

THE GREAT ANCESTOR

Albert E. Cowdrey

Albert Cowdrey's last story for us was "White Magic" the March issue, and since it ran, folks have been clamoring for more from Mr. C. We're delighted to oblige. This dark fantasy takes us again to Mr. Cowdrey's home town and lets us peek into the history of one of the Big Easy's most prominent families. I'd always thought that the dead in New Orleans were entombed above-ground, but Bert assures me that's not so.

"NOT GUILTY!" CRIED THE foreman of the jury that day in 1989, and the courtroom in the New Orleans federal court "erupted in pandemonium," as next morning's Times-Picayune expressed it. My lawyer, who had been nervously fingering some documents, tossed his papers into the air and embraced me. Then my family came swarming out of the spectators' seats and piled on. Little Pierrette, my beautiful little girl, rushed into my arms, crying, "Daddy, Daddy!" My wife Amy gazed up at me with limpid blue eyes. My brother Ned pounded me on the back. My mother, who was weeping, plucked at my sleeve until I bent and kissed her. Aunts

and uncles and in-laws crowded around me, weeping, laughing, congratulating.

"The luck of the Carcassonnes !" thundered a hoarse, hollow voice from somewhere at the back of the throng.

Yes, it was a party. Pity my Great-Aunt Kate was dead. She would have appreciated the verdict more than any of them. Truly, mine had been an ordeal by law. All those accusations in civil court regarding my stewardship at Goldenacres Savings and Loan, and then that final, dreadful criminal charge-- that I had procured the murder of the government's star witness!

The media were waiting like a school of circling sharks just outside Courtroom No. 3 that I had gotten to know so well during the long, bitter days of the trial. By this time I knew how to handle them. I let the lawyer talk while I stood holding Pierrette on one arm and clutching Amy to me with the other. When it was my turn to speak I just said:

"This has been a terrible experience for my family, but thank God, the system works. I just wish the government had some better things to do than hound honest businessmen, that's all."

Nothing more than that. You can always give thanks and damn the government safely. Anything else wouldn't have been safe. Above all, you never tell the media what you actually think. They'll use the truth to kill you.

Then it was time for all of us to go to Mother's house for the victory banquet, laid on in advance of the verdict because she, too, believed in the luck of the Carcassonnes.

We were all there, over a hundred people of all ages, filling the house and overflowing on the lawn and surrounding the pool. The caterers were working themselves to death unloading their vans, for Mother's kitchen couldn't possibly have cooked all the food. Our new puppy, Grits VI, got under everyone's feet and barked himself hoarse. The waiters, many of them college kids hired for the day, ran around with their trays like ants carrying pieces of dismembered bugs.

The place of honor was the dining room table where I sat with Amy, Mother, Ned and his wife, and a few others. All the inner circle except Great-Aunt Kate, who was in her grave, and Daddy, who was in New York arranging to sell some asset of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A long, noisy table of us -- in-laws and out-laws, as they say -- and all of us, I was aware, somehow sounding and gesturing alike even though we were so different. The family.

Even our Founder was there, hanging in his portrait over the table. While waiting for the main course to arrive I glanced up at him -- a fierce-looking old man with a cataract of white whiskers. Under the varnish his suit was shiny black, his eyes were glittering black, and his linen gleamed like a mountain of white ore. The polished brass plate under the portrait said Pierre Carcassonne . LeFondateur , 1868.

He had been there every mealtime while I was growing up. Pierre the Great, Daddy liked to call him. The Founder. Founder of what? Ned asked once when he was still little and dumb. Of our family, said Daddy, reverently, and we were all solemnly silent for as much as a minute. Because we all believed in our family. Not in God, the devil or the flag, but in our family.

We lived in the same big house with its nineteen rooms and five baths overlooking Audubon Park in uptown New Orleans. We had formal gardens, tennis courts, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool in marble and tile and a bronze lion-head that gushed cold green brine from our own artesian well. Money that Daddy had made by helping the Shah of Iran to invest a tiny part of his billions in Louisiana had paid for the well and the pool, so we called it the Shah's Pool. The deal with Teheran was part of the family legend. Other aspects of the legend--the important people we had met, the money we had made, the secrets we knew--sparkled in the backs of our minds like the paste jewels in the glass case in Aunt Kate's living room on Prytania Street that marked the time she had been Queen of Astarte, the best women's carnival krewe. No Carcassonne had yet been Rex, King of Carnival, but surely that would come in time.

