

*Mike Conner's last F&SF story was "Stillborn," (March 1982). This new offering is a gripping tale about a San Francisco antique dealer who attends a country auction and bids successfully on an old box that changes his life — in a most unpleasant manner...*

# The Corsican Box

BY  
MIKE CONNER

**L**et began at what I thought would be just another country auction up in Sonoma.

Sonoma's a wonderful little town, with a lush, palm-shaded plaza fronting its turn-of-the-century civic buildings. There's a bit too much nostalgic kitsch along Napa Street East, with its frozen yogurt stands and antique shops, but enough of the old town hardware stores and markets remain to give visitors a nice feeling of temporal displacement.

I cherish that feeling. It's one of the reasons I'm in the antique business myself.

Perri and I were heading for Emma McCandless' old place, east and above the town on Wood Valley Road. It turned out to be a rambling, white-washed Victorian-style house: three-story turret furnished with curved glass windows in front, and a long, cool pergola behind smothered with

heavy grape vines. The bidding would take place in the merciful shade beneath.

We parked in a field across the road from the house.

"Lots of people," Perri said. She'd been uncharacteristically silent ever since I'd picked her up at her apartment in San Francisco. I hadn't quite figured out why.

"It's the usual auction crowd. Let's have a look." I shepherded her into the kitchen, where odd lots of pots and pans and ancient gadgets like potato ricers were in boxes for the sale vultures to pick through.

"I wouldn't mind having this chopping table." Perri ran her hand over the fine maple top.

"You'd have to stand on it." It was just about the size of her kitchen, but my attempt at a joke backfired, and her face clouded again. I decided to distract her.

"Hey. There it is." I pointed through the doorway into a sunny, informal breakfast room. In the far corner, glowing warmly between two lace-curtained windows, was my reason for driving all the way up here; number 16 in the sale catalogue, a cherrywood corner cabinet from the 1860s, made by a Swiss-American joiner named Fredrik Gnau. The Gnau was my baby. It wasn't a particularly rare or unusual piece — Gnau's shop had served the gentry of St. Louis and Chicago for almost thirty years — but it happened to match a cherrywood drop-leaf table and matching spindle-back chairs that I already had in my shop. I had a customer — tiny, fussy, Mrs. Rosenberg — who was ready to drop a bundle for the whole ensemble, if I bid successfully today.

Perri had been to sales with me before and knew how to look at a piece without appearing too interested. We made a couple of leisurely passes, pretending to admire a sterling tea service. Meanwhile, I watched the other dealers for signs of interest. It seemed to be minimal, which improved my mood. The floor bid was \$450, and I had calculated I could afford three times that amount. Now, however, I began to entertain hopes of getting a bargain.

"Russ?" Perri called me from the parlor.

"What's up?"

"I'd like your opinion." She stood in front of a big Wooton trunk-desk

that had its writing table pulled out. On it were several metal and enameled snuffboxes, and a larger one that could have been for jewelry or cigars. The sides were clear pine banded with satinwood, and the inside was lined with cedar. On the inside cover were the jagged sherds of a shattered mirror. The outside had been done over, rather crudely I thought, with green paint.

"Number 24," I said, picking it up. "What's the catalogue say?"

"Corsican box. Circa 1880. Satinwood, walnut burl, cedar." She looked up eagerly.

"I think there's some marquetry-work underneath this paint." Perri brightened, for the first time all day.

"Monica would love this for a jewelry box." Monica was her nine-year-old daughter. For the past month, she'd been living with her father in Marin. The poor kid was the volleyball to be tossed side to side in the divorce settlement.

"D'you think you could get the paint off."

"Sure. And I can replace the mirror while I'm at it. That is," I said with a wink, "if you can handle the five-dollar floor bid."

She smiled and elbowed my ribs. Then as we headed for the grape arbor, she nuzzled me quite nicely.

"Russ, I'm sorry I've been such a grouch today."

"Forget it." I was just glad she felt better.

Outside, some high school kids

were serving cold lemonade and hot coffee. The wind stirred the grape around a bit, and then the auctioneer, a local free-lancer named Charles Mundy, appeared. I'd had the pleasure of dealing with him before. He moved the lots quickly, with the intent of getting as much as he could. It was one of the motivations of working on straight commission.

I sipped my lemonade and thought about the picnic lunch I'd packed in the trunk of my MG, until Mundy got around to the Gnau. "Number sixteen in the catalogue," he said. "A lovely corner cabinet in cherry, framed in beechwood. Glad doors on top, plush-lined silverware drawers and linen drawers below. From the circa 1865 to 1875, Fredrik Gnau Cabinetry Works, St. Louis. We would like to start the bidding at four-fifty."

I kept quiet. Mundy's floor bids were not solid, as they would have been at a private auction house. What he couldn't sell this weekend would be shipped off somewhere on consignment. So he would soften a minimum bid if he thought it was necessary. He shook his head.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I asked for and got fourteen-fifty for a cabinet not half as nice as this one only last week."

"Three seventy-five," said an old man behind me.

"Thank you, Dad." Mundy got his laugh and took the bid. A lady in a straw hat bid four. I rejoined at four-fifty, and from there the bidding es-

calated rapidly with three other dealers contributing bids until the price reached a thousand dollars. From then on it was only me and the hat lady. Things were getting tense, honor and profit now being locked in a battle of inverted proportion.

"Twelve-fifty." My rival's voice was strained, for this was a quantum jump. Mundy watched me as I thought about letting her have the cabinet after all. There was some satisfaction in knowing I'd forced her to go higher than she'd wanted.

"Thirteen hundred," Perri called suddenly. People in the front turned around, and Mundy looked over the top of his glasses.

