had the look of a mere maintenance shed. Its door was locked. As I pulled on the door I heard the door which I had so recently exited open, followed, to my horror and amazement, by the unmistakable sound of a pistol shot!

I hurried to the opposite side of the shed, seeking at least shelter, finding a second door, that had no lock, but rather a simple hole where one might be installed. The frame of the door appeared to be crooked, but by pulling furiously I was able to open it, though the shed was so close to the edge of the roof that there was insufficient room to open it completely. Once inside I braced my foot against the side of door frame and pulled the door as tightly shut as I could. Almost as did so I heard the heavy footsteps of my assailant. I then heard the sound first of heavy breathing and then a harsh voice.

"Come on out, pal, and you won't get hurt. I just fired a round to let you know I mean business. But I don't want a corpse. Hand over the envelope and you won't have a problem."

I doubted the veracity of that statement, and in any case I had no intention of surrendering the clés. I squatted and was able to look out through the hole in the door to observe the man, just in the act of placing a small revolver in his waistband. I don't believe it occurred to him that I might be watching him.

“Come on out of there, pal,” he said once more. “You’re only making it tough on yourself.”

With that he grabbed the handle of the door and tried to pull it open. When it held fast he grabbed it with both hands and braced his left leg against the frame. I heard the grating of metal and suddenly launched my shoulder against the door, causing it to fly open. As it did so I crashed into my pursuer and sent him hurling backwards over the low wall and, had I not fallen on my knees, I might have followed him.

He fell headfirst for three floors, arcing towards the building. His forehead struck on the stone sill of a fifth-floor window with a hideous crunch, so that he completed his fall feet first, bouncing off an iron railing and collapsing on a concrete walkway. He died without a sound.

I realized that I had to get away from this scene as soon as possible. If I had been observed, I would have to deal with it as I could, but it was my hope to escape detection. I re-entered the building and descended the staircase without meeting anyone. The lobby was empty as well, but as I exited I passed a couple entering the building. They were engaged in an animated conversation, which encouraged me to believe that they would not remember me. It was only two blocks to the subway. I entered and took a train headed in the direction opposite to the one I wished, riding for five stops before getting off and transferring to another train, ending at length at a station known as “Brighton Beach”, which, as it turns out, actually is a beach. I walked along the boardwalk for half an hour, wishing that I could call Mr. Wolfe, but I understood that he felt it was most imperative that there be no phone conversations originating or terminating at our address.

When I felt that my heartbeat had returned to something like normal, I returned to the subway and took a train headed back to the city. I arrived at length at Times Square, where it would be almost impossible for a person of any description to attract attention. Eventually, I was able to find a cab and rode to within several blocks of our brownstone before completing my journey on foot. I entered by the rear, of course, and discovered poor Mr. Wolfe, who had had no proper lunch, sitting in the kitchen by himself, with a half loaf of bread and a similarly diminished wheel of cheese before him.

“You have had difficulties, Fritz?” Mr. Wolfe asked, for of course he knew that nothing ordinary could have prevented my prompt return from my errand.

“Yes, indeed, Mr. Wolfe. I am afraid a man is dead.”

“Sit,” he said to me, firmly, indicating the chair beside him. “You must eat. Would you like something to drink?”

“A glass of mineral water, if that would be possible.”

“Of course, Fritz. Of course.”

I should not have allowed Mr. Wolfe to serve me, but I am afraid that once I had sat on my familiar stool I found I could not rise again. There is nothing so shocking as the brute finality of a violent death, and I had happily forgotten its power for a very long time.

He handed me the glass and I drank.

“Eat, Fritz!” He commanded. “But you must have more. I shall prepare you a plain omelet, accompanied by a slice of ham from last night’s dinner.”

“You are too kind, Mr. Wolfe.”

“Nonsense. Not another word until you have eaten.”

As both Mr. Wolfe and I know, there is no restorative comparable to a well-cooked meal. When I had finished the fine omelet he had prepared, I gave him a full description of the grim proceedings of the previous five hours.