Ultimately everything we had derived from Pierre the Great, who had emigrated from Toulouse or Marseilles or someplace in the early nineteenth century and become a cotton factor and speculator. Though we knew little about him, some of his oddities were remembered -- for example, the fact, remarkable for those times, that he had refused to own slaves. For whatever reason, he had been no friend of the Confederacy or the southern war effort. During the Civil War when

others were going bankrupt most of his wealth had reposed comfortably in the Bank of England, earning more money than in the postwar depression had enabled him to buy up valuable sugar land for a song. His sons and grandsons made more money by investing in the brand-new oilfields of the Gulf and Texas.

In Daddy's generation the Carcaissons were doctors, lawyers, investment bankers, and stockbrokers. They divided the inheritance but also multiplied it. They called themselves "the hundred cousins" and together with their spouses they possessed about nine billion dollars. My generation generally followed their parents into business but also did some offbeat things, producing among other oddballs an artist who sold bad paintings for exorbitant prices and a drug-runner who never wound up in the penitentiary, although he probably should have. They too shared the luck of the Carcaissons.

I was a bookworm as a child and for a long time I was drawn to the study of history. Daddy was not too happy over that, pointing out to me that there was no money in it. He probably thought I lacked the courage to do more adventurous things, and in that he may have been right. But when I persevered, he told me to go ahead, warning me however that my trust fund would not be a nickel larger than Ned's, whose goal was to become an investment banker.

I think it was the general air of polite disapproval at home that caused me, in 1970 when I was in my first year as a graduate student at Tulane, to become interested in writing a biography of Pierre the Great. I secretly hoped to demonstrate to Daddy that my profession could add, however slightly, to the

luster of the family name.

The first thing I found out was that tracking down Pierre Careassonne was surprisingly difficult. For a family as narcissistic as ours, we turned out to own little in the way of papers. Interesting papers, anyway. Account books, yes, we had those, by the dozen. From ledgers of the 1850's I could see how Pierre had shifted his money around, crisscrossing the Atlantic with his interests, moving cotton between the New Orleans warehouses and those in Liverpool and banking the profits on Threadneedle Street in the City of London and using them to speculate on the Exchange and the Bourse.

He obviously had believed that the United States of his day was a great place to make money but a very poor place to store it, and a series of panics and depressions and bank failures culminating in the disasters of the Civil War proved him right. At any rate, he never ended a year without posting a profit, including even the calamitous year 1862, when New Orleans fell to the federal fleet.

But where were the letters and diaries that alone can make a dead person come to life? I could find none, except copies of business letters which were only a bit less boring than the account books. I had real hopes of Aunt Kate, but she put me off, saying that her house was such a mess she could find nothing in it. Other relatives came up only with bits and pieces. A letter consisting in its entirety of the words "Yours of the 7th inst. rec'd and I thank you for it" tells you little about the writer except that he was terse. I finished the meager materials stored in family safes and desks knowing little or nothing of

thereal PierreCareassonne except that he had been shrewd, and I had known that beforeI started.

I could not even discover where he was buried. InMetairieCemeterythe Carcassonneshad a pompous family vault with walls and roof of granite and a greenbronze lady in a robe mourning beside the door. But the first people to be buriedthere were Daddy's grandparents. Some earlier members of our family reposedin an uptown cemetery across from Commander's Palace restaurant -- very convenient, Daddy liked to say, if their appetites were anything like those of mybrother and myself! ButPierrethe Great was not there, nor did he seem to be anyplaceelse.

On my hours off, when I was neither lecturing at Tulane nor being lectured to, I pokedaround in the older cemeteries, hoping to get lucky. Soon I made a number ofnew acquaintances among sextons and caretakers, and among a curious collectionof people who were victims of genealogical obsessions. These students ofthe past moved in hunched postures from gravestone to gravestone, copying namesand dates; they made rubbings of interesting epitaphs and the quaint carvings-- winged hourglasses, weeping willows, sorrowing angels -- that Victorian stonemasons used to memorialize grief. I liked the genealogists becausethey, too, believed in the importance of family, even if they had to supporttheir dreams by fantastic efforts to connect their ancestors to the Romanoffsor theBorgias .