"Your bid, madam?"

"His. He's got something in his throat." When the laughter died down, I nodded my consent. The hat lady scowled deeply, checked her calculator, then called a bid of thirteen-fifty. This time I put my hand over Perri's mouth, and Mundy quickly gavelled the bidding closed.

I was a bit numb after that, but we stayed long enough for Perri to bid on — and get, for \$35 — the painted Corsican box she wanted for Monica. On our way back to the MG, the hat lady stopped to shake hands and offer condolences. She knew how I felt. The same thing had happened to her plenty of times. I knew she wanted to invite us to have a drink back in town, but I put my arm around Perri and moved off before she made her offer. I wanted

to nurse my wounds in relative peace.

We drove to the Buena Vista winery for our picnic. It was a beautiful spot. The wine cellars had been chiseled out of a limestone bank by coolee labor about the time Fred Gnau had been turning out cherrywood cabinets back in St. Louis. Perri found us a table beneath a pair of towering eucalyptus, where we could listen to the music of a creek below us, and the gentle humming of bees in the blackberry brambles. I didn't have much to say at first, until Perri tapped my wrist with a baguette of bread.

"I thought you were supposed to be cheering me up."

"Fourteen hundred might have sunk her," I said.

"Her and you both."

I couldn't argue with that.

"And, anyway, we've got the box." She lifted the top and stared for a moment into the broken mirror. Her face clouded. "I hope I'll be able to give this to her."

"What are you talking about? Is Gerald giving you trouble again?"

She nodded. "He read me the riot act last night. He doesn't approve of my going to art school on his alimony. He doesn't like Monica staying in the city in my apartment. That hole in the wall' is what he called it."

"He's got a hole in his head."

"There's more. You."

"Me?"

"He's never liked you. In fact—"

her voice caught — "he's threatened to get a court order denying me custody. On the grounds that we're cohabitating."

"Cohabitating!" That sounded like Gerald. One morning I'd answered the door when he'd come to see Perri about some business. In my bathrobe. He'd made it quite clear that he did not approve of his ex-wife "screwing around," as he later put it so tactfully.

"He doesn't want me to ever see her again. My own daughter!" Her eyes misted. Suddenly she looked so fragile that I knew I'd somehow have to hold her together.

"Look, Per, have you talked to your lawyer about this?"

"No. I only spoke with Gerald last night."

"Well, you know how Mr. Macho operates. He's blowing smoke. Trying to soften you up for something else."

"I don't think so."

"When will you see him next?"

"Wednesday. When he brings Monica home. If he brings her."

"He'll bring her. If he's at all serious about going to court, he'll have to obey the custody terms until they're changed. When he comes, I want to see him."

"But he's threatened to do something—"

"Like beat me up?" I flexed my bicep. "He may be big, but I'm fast."

"This isn't funny," Perri said, laughing anyway.

"I know it's not. But we're all

adults, and I'm sure we can come to an understanding." I took her hands. "Perri, you're a good person and a wonderful mother, no matter what the incredible bulk says. Monica's crazy about you. And so am I."

"You may have to prove that statement," she said, closing the box.

"When?"

"That," she smiled, "depends on how fast you can drive."

**M**y Monday mornings in the shop were usually spent clearing the decks. There were the books to do from the weekend, when Gert had been minding things, some letters to answer, and then I took time to look over the stuff my runners had culled from the local garage and tag sales. This time, they'd picked up a cute collection of cut-glass owls and a painted board with several hundred beer and soft-drink bottlecaps from the 30s and 40s nailed on. Customers liked stuff like that on College Avenue. I tagged the merchandise, did a little dusting and rearranging out front, and then decided to close for lunch so I could work on Monica's box.

It was the first chance I'd had to really look at the workmanship, which was craftsmanlike, but not really elegant. It was false-mitered on the corners, with hand-cut screws and hinges of brass. That meant the box might be considerably older than the 1880 Mundy claimed in the sale catalogue.

I measured the top and called the glass company down the street to have a new mirror cut and drilled. When I removed what was left of the old one, I got a surprise: underneath it was glued-on, yellowed parchment covered with hand-written verses in faded ink. I'm certainly no expert when it comes to old manuscripts, but the language seemed to be Italian, boldly, almost angrily stroked nearly the full width of the box top.

This was a bonus. I got my Polaroid from my desk, slipped an enlarging lense into the clip-on plastic frame, and took several close-up shots. The verse reproduced beautifully. Now my curiosity was piqued. I got out my encyclopedias and looked for entries under Corsica. It turned out that rocky island hadn't much of a native furniture industry, being timber-poor. But I found out that Genoa had maintained an occupation in Corsica for almost 400 years during the Middle Ages and the fine joiners and cabinetmakers had worked in the northern mercantile city. Perhaps the box had been made there, and brought to Corsica by one of the dukes sent to maintain Genoese power.

It was fascinating to think about where the box had been, who had owned it. I liked that kind of mystery. It was good therapy for me and, sometimes, very good business.

Daydreaming that way, I got out the paint remover and brushed some over that awful green paint on the top.

The solvents blistered it almost immediately. As I waited for them to penetrate, somebody tapped on the window in front of my shop.

Mrs. Rosenberg. She waved anxiously when she saw me. So I wiped my hands and went up to let her in.

"Oh, Mr. Boehm! I do hope I'm not keeping you from something important." She looked over my shoulder at the drop-leaf table and spindleback chairs I'd hoped to sell her.

"Not at all. In fact, I was about to give you a call. Unfortunately, I ran into some bad luck at the McCandless sale."