“We must devise another plan,” Mr. Wolfe said, once I had completed my account. “There is still much to be done.”

The plan Mr. Wolfe devised proved to be time-consuming though effective. Instead of passing information using a clés, we transmitted the information through disposable phones. To discourage detection, I was forced to ride the subway for fully an hour at a time, due to the length of the “files” and the limited power of the phones. For the next week, I, and I am sure, Mr. Wolfe as well, were fearful that our plans had been discovered, in some manner and to some extent, but Mr. Wolfe said nothing, and the regularity of our transmissions gave me confidence that Mr. Wolfe felt our secret had been maintained.

Fully another month passed after that terrible incident. Mr. Wolfe had taken another case, and Archie was frequently out of the office. Yet Mr. Wolfe never took the occasion to utter the slightest remark to me regarding Miss Rowan. Mr. Wolfe had cautioned me not to make any effort to search for information about the Hudson “Yards” on the Internet, so that I was confined to ignorance, despite the constant reminder of Miss Rowan’s dark intentions, in the form of the most wonderful truffles a chef could imagine.

Thus it was a complete surprise to me one morning when, while preparing Mr. Wolfe’s breakfast I heard him give a sudden snort of surprise.

“Do you desire my assistance, Mr. Wolfe?” I asked, from behind the screen.

“No,” he said, sharply. “Please continue with my omelet.”

I did so, and when it was ready I scooped it onto its plate, accompanied by venison sausages with truffles and popovers. I brought Mr. Wolfe’s tray and placed it before him.

“Very good, Fritz,” he said. There was something in his manner that convinced me he was in good spirits, but no man should be interrupted while eating his breakfast. It is, in a way, perhaps, a sacred meal.

After I served Mr. Wolfe I returned to my station behind the screen to prepare the breakfast cart for its return to the kitchen, as well as to attend to Mr. Wolfe’s request for another cup of coffee when he should require it, for he will always ring when his cup is perhaps one quarter full, to allow me to brew a fresh cup. When he did ring I prepared the fresh cup and brought it to him. As I did so he suddenly swung the computer screen around.

“Look at your handiwork!” he commanded, pointing to the screen, which displayed the facsimile of the page of a newspaper, his finger indicating a small article headlined “Hudson condominium announces restructuring”. I tried to read the article, but the prose was clotted with strange terms, surely the “language” of the commercial world, of which I knew nothing. I did not want to struggle with the meaning, for I knew the remainder of Mr. Wolfe’s omelet was getting cold.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir."

Before replying, I was gratified to see that Mr. Wolfe took a healthy bite of omelet and venison sausage, which he chewed carefully, as is always his practice, followed by a swallow of coffee.

"A fine omelet, as always, Fritz," he said, "and the venison as well. I'm not surprised that you find the article uninformative. It is designed to be so. But to the knowledgeable it speaks volumes. The information obtained by Mid-Town Investments was dispensed, I am pleased to say, with both the anonymity and effectiveness of an underwater mine. Miss Rowan's plans were revealed to those most likely to resent them. This 'restructuring' assures adequate funding for the organizations she targeted, denying her the controlling interest she pursued. The squabble for precedence will now proceed in the open. These infantile titans inevitably take a greater pleasure in thwarting the dreams of others than fulfilling their own. Miss Rowan will have a building, eventually, I am sure, but not the one of her original expectations. And it will not materialize for, I would say, at least five years."

"That is so excellent, Mr. Wolfe!" I could not keep myself from exclaiming. "*Magnifique!*"

Mr. Wolfe appeared indeed pleased. He took another bite of omelet and sausage and chewed happily.

"Most satisfactory," he said. "Your doing, Fritz."

"Not at all, sir."

"Yes, it was. You were the vital link, the only one I could turn to, and you performed admirably. Now you must name your reward."

"Sir, to have Mr. Goodwin with us is all the reward I require."

"Well said, Fritz, well said. I believe I will have another popover, with the blackberry jam this time, and the lemon curd as well. And perhaps another sausage."

"Of course, sir."