The genealogists and I would bringpo'boy sandwiches in brown bags and eat lunch

among the tombs, sitting on marble benches under the big old trees and breathing deeply in the murmurous summer silence that reduced the noise of the city to a distant beelike hum of traffic. One day I was munching my sandwich in St. Louis Cemetery No. 3 and talking to a tatty old lady who claimed to be descended (by the wrong side of the blanket) from the Archduke Francis Ferdinand. The archduke, she said, had been on the verge of legitimizing her grandfather when Ferdinand's assassination and the First World War put an end to the project.

"It preyed on Grandpa's mind," she said. "Not that being illegitimate bothers anybody anymore, but he was of the old school. He studied French in order to write his own diplomatic dispatches in case the Hapsburg throne should ever be re-established and his claim to it recognized. His last words on earth were, *Helas! je suis toujours un bâtard* "

That seemed sad to me, being forever a bastard. Since she had confided in me, I told her about my search for the grave of my great-great grandfather, Pierre Carcassonne, and my fear that he must have died outside the city, since I could find no trace of him in New Orleans.

"That's an unusual name," she said thoughtfully. "Now, where have I seen it before?"

I was about to suggest that our family was locally prominent and often mentioned in the newspaper. But then she brightened and exclaimed, "Oh, I've seen that grave!"

"You have!"

"Oh, yes. I often forget faces, but I never forget a grave. Now let me see...it was in...it was in Oh, I know. It's in the St.Dismas cemetery, on the Basin Street side somewhere. Yes, I'm sure it is. It's not in very good condition, I'm afraid."

Candidly, I did not believe her. But I wanted to believe, and a little light had switched on in my head when she said St.Dismas . This was indeed a very old cemetery, once located just outside the ramparts when New Orleans was still a fortified town. But it had soon become a burial ground for people of dubious antecedents, including some of Jean Lafitte's pirates. It also held many of the city's free blacks. Many had been people of wealth and education, highly respectable and much respected. But they, too, had had their bad apples, including a couple of voodoo queens buried in marble tombs that people still marked with red crosses, hoping to keep the witches inside.

It seemed to me as I thanked my friend for her help that one of the obscurities surrounding Pierre the Great -- his refusal to own slaves -might be clarified if it turned out to have been a mulatto or quadroon who had married a white woman. Of course, such a union would have been illegal at that time, but wealth finds a way, and the number of local white families with black ancestors is almost as large as the number of blacks with white forebears.

As I reflected on the features of the old patriarch in the portrait, I could

find neither support nor refutation for my idea. Were the lips hidden in that cascade of moustache and beard as thin as European or as full as African? No telling-- and the painter had probably adjusted both features and coloring to accord with the wishes of his model.

Nevertheless, as I drove to Basin Street I was almost humming with excitement. I was without conscious racism myself, and since Daddy had predicted that the next Mayor of New Orleans would be a black Creole I could see no reason for anyone to be ashamed of such a connection any longer. I particularly relished the thought of how my more pompous relatives, who scorned history as a useless pursuit, would be floored if I turned up clear evidence that the Founder had been partly black! I was still young enough to relish the sheer shock value of such a revelation.

I will not waste time telling of my slow and somewhat dangerous search for Pierre's tomb. Dangerous because the neighborhood had gone bad and I would not have dared to go there alone at any time but the afternoon of a sunny day when well-guarded tourist parties could be expected to arrive also. Suffice it to say that after several anxious and muddy hours spent mostly on my hands and knees, I discovered at last what appeared to be the grave of the Founder.