She looked at me sternly. Mrs. Rosenberg had taught second grade for twenty-five years; now, I felt like one of her squirming charges, fresh-caught pulling pigtailed in the back of her classroom.

"I have the card from the dealer who did get it," I put in quickly. "I'm sure she'll give you a good price." Mrs. Rosenberg said nothing, but sat down in a rocking chair and took out a notebook from her purse.

"I want you to see something, Mr. Boehm." She gave me the notebook. There were numbers in a neat column, just the way Mrs. Rosenberg would have written them on a blackboard.

"The bottom figure is what I can afford to spend on your lovely table and chairs."

The amount was enough to tempt me if business had truly been poor, but almost nothing when I figured in the

time it had been on the floor, with taxes and lights and all the rest. Very reluctantly, I shook my head.

"Can't do it, Mrs. Rosenberg." She sighed.

"It would have been so much better if you'd got the cabinet."

"I tried," I said.

"The cabinet's what I really must have."

"I understand."

She put the notebook back in her purse and headed for the door. Then she turned, brightening.

"But I'll wait a day or two before I contact this dealer. You never know what might happen!"

I waved ruefully. Then I went back to my Corsican box. When I rubbed the top with some steel wool, the dissolved paint came off in a single sheet. And then I dropped the steel wool, for I was not prepared for what I found underneath.

A man's face.

It was there, clear as a photograph in the bleached walnut inlay: narrow, mouth open slightly as if in surprise. A thick reddish mustache. And eyes, deep and flashing as the wood grain that formed their image, open wide in unmistakable terror.

Accidents of nature I'd seen before, forms of animals or trees captured in the curly figures of cut wood. But never anything like this. I took some shots with the Polaroid. Then, as the solvents evaporated, I watched the face fade back into the unfinished flat-

ness of the veneer. I was still trying to get over the shock when the shop bell rang. Oddly enough for a Monday, the rest of the day was quite busy.

Late in the day, the glass company delivered my mirror. I used new screws and nice chrome rubber-lined washers to fasten it over the parchment, and when I finished, the box closed perfectly. Now it had a face on both sides. Maybe the joiner's idea of a joke when he'd made it.

Before I went home, I applied a coat of cut shellac to the top so it could dry overnight, but I was disappointed: for some reason, the face did not come up. The structure was still there, but somehow the elements in the grain no longer combined in the same vivid way. Maybe it was just as well. I'd been having second thoughts about giving Perri something as weird as that. Anyway, I still had my snapshots. I took them home with me when I finished. Somehow, I didn't like the thought of leaving them in the shop.

On Tuesday I left Gert in charge of things so I could make the rounds of the Galleria in San Francisco. I was looking at some mission-style pieces — all the rage with decorators at the moment despite dark unattractive woods and clunky lines — when I ran into Charles Mundy.

"Russ! What luck. I've been trying to get in touch with you all morning." I figured he wanted to tell me about his next sale; instead, he nearly floored me

by asking whether I was still interested in the cherrywood corner cabinet.

"Why? Have you seen another one like it?"

"The Gnau's still in Sonoma. The woman who bought it called me late yesterday and said she'd stopped payment on the check."

"Nice of her."

"We were just loading it onto a truck, as a matter of fact. But she said something had come up, and she needed the cash. Emergency situation."

"That's too bad," I said, trying not to sound too eager.

"Normally, I'd send it down here with the rest of the unsold things for consignment. But I know how interested you are in the piece. I'm willing to let you have it for what she paid. Thirteen fifty."

"My last bid was thirteen," I said, surprising myself a little. After all, Mundy was trying to do me a favor. But he swallowed his frown and agreed. I got out my checkbook, and we concluded the deal right there.

"I can ship it if you like."

"Better send it to the store." I remembered Mrs. Rosenberg saying she wanted to paint her dining room when she finally got the set.

"No problem. As long as you don't cancel your check."

We laughed, and then I thought of something. "Say, Charlie, do you remember that little box Perri and I got? Number 24, the one with the green paint?"

He thought a moment. "Oh, Corsica, right?"

"That's right. You happen to know anything more about it?"

"Not really. Only that Rose McCandless — Emma's daughter — made a big stink about my listing it. She wanted it thrown away. I told her I thought I could get a few dollars for it, and that seemed to satisfy her — except she insisted it be out of the house by Saturday afternoon." Mundy shook his head. "Strange old bird."

"How so?"

"Well, for one thing, she wouldn't go inside her mother's house. They'd had some sort of long feud. In fact, she said she hadn't visited her mother since the fifties."

"Scottish stubbornness?"

"Emma McCandless wasn't Scots. She was a French citizen, born and raised in Corsica. See, her husband Jimmy made a fortune there and in France after the First World War selling root stock from Sonoma grape vines that were resistant to phylloxera. You know, the grape blight. Most European wine has American ancestors."

"I'll remember that the next time I drop a twenty for some Muscadet."

"Do that. Anyway, Jimmy married Emma and brought her home to the big house he'd built. He was trying to buy up some of the property around it to start his own vineyard, when he got into some kind of trouble. Locals objecting to the pushy rich newcomer. I guess the pressure finally got to him."

How so?"

"They found him one morning hanging from an oak tree with a suicide note in his back pocket. Little Rose couldn't have been more than two or three at the time."

I checked my watch. "Charlie, you're a fountain of lore. But I promised to meet Perri for lunch in about fifteen minutes, and if I don't show, I'll be hanging."

We shook hands. "Thanks for thinking of me."

"Anytime. Give my best to Perri."

I whistled all the way downtown, but when I found Perri at a soup-and-salad place off Union Square, she was too distracted to appreciate my good fortune. Gerald had been making more threats.

"I just don't want to talk about it today, Russ," she said. So we ate our soup more or less in silence. I was annoyed with her. And, strangely enough, I found myself empathizing a little with Gerald. I could understand how Perri frustrated him. She was the type of person who absorbed every blow without crumbling, or even bruising much. Even after he'd long since turned her to pulp inside with his bullying, she'd never once given him the satisfaction of knowing he'd reached her. I had a feeling that if things ever got bad between Perri and me, she'd never let me know either.

It was not a good way to disgust



lunch, and I did my best to end it on a brighter note.

"I've almost finished with the box," I said. "I'll bring it with me tomorrow night."

That cheered her up some, but as I left the restaurant, I caught something in her eye I'd never seen before.

Doubt.

I didn't feel like going back to the shop right away after that. Instead, I drove over to Berkeley and the UC campus, where, after a bit of wandering, I located the Italian Department in Dwinelle Hall, just inside Sather Gate. The department secretary was very helpful. She promised to give the Polaroids of the verse to one of the professors, and paperclipped them together with one of my business cards. Someone would call me in a day or two, she said.

It was almost three by the time I got back to College Avenue to relieve Gert. She was a bit huffy about my being gone so long but recovered when I told her about the corner cabinet. As soon as she left, I gave Mrs. Rosenberg a call.

"Oh! That's simply wonderful! What did I tell you about waiting?"

Then I gave her my firm price for the set — several hundred dollars above the figures I'd seen in her notebook. There was a long moment of silence where I almost panicked, but I held on, and finally she swallowed the deal properly and promised to stop by Wednesday morning with a check. I

felt quite proud of myself as I put sold stickers on the tags tied to the table and chairs. A few more browsers came in. It was past four-thirty by the time I finally got back to my Corsican box.

The shellac had dried nicely. I put a lump of furniture wax inside a cloth and went over the top, then buffed it to a satin sheen. Now, the face was nothing more than an oval without features. It was the damnest thing. The wide eyes and mustache were gone. And yet I had snapshots that showed the face quite clearly. So I knew I hadn't been imagining seeing it. Puzzled, I opened the top.

It was a shock to see my own face captured like a genie. My reflection looked startled; then it grinned as I realized that for a moment, I hadn't recognized myself.

"Russ, boy, I think it's time you went home," my reflection told me. Then we both laughed, perhaps too loudly, until I closed the cover and went home for the night.

Then came Wednesday.

I was in a fine mood as I drove across the Bay Bridge with the Corsican box wrapped in pretty paper and a couple of Mumim's on the passenger seat. The day had gone splendidly. Not only had Mrs. Rosenberg and I concluded our transaction, but I'd managed to sell a few other pieces as well, including the cut-glass owls at a price fifteen times what they were really worth. Fortunately, Gert hadn't been

around to witness that bit of piracy.

And Perri seemed happy too when I got to her place. She'd skipped school to get everything ready and cooked a beautiful leg of lamb — Monica's favorite — and a four-layer, double fudge cake. Perri hummed to herself happily as I put the champagne into the fridge. Best of all, when I kissed her — tentatively — she responded affectionately and with more than a hint of passion.

"Mmm," I said. "That is not the kiss of a married woman."

"Good of you to notice."

"I hate to bring the subject up, but what about Gerald."

"There's a truce on," she said. "My lawyer and his lawyer arranged it until we can reach some sort of compromise."

"At least somebody's got some sense." We kissed again. The doorbell rang.

"Can you get it? I've still got my hair to fix."

"What if it's Gerald?"

"He's not due for another fifteen minutes. Go on, he's never early."

"Okay." I buzzed the downstairs door and then, feeling nervous and fidgety, snatched up the gift-wrapped box.

Gerald came up to the landing. And stopped, and scowled. Monica ran past him. "Russ!" she cried hugging me. "Where's Mom?"

"In the bathroom." My eyes were on Gerald. He stood on the landing with his lantern jaw working, all 6'2"

of him in his London Fog topcoat and clunky Montgomery Street brogues. He was built like a Wootton desk, and I could tell he'd forgotten all about the truce. Nevertheless, to please Perri, I offered my hand.

"Get the hell out of my way." He stormed into the apartment and lit into Perri while I stood there like an idiot. Their discussion didn't take long. Gerald reappeared pulling his daughter by the arm, Perri following looking sick and confused all over again.

"Hey," I demanded. "What do you think you're doing?"

His answer was to push me against the wall. That's when I snapped. Gerald and Perri were divorced. She had every right to invite me over; Gerald, no right at all to put his hands on me. I had never been much of a fighter. But I turned around quickly and put the gift-wrapped box in Perri's arms.

"I'll be right back," I said in a thin, calm voice.

I caught up with them in the street. Gerald's gold BMW was double-parked, and he'd already shoved his sobbing daughter into the back seat. Surprise flashed across his face when I spun him around, quickly replaced by triumph. This was something he'd wanted for a long time. He launched a left that would have taken my head off if I hadn't ducked.

But like a lot of hookers, he left himself open for the straight right hand. I gave him one. He crumpled, but didn't drop. Then the battle was on in earnest.

The first thirty seconds seemed like thirty minutes, as everything I fired landed. I bloodied his nose and his mouth until he leaned back, shocked and almost out, across the hood of his car. That's when I grabbed his lapels and started banging his head. Liquid fire ran up my spine and powered my arms. I dealt my rage out in short, efficient bursts that would pound him into submission.