It was much smaller and in much worse condition than I had expected --merely a chamber of very old, weathered and broken brick, cracked by the roots of trees that had themselves died and become part of the cemetery earth generations ago. There were no remains inside, only a bundle of old newspapers reduced by damp to papiermache, which showed that a derelict had been sleeping there at some time

in the not too remote past, with a wad of newsprint for a pillow. A broken and dislodged square of marble lying beside it was much eroded by the rain and the words cut into it were only partly legible:

PI..R.CARCASSONNE

NE LE 2ME AO.,...8

DE .EDEL. 31REOC , 18.8

ODER..T DUMMET . ANT

The French part of the inscription was easy: Pierre Carcassonne/Ne le 2me Aont ... 8/Decede le 31re Octobre , 18.8. In English, he was born the second of August in a year ending in 8 and died the thirty-first of October, probably in 1868, the year of the portrait. This suggested to me that he knew the end was close and had had the picture painted in order to fix his image in the minds of his descendants.

The Latin epitaph, apparently *Oderint dummetuant* , was a poser. My Latin was poor, but after digging out a grammar I had used in high school I decided the words were Caligula's famous remark about the Romans: "Let them hate me, so long as they fear me." That struck me as a strange sentiment to inscribe on a tombstone.

In any case, I had a good deal more information than I had possessed before arriving at St. Dismas . I had brought a polaroid camera with me and I took the whole roll of film of the vault and its surroundings. My last happy discovery of

this eventful day was that my car had not been stripped while I was in the cemetery, though I did have to pay five dollars tribute to a teenager carrying a baseball bat who claimed to have been guarding it for me. Cheap at the price, I thought, as I drove off, for I had at last touched something tangible belonging to Pierre Carcassonne, even if it was only an empty grave.

AT HOME I played with Grits IV, recently installed as the family dog following the tragic death of Grits III under the wheels of a concrete mixer. He was a young Schnauzer, with a short beard and a merry bark. He accompanied me to my bathroom where I took a much-needed shower and when I had dressed we went down to the dining room where I stared possessively at Pierre. Yes, I decided, his skin was definitely rather dark. I had to admit that the hue might indicate old paint or a bad liver rather than what in 1970 we still called a touch of the tar brush; nevertheless, I felt that I had come closer to him than any of my many relatives.

Daddy deflated me, however. He was simply not interested in what I had discovered.

"That's not where Pierre was buried," he said flatly, after glancing at my photos. "He wouldn't be buried in a hole like that. Anyway, why would he be in Dismas? Nobody we ever knew is buried there with all those voodoo queens and pirates and whatnot."

He even dismissed the evidence of the marble slab, and I had to admit that in the Polaroid picture the lettering looked all but meaningless.

The question was how to get more evidence. I considered going back and stealing the marble slab, but rejected the idea on ethical grounds, for in those days I still had ethics. Instead, I resolved to seek documentary information, and on my next free day I went to the French Quarter to work in the General Ferd Blister Collection. This choleric retired officer, made rich by oil discoveries on vast tracts of inherited swampland, was whiling away his golden years by buying a huge volume of memorabilia - pictures, manuscripts, indeed almost anything -- that dealt with New Orleans in what he called "the good years" before the suppression of legalized prostitution. I introduced myself and was respectfully received by General Blister's archivist, a translucent young man named Dave who seemed only half alive, and hence all the better fitted to preserve and interpret the records of the dead.

"General Blister," Dave muttered, eyeing a point in distant space, "would really like to get hold of some Carcassonne family papers."

"So would I."

"Surely they must be somewhere."

"All I can find is old account books." I then explained that I hoped to track down references to Pierre Carcassonne through mentions in the papers of his contemporaries.

"I think," Dave whispered, "I think...yes...I ran across some mentions when I was accessing the Dubroville Papers. And the DeSaye Papers. And the Worthe Papers. Hm. Hm ." He wandered off muttering to himself and eventually returned with half a dozen gray document boxes.

He relieved me of my pen, issued me foolscap and a short hard pencil to take notes with, and sat me in a corner of the dark, somewhat dungeonlike room that General Blister allotted to researchers in his collection. In fact, it had once been a dungeon, for iron rings were still set in the old brick walls and a spiked metal slave-collar dangled menacingly from a short length of chain.

Here I spent the whole of a long day on my self-imposed quest, laboriously panning out a few glistening grains of gold from the verbal torrent of 19th-century letter writing. The Dubroville Papers were the most revealing, because a member of their family had fought a duel with Pierre Carcassonne . Here are some of my notes:

Honore Dubroville to his wife Claudette, November 2, 1857:

"Ah, my dear, if only you were here in New Orleans, to give counsel in this crisis! My nephew Louis wishes to challenge that accursed wretch Carcassonne to a duel. I have earnestly advised him not to do so, for a duel can be held only between gentlemen, no others being able to dispute a point of honor. As to the danger of fighting such a man, I said nothing: danger would only spur the young firebrand."

Same to same, December 13, 1857.

"That ill-considered duel! An honorable young man is no more, while Carcassonne continues to flourish like the green bay tree and is more insufferable than ever. In addition to being a pig and a camel, he is now an assassin, too."

Various other comments followed, all uncomplimentary. During the federal occupation of the city, the Founder had proclaimed himself a Unionist and worked hand in glove with the corrupt General "Beast" Butler, to the great profit of both, according to the Dubroilles. The last reference to Pierre was an almost fiendish burst of glee when, after the war, my ancestor died of unspecified causes.

Claudette Dubroville to "Montres chef mari," AH Saints' Day [November 1], 1868.

"How unfortunate that you are away from home at so happy a time! We are rid of Carcassonne at last!!! Surely the family will have a closed coffin at the wake. They will be lucky if the consecrated earth does not vomit him up!! For his children I am not sorry either, they are all limbs of Satan. True, we are commanded by the good God to forgive, but surely not the Carcassonnes."

Such malice was rather daunting. As Dave brought me more boxes from other collections of letters, my dismay increased. I had grown up in the firm conviction that my family was in every sense honorable and respectable, yet it

seemed increasingly that the Founder's contemporaries did not agree.

Reluctantly, I admitted to myself that fathomless unpopularity had enveloped old Pierre. He was called everything vile -- a cheat, a blackguard, a swine, a murderer, a thief, a rascal, a rout, and a Republican. To add to my discomfort, in all this catalogue of denunciation no reference was ever made to his race -- and, if he was black, that seemed strange, given the attitudes of the time.

Perhaps my whole theory of a black man on the rise who virtuously refused to own slaves because they were members of his own race was wrong.

I returned home from my day in the Quarter in a thoughtful mood and settled down with Grits IV and a drink to await the return of my father from his day's occupation. He had successfully managed some intensely complicated transaction of other between two banks and was in a relaxed and pleasant mood. He patted the dog, praised the martini I mixed for him (he was very exacting about martinis) and asked me how my researches on the Founder were coming.

For reply I handed him the foolscap sheets on which I had jotted my notes and he read them with the close attention that a lawyer always gives to a written document.

"Not widely loved, was he?" he murmured, handing them back.

"No. Somehow it's not what I expected. I thought he'd be respected, at least."

"Too successful, I suppose," said Daddy somewhat heavily. "A little success has many friends, but a big one has many enemies."

I couldn't buy that, even dressed up in one of Daddy's instant wise sayings.

PierreCarcassonne had been hated. I pointed this out.

"And yet in these documents nobody ever says exactly why. They just heave insultsat him."

"That's because back then everybody knew why. My adviser at Tulane tells me it's somethinghistorians run into time and again. What everybody knows, nobody ever bothersto say. It can be terribly frustrating."

The next bit of evidence came from a completely unexpected source.

JakeTouro kept one of the last great junk-shops inNew Orleans. A pleasant, dumpyman of no special age, he was literally unable to let any object that couldbe physically inserted into his tiny shop escape him. For reasons of space hiscollection contained no antique locomotives or stuffed whales; but he had everythingelse, especially if it concernedNew Orleans.

Jake had already marked me down as a potential customer, and I got a call from himone morning as I was preparing to leave to take an exam at Tulane.

"Jake, I don't have much time."

"Sure, sure, sure. Just wanted to let you know I've got a pitcher you might want to see. Carcassonnestuff, middle of the last century. Interested? Ha. Thought you might be."

As a matter of fact, at three that afternoon I was edging into Jake's Treasure Chest on a side street off Esplanade. Edging because the junk was piled so high and deep and close that I had to go sideways or not at all.

"Let me put on the lights," muttered Jake, emerging from a back room. He had ten or twelve gooseneck lamps scattered around and with a good deal of ballet-like twisting and toe-standing he managed to turn most of them on. Then he sidled behind a counter and started rummaging in a collection of shoeboxes.