I might have finished him if Monica hadn't screamed. When I half-turned, Gerald finally connected with the hook in an explosion of stars. I grabbed at them as I staggered back, but they dissolved in my hands. I was only vaguely aware of the sound of tires squealing. Then, for a long time it was quiet. The stars popped out one by one, and then I heard Perri crying softly over my head.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed, when I tried to get up. There was hatred in her face, and I knew it wasn't for Gerald. It was for me.

"He had it coming," was all I could think of saying. She threw the Corsican box at me, and, somehow, I thought it more important to keep it from breaking than to smooth things with her.

By the time I figured out my mistake, she was gone.

I answered the phone on the sixth ring. It had taken me that long to struggle out of bed and limp across the living room to get it. Gerald's left hook

traumatized me from the jaw on down.

"Mr. Bo-hem?" A lifting accent I couldn't place. "This is Cervione."

"You've got the wrong number."

"You are the man who brought the verses to the department office on Tuesday?" He pronounced it "Tew-ee-day."

"Oh. Yeah." At the moment I didn't feel like talking to him. "Can you mail me the translation or something?"

An insulted pause, then: "I have it nicely typed by the department, Mr. Bo-hem. And some additional material you should consider interesting."

"Okay. When's a good time?"

"I shall be in my office another two hours. After that I leave for Tahoe for some vacation."

"I'll be down," I said, having realized it would probably be better if I kept moving today.

At the *Dottore's* office I had to step over his packed suitcases. Cervione turned out to be a spiffy little man in summer flannels and a three-day beard. I managed to get into his chair without creaking too loudly.

"How glad I was to see this material," he said. "This is not a good time of the year for me. Too much of the casual attitude after June. Ah, but why not? When the nights are warm, the heart reaches in like so and takes control of the head." He yanked in his fists to show what he meant.

"What about the verse?"

The *Dottore* handed me a typed

sheet. On the top half was a transcription of the Italian; below it was the English rendering, which wasn't exactly Shakespeare. The unrhymed stanzas seemed to be a syrupy love poem, full of things like, "My sweet! My tangerine!" I winced. But at the end of the second stanza the tone changed. "They have taken you," it read. "Spawn of motherless dogs have cut you off. Now their very hair shall burn!"

When I looked up, Cervione was grinning at me. "Better and better, eh? Now look at the final stanza."

I read:

"You have taken this land and I cut this tree for you.

You I cut, son of Satan, your entrails in this box!

The Spirit of the Wood is your jailer,

And by his will are you damned before the eyes of God."

"I have a recording," the *Dottore* said, "made in Corsica some years ago. It is of verses very similar to these."

He turned on his recorder, and a woman's voice came through the speaker. It was nasal, rough, the voice of someone old, and she spoke in sing-song phrases with the end of each line cut off sharply inside her throat. What began as a dirge became a wailing and then something hateful, a shrieking that gave me chills. By the end of it, Cervione's grin had disappeared. He shook his head sadly as he turned off the recorder. "So many killed because of that," he said.

"What is it?"

"A *voceru*. Improvised verses given by a woman known as a *voceratrice*. In the old days, in Corsica, each clan had its own. At funerals when a son of the clan lay murdered, it was up to the *voceratrice* to incite the family to vengeance. You know the vendetta?"

"I've read about it. In Sicily."

In Corsica, in the old days, much, much worse. Once emnity had been declared, no man in either family was safe. After each killing the nearest male relative must take revenge, take a male life. Sometimes, there were those who had no stomach for the killing. But at the funeral he would hear the *voceru* and be caught up in the power of the *voceratrice*. It was more than most men — or sometimes women — could resist. It sounds barbaric, Mr. Bo-hem. It is barbaric, but when in the old days there is no state or law to punish crimes, such justice exists."

"All right. But do you have any idea why a *voceru* would be written down and hidden beneath a mirror on a fancy box?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps the vendetta involved the family of a *signore* or one of the foreign dukes. The *voceru* mentions the taking of land. The verse might have been hidden and the box given to the *signore* as a way of cursing him."

I thought of the smashed mirror and the green paint. It had to be more than a coincidence that someone tried to destroy what had been built into the

box to begin with. And then I remembered the story about Jimmy McCandless: how he'd been found hanging from a tree in the field he intended to plant with grapes.

"May I have this paper?"

"In exchange for your snapshots, yes. I would also very much like to see the box itself someday. Corsican culture and history is a special interest of mine."

"Maybe when you get down from the mountains," I said, thanking him. I wished him good luck at the tables. Maybe some would rub off on me.

I went back to the shop and called Charles Mundy. My check had cleared the bank, and he was quite cordial and willingly gave me the information I requested. After I rung off I unwrapped the Corsican box and took it with me back out to the car, telling Gert as I went past her that I wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

"Oh, and if Perri calls," I said from the door, "tell her I'm sorry."

**T**he asphalt was already melting in Santa Rosa by the time I got there just after one o'clock. I stopped at a Seven Eleven for a Slurpee and bought a street map of the town. A few minutes later I found the address Charles Mundy had given me.

Miss Rose McCandless lived at the end of a U-shaped, white stucco motor court that had been converted to housekeeping apartments. Bits of tile

from the crumbling roof littered the buckled sidewalk underneath the eaves. A line of ants marched steadily up the wall by her doorbell. I pushed it several times without result. Then I knocked.

"What do you want?" Yelled through the door.

"My name is Russ Boehm. I'm an antique dealer—"

"Sales over. Everything's gone."

"I know. I bought a few pieces that I'm still curious about." Silence. "I only want to ask a few questions."

Slowly, reluctantly, she opened the door. The only light in the room came from a huge color television set in the corner. Miss Rose McCandless looked me over. She was tall and thin, dressed in a black sweater and slacks, with her white hair pulled back tightly and tied with a black scarf. I could hear the air conditioner laboring inside the kitchen window as she let me in.

I gave her my card. "I was just up at your mother's house this weekend. Beautiful place." I wondered why her daughter would live in a dungeon like this. She grunted, resigned to the intrusion, and put my card on top of the space heater.

"Would you care for some tea, Mr...."

"Boehm. Yes, that would be nice."

As though she'd anticipated having guests, she returned from the kitchen with a tray only moments later. Rose McCandless seemed to float across the tiny living room, perfectly composed,

erect, expressionless. She poured out two cups and offered me a crepe horn dusted with powdered sugar. I bit it gingerly so it wouldn't crumple onto my shirt; meanwhile, Rose poured three or four drops of something spicy — oil of cinnamon, I guessed — into her tea.

"These are very good." She paid no attention to the compliment. She was busy dabbling her fingertips into the teacup.

"Ask your questions." Rose frowned and stirred her tea again.

"Well, a friend of mine bought a green wooden box at the auction. It had a mirror inside the cover, and when I was working on it, I found some verses written on parchment underneath."

Rose's eyes lifted from the cup and bored into mine. They were jet-black and awesome in a way that is difficult to describe: malevolent, yet without the personal rancor of true hatred. I'm sure she gazed at her television with that same cold stare. I clutched my teacup and gulped tea that was much hotter than I preferred.

"The box belonged to my mother," Rose said abruptly.

"I know. That's what I'm curious about. The wood underneath the paint is very beautiful, and I just can't understand why she would have painted it over."

"You know," she said. The nape of my neck went prickly, but I tried laughing it off.

"I wish I did. If I could authen-

ticate the age, I'd know better how much I could expect to get for it."

"Got it with you?"

"In the car. I can bring it—"

"Don't bother!"

"Surely you can have a look at it. I've come all the way from Oakland—"

"Stop it!" Her voice rose just a touch. "Stop wasting your breath. You know as much about the box as I do." She showed bleached-white teeth. "The difference is, you won't admit it to yourself."

"Look," I began, wanting to flee, "maybe I've caught you at a bad time."

"Things are changing for you now, since you bought it. You've felt your business improving."

It wasn't a question. And on paper, this week had been the best the shop had done in ages. I watched her stir the tea again.

"You think no one can stop you from doing what you want. But now the people who have always trusted you are a little confused. Isn't that true? Isn't it?"

I took a breath.

"Here." Rose tilted her teacup. "The oil drops won't come together. In the old country, my mother's family were *signadore*. They would have said this meant you suffered the *mal occhio*. The evil eye. I knew as soon as you came into my house. You stink of it."

I told myself this was ridiculous. Rose was only a crazy old woman who lived next door to bikers. How could

she know anything about me? How could cinnamon drops in a teacup mean a damned thing?

"Drive out to the beach," she said. "Take that box and fill it with rocks and throw it into the sea." Suddenly she grabbed my wrists with her dry, bony fingers. "It made my poor mother a widow. It has done this to me. My father thought he could use it to make his fortune, and it destroyed him. If you value your own life, do as I say."

I pried loose and backed away, afraid she'd fly at me, screeching. But the intensity faded from her face, and she sipped her tea with the same unconcerned malevolence I'd seen when I first came in. I mumbled an apology for interrupting her afternoon. Then I saw the photograph on the wall over the space heater.

There was a woman in a black dress, young, but otherwise very much like Rose. Standing next to her with his arms around her waist, was a man with a narrow face and a wide mustache. His mouth was open, as though he'd been talking to the photographer.

It was the same face I'd seen when I stripped the green paint from the top of the Corsican box.

Rose McCandless' father.

**O**n the way back from Santa Rosa I very nearly took Rose's advice. Gradually, though, my shock and panic subsided. I told myself it was a wooden box, nothing more, nothing

less. True, some unsettling things had happened in my life lately, but, then, what living, breathing member of the human race had ever been spared an occasional run of bad luck? Everyone in the world had changed since last Saturday, when you got right down to it. And there was no such thing as Evil Eye, unless you chose to pretend it existed and fall victim to the power of your own imagination.

By the time I got back to my apartment, my logic rescued me. I enjoyed an excellent steak with mushrooms and a seven-year-old bottle of Mondavi Cabernet. Gert called and reported that Mrs. Rosenberg's corner cabinet had arrived safely. Really, the only cloud remaining was my problem with Perri.

I decided to give her another day to cool down. By tomorrow, I was sure that not having Monica would make her angry enough at Gerald to forget what I'd done on Wednesday.

Just before I fell asleep that night, I thought about the verses Cervione had translated for me. Perhaps the wood in my box did have a spirit, I reflected. But it certainly was a benign one.

At three thirty that morning I was blasted back to consciousness by my telephone. It was the dispatcher from my burglar-alarm company. Could I come to the shop? There'd been an accident and the front window was smashed.

I prepared myself for the worst as I drove down the hill. I'd been burglar-

ized before, and so had most of the other businesses along my stretch of College Avenue. It was one of the prices you paid for hanging a shingle in the bohemian district.

But I wasn't prepared to see the street turned into a white-water river. Or to see a white Volvo bobbing its front end three feet over the gusher from a sheered-off fire hydrant. Half a dozen Oakland firemen in black rubber coats stood around gawking at it. Behind them, a video crew from one of the local television stations recorded the spectacle for the amusement of their dinnertime viewers.

I waded through knee-deep water toward the alarm company rep, who was talking to a fire captain and one of the cops on the scene.

"I'm the owner," I said. I wouldn't have blamed them for laughing, but they kept their professional cool.