"Ah," he said, "system never fails."

He pulled out a gutta-percha box with an arcadian scene stamped into the lid, and flipped it open. Inside was a tintype of Pierre, so faded that I had to turn it from side to side under one of the gooseneck lamps before the image emerged. But then -- what an image!

Only his face and one hand rose from the gleaming blackness of the plate. The hand was huge and gnarled and rested on a cane whose head was a massive knob of ivory carved in the shape of a snarling dog. Whenever the image was taken, Pierre had been clean-shaven; his nose was a raptor's beak and his face was set in a ferocious expression, the eyes fairly starting out of the head as he glared into the camera. I found myself wondering if the lens had not cracked under the

intensity of that look.

The painting at home was formal, modified by all the skills of the artist to turn this corsair into a gentleman. The image I was looking at now was, I believed at once, the real man himself as he had been in life.

Voodoo queens and pirates! In death, Pierre had gone to earth among his own kind in St. Dismas. But his kind had nothing to do with race. For it was clear to me from the photograph that Pierre the Great, the Founder of our family, was white -- the whitest man I ever saw -- dead white, in fact. Then (coming back again to the old question) why had he refused to own slaves at a time when being a master was the sign of wealth and success, the one thing that enabled anyone to exclaim "I have arrived!" with no danger of being contradicted?

Jake wanted two hundred dollars for the tintype in its case. I was able to extract the money from Daddy without trouble, once he saw the picture.

"A tough bird," he said. "I'd hate to go up against a man who looked like that in court. Brr!" And he actually shivered.

He must have talked about my discovery to older members of the family, and they told others. In any case, a week or so later I got a very old, spotty card in the mail with my Great Aunt Kate's maiden name embossed on it and a few spiky, spidery handwritten lines. She had heard about my success in finding information about the Founder, she wrote, and she had now located something in

herhouse that might interest me.

I showed the card to Daddy, and he was downright enthusiastic.

"She's so old," he said, "that she's a lot closer to the Founder than we are.

This is 1970 and she was born in 1890. Her father was Pierre's son; she spent her childhood among people who had known the old man intimately."

The warmth with which he said this made me smile; it was obvious that Daddy was finding history a more interesting study than he had expected it to be, since I had begun to uncover our family's place in it.

As I've said, Kate lived in a big old house on Prytania Street. The house was not on the Uptown Mansion tour; it might have suited a haunted house tour, if our local hucksters ever decided to establish one. From the street the house was simply an enormous thicket sprouting chimneys. English yew had grown up roof-high, and down below aspidistra had taken over all the garden beds. Then on top of this basic jungle had grown thick living carpets of vines -- honeysuckle, ivy, cat's-claw, Virginia creeper, yellow jasmine. I remember that the place was startlingly alive in the bright hot sunlight, clamorous with insects and brilliant with flashing jays and redbirds.

Aunt Kate was served and cared for by an extraordinarily small woman named Nelly, who seemed to have invented her own race, being neither black, white, Oriental, nor Latin. She had dry henna-colored tresses, a wrinkled little face like a marmoset, and a great deal of superfluous hair on her face and arms. She

opened the front door, peered up at me from not much above the level of my belt-buckle, and then turned away.

On my last visit to Aunt Kate -- five or six years earlier -- Nelly had announced me with exactly two words, "He's here." On this occasion she said, "Well, he's here," which was a gain of one word. She didn't say them to anybody, just enunciated in a loud, cracked voice, standing in the dark entry hall with its elk-horn hatrack, clouded mirror, and yellow-brown wallpaper. Then she rustled away like a departing leaf in autumn and left me to find my own way.

I tried the living room, which was very dark and smelled like mildew, and the only light seemed to dwell in the rhinestone regalia Kate had worn as Queen of Astarte in 1948. I tried a few other rooms, and eventually found my great aunt in a large, jungle-shaded back gallery, lying on a spotty chaiselongue and reading a battered old book. I knew that she bought second-hand books by weight, and in fact brown cardboard boxes stood all around with piles of books in them, most with brownish pages and broken spines. The one she was reading was called *L'Abattoir* and she put it aside to lay her hand in mine like a long bony fish.