"Looks like a case of drunk driving," the cop told me. "Knocked off the hydrant and got hung up."

"Main force of the water went through your window," added the fire captain. "We'll have the main shut off in a minute or two."

"You didn't happen to catch the idiot who did this."

"Nope. Looks like a stolen car. Plates don't match, and there's no registration in the vehicle."

I watched the Volvo do its aerial ballet for a while. Then, gradually, the gusher tapered off, along with the roar, and the car floated gently to

earth again. Now it was very quiet, except for the gurgle of water pouring down the storm drains — and out the front of my shop. Bits and pieces of my stock floated slowly by.

Suddenly, I realized I had seen the Volvo before.

It was Perri's first car, the one she'd been driving the first time I'd ever seen her, when she'd come into the shop with Monica. She'd been proud of that car, bought with money from her first outside job. And she'd left it in Kentfield when she finally fled Gerald's landscaped penitentiary.

Gerald. It was sickening to realize he'd chosen to escalate our conflict. I'd never taken him for a thug. But, then, he'd never taken me for a knock-out artist. I stood there, holding on, trying to figure my next move, when something bumped my legs.

I reached down and picked up a dripping piece of cherrywood.

I didn't tell the police who owned the Volvo. Or about the state of my relationship with Gerald Williamson. By eleven, the car had been towed and a new hydrant bolted onto the water main. Gert was busy sifting through the remains and working with the salvage company on an inventory. I let them all get on with their business and drove across to the city. Perri was just finishing a class at the Art Academy when I found her.

She tried to get past me, but I grabbed her arm. "We're talking." She



didn't argue, but she was white with fury by the time we found a bench in the little park behind the school. Then she took the first shot.

"I'm not sure I want to see you again. Violence was the reason I left Gerald. I won't stand for it. Not from you, not from anybody."

"Your husband paid me a return call last night." Then I told her about the Volvo and how he had probably hired someone to do a job on my business. She showed disgust, but no surprise. She knew perfectly well what Gerald was capable of.

"You'll go to the police," she said when I finished. "I'll identify the car."

"No police."

She caught on right away, and her eyes flashed. "So what's the next move, Russ? Bomb his house? Have him shot?"

"He started this."

"And I thought you were sensible enough and man enough not to let him drag you down to his level."

"I am, and I won't. But don't you understand? What Gerald did has nothing to do with me, not personally. Last night was a statement. He might have ruined my shop, but you're the real target. I'm just a symbol."

"Of what?" She said it scornfully, but I knew she was listening.

"Of you. Your independence, of the fact he's lost control of a person he was sure of. Of the fact that, sooner or later, he'll lose his child too. A man like Gerald can't stand that kind of

threat. So he's shown what he'll do if you don't give Monica up.

Her face turned anguished, showing lines I'd never noticed before. "But you're the problem! He's never liked you, and it makes him crazy."

"And it'll be the same with the next man! God knows what he'll do if you decide to get married again. Control's all he cares about. And he'll keep you in line so long as he has your daughter. You know it's true! He's just about split us up, hasn't he? Hasn't he!"

She nodded yes, tear pooling in her eyes. I felt a burst of exhilaration. I was making her see things my way.

"The thing is to stop him. You've got to get Monica back."

"But the court—"

"By the time you go through the whole thing, it'll be September. He'll have had her the whole summer, talking about you, poisoning her. And then he'll find a way to keep you from ever seeing Monica again." I shook my head. "The courts are for when you have her. Then your testimony about the car might do some good."

"How?" I could barely hear her.

"You leave that to me. I'll have her back at your place Saturday afternoon."

"Tomorrow...." Her voice trailed, and I saw the conflict raging inside her. It was the desire of a civilized person to conduct herself according to the law, against the overwhelming instinct a mother has to cradle and protect her child. In the end, the mother won, as

I'd known it would. She agreed to let me handle things.

"Just tell me something before you go." Perri looked very tired, very old.

"What?"

"It's not just because you want to hurt Gerald, is it? It's not just revenge."

"No," I said. I think we both knew I was lying.

Finding out Monica's plans for Saturday took one phone call. She sounded cool at first, but my apology put her at ease. "Your Dad's all right, isn't he?"

"Well ... He does have a black eye." Then she giggled and told me Gerald was taking her with some friends to an amusement park called Great USA.

"Sounds like fun. What's your favorite ride down there?"

"The Monster Wave. You know, the roller coaster with the upside-down loop?"

"I think so."

"I bet my friend Lorrie I could ride it ten times in a row."

I told her to ride it once for me, then made her promise not to tell her father I called. After she hung up, I lay down on my couch and made my plans. Gerald had thought to hurt what I loved most, but I would cut him off from his future. It would be a kind of death, vengeance for the death he'd made me suffer.

The Corsican box was on the coffee table with its top flipped open. I could see myself in the mirror. Suddenly I

realized that, in a way, the *voceru* beneath it had incited me to a form of the old vendetta. Rose McCandless would have said so. So would her mother.

I wondered if Jimmy McCandless had seen himself in the box when he'd plotted his next move against the rival landowners. Had he convinced himself he would strike back because of honor, to right a wrong? Or had he been caught in the flow of larger, incomprehensible forces? The *voceratrice* who'd composed the verses knew. So had the artisan who had done the marquetry on the top.

My windows were open, and I could hear distant sirens rising in mournful wisps up from the flatlands. After a time, a gust of wind tore back the curtains and blew the top of the Corsican box shut.

I'd been dozing. I sat up, wide-eyes, heart hammering. Then I picked up the box and saw a face in the grain of the wood even more clearly than I'd seen it the first time. It was a different face.

My face. But I didn't care. The spirit of the wood was indeed my jailer. And, like a good jailer, it would take care of me and help me do what I needed to do.

**G**reat USA was very peaceful when I wandered in early the next morning. I could smell fresh popcorn and see kids who worked the refreshment stands bringing in cups and cans of syrup.

They worked slowly, knowing that in another hour the place would be a madhouse. This was the best time of day for them.

I found the Monster Wave and decided to give it a try while I waited for Monica. The operator loaded me in and snapped a padded shoulder harness over my backpack. Then the cars rocketed out of the launch chute, and I could feel the corners of the Corsican box digging into my back until we went through the loop. Then it was up the tower, and then a gravity-assisted backward trip through the loop again and finally into the chute. I staggered off with the rest of the passengers and saw I could grab Monica on the ramp outside the safety gate. Everyone had to get off and line up again on the other side if they wanted to ride again. Monica wanted to ride ten times. I'd have my chance.

I bought a hot dog and ate it. The park was getting crowded. I rode the Monster Wave again, this time with my eyes closed, so that I felt I was floating during the middle of the loop while the kids behind and in front of me screamed their heads off.

On my way down the ramp I saw Monica. She was with three or four of her friends, looking excited and happy. Gerald was behind them in white tennis togs and dark glasses. He looked resigned to a long and boring day. After the girls got in line he went off, and I took my position at the end of the ramp, watching as the operator

loaded them into the cars. The motors whined, and then the cars went through the loop, up to the tower — hanging there a moment as though they might be stuck — and back to earth again. Kids came off the ramp wide-eyed, chattering to their friends.

Monica stopped dead when she spotted me. Then she told her friends to save her a place in line.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. She looked just like Perri did when she was mad. I could feel the backpack's straps dig into my shoulders, as though the box had suddenly tripled in weight.

"Your mom sent me." The lie was easy. "She's sick."

"Sick? Daddy didn't say anything."

"Maybe he didn't want you to know." She considered this. "She needs you, honey. It tears her up that she can't see you. In fact, I think that's really what's not making her feel so good."

"Maybe Daddy'll let me see her tomorrow."

"Honey, you know I wouldn't have come here to find you unless it was really serious. We can be at your Ma's place in half an hour."

"But I can't just leave without telling Daddy—"

"No!" Her eyes grew wide. "He wouldn't let you go with me. You know that. You tell your friends to tell your dad where you've gone. But make them wait fifteen minutes."

She looked at me with a pitiful ex-

pression, and I knew she'd do anything if I'd just let her off the hook now.

But I said, "You love your mother, don't you?"

She took a deep breath. "Okay. I'll be right back."

The I saw Gerald. He had a beer and some popcorn and he stared at me with absolute disbelief that quickly turned to fury. The popcorn and the beer hit the ground. I grabbed Monica's hand before he had a chance to open his mouth.

"Come on!" We pushed onto the platform just as the cars left the chute. I lifted her over the barrier. The operator yelled, but we'd be gone before he could do anything.

I hadn't counted on Gerald being so fast. He hit me from behind just as I put Monica onto the other side of the platform. Then I turned to face him, knowing that this is what I'd wanted all along. He lunged at me, and we both hit the track, where I could feel the vibration of the cars — which had just climbed the tower — come off the rails. He swung at me and missed, and I laughed. There was nothing he could do to me, nothing at all, and he knew it.

Then he went for my throat, knocking me against the edge of the platform. And I heard the mirror inside my box break. The sound made me, a madman: I kicked both feet together, caught him squarely in the chest. Gerald grunted in surprise and hit the opposite lip of the platform

with the back of his head.

The cars were back at the top of the loop. Everyone was frozen with horror. I saw the operator struggling at the control board to activate the emergency braking system, but from his panicked expression I knew they weren't working right. Gerald was out cold. All I had to do was step up and I'd be safe, with better vengeance than I'd ever dreamed. In the buzzing of the car wheels I could hear the *voceratrice* cursing him for what he'd done. The spirit of the wood was going to capture him forever.

But it was my face in the box. I would be the one to suffer from his death. And the next person to have the box would see me caught in it and tell himself it was all an illusion, a trick of nature.

The mirror glass rattled as I crossed the track. Kids were screaming — those on the platform who could see what was going to happen, and those aboard the ride were facing the wrong way and enjoying the last of their safe terror. Never again will I be as strong as I was at that moment. The seams in his tennis shirt started to rip, but I arched my back and got the last foot-pound of strength from my legs and upper arms.

Gerald's shoes grazed the side of the cars as they roared past us.

**G**reat USA's security people kept us for almost two hours while we

stonewalled and gave more or less similar stories. He was the jealous husband, me the new boyfriend. They opened my pack, disappointed, I think, not to find a bomb. The box with the broken mirror was a gift for the girl, I explained. Gerald had freaked when he saw me trying to give it to his daughter.

Both of us declined to press charges. So finally the frustrated park officials let us go, after banning us for the rest of the year. Monica and her friends got free passes on the way out, however. I had a feeling I would not be seeing her for a long time.

On the way home, I stopped at the glass company for another mirror. I in-

stalled it back at my house, taking care not to look at the *voceru*, or at the top. Even so, the box seemed to call to me, telling me softly that now I had learned about its powers I could control them. I didn't fall for it. If there was power here, it was more that I could handle. I'd been lucky. Jimmy McCandless, who'd only wanted to grow some grapes up in Sonoma, had not. Vengeance belonged to one who had made the box, the one who had given it. Not to the one who possessed it.

I packed it very carefully in styrofoam peanuts and sent it, UPS, to Mr. Gerald Williamson, Kentfield, California.