"So, darling, you're interested in Pierre Carcassonne," she said, fixing me with two tiny, glittering dark eyes lying in a nest of bags and wrinkles like gems in drawstring purses.

I said yes, and told her what I'd found so far. She made me sit on the end of the chaiselongue while we talked. She was wearing a long-faded robe trimmed

with rabbit fur that had probably looked better on the rabbit. Her bony feet were bare but the nails of her feet and hands were both done meticulously with silver varnish. She wore green eye shadow on her lids and her thin arms were noisy with many jingling bracelets made of what looked like steel. With the hard intelligence in her eyes and her somewhat predatory air, she fitted my image of a successful retired madam.

When I had finished telling my story, she brushed one hand back over her head of thin, clean white hair, setting her bracelets jangling, and said thoughtfully, "Grandpapa must have been the most fascinating man. Of course he'd been dead twenty-two years when I was born, so I never knew him in the flesh."

"He wasn't very popular, I'm afraid."

"I doubt if he cared. He was rich and he had a big family and provided for them very well. As you and I both know. But perhaps you don't know. Come along, darling, I've got something wonderful to show you."

She got rather creakily to her feet and led me into the brown shadows of the house. "There are such strange things in this house, darling! Oh, of course there's rubbish, too. Damn all these cookbooks, I never cook anymore, why do I keep them? But also there are wonderful, wonderful things, hidden away, just waiting to be found again."

She unlocked a door and we entered a little room that seemed to have no particular purpose at all. I helped her clear a path to a big pine cupboard that

stood in a far corner.

"Now, you remember this place," said Aunt Kate, "and come back here when I'm dead. I've decided to make you the executor of my will, because you're a historian and because this house --"

She paused to swing her long, jingling, bony arms in encompassing arcs. "This house is history!" she cried in a harsh voice that filled the little room like the scream of a macaw.

We finally got the cupboard door open and a cascade of rubbish fell out broken dolls, pots and pans, bundled-up papers.

"Shit," she said.

While she rooted I looked around, wondering how long it would take me to catalogue the stuff in this house and how much you earned for being an executor.

At last she gave a kind of happy squawk and brought out an old leather dispatch box with a snap lid. Giving me a secret, crafty smile, she led the way back in silence to the shaded gallery. She cleared a space on a once gorgeous marquetry table and snapped the lid of the box open.

"Now, darling, you'll find this truly interesting," she said, pulling out with some difficulty -- for her wrists were weak -- a thick oblong plate of

greenishlycorroded copper.

"Daddy gave it to me before he died," she said proudly. "He had five sons, you know, but he said to me, 'Kate, you'll appreciate this more than any of them.'"

I picked the metal plate up and stared at it, first in confusion, then in growing wonder. Kate had produced something the like of which I had never seen before and have never seen since, though I think there must be many others, scattered around the world. Some sort of writing had been gouged into the metal. The work had been done either with a steel stylus or -- as a forensic scientist suggested, many years later, after viewing it under a strong lens -- with the point of a hard, rough, sharp claw.

Before I locked that curious object away for good I also showed it to three alleged experts on the Tulane faculty, who assured me that the language was either Ill Amharic, the ancient language of Ethiopia 121 Medieval Georgian, or (3) Old Church Slavonic. None of them offered to translate it. Indeed, I can only compare the handwriting to the very worst sort of doctor's prescription.

That day in Aunt Kate's I wasn't even sure which way I was supposed to hold the plate, until I noticed the signature at the bottom.

The name appeared to have been burned into the metal with some strong acid and it was perfectly legible. It said, of course, Pierre Carcassonne, and gave the date, le 3^e Octobre 1848, just twenty years before his death.

I wanted to take the plate with me, but Aunt Kate was having none of that. I

would get it when she was dead, she said firmly. And no, I couldn't have it photographed. This was something that should exist only in the original.

"Remember, darling," she said as Nelly waited to lead me out. "Grandpapa didn't just sign that agreement for himself, for his own benefit. He signed it for all of us, for his descendants to the God-knows-what generation. I just don't think it's possible for a family to go on for a century and more always making the right investments just by accident, do you? And what's more, avoiding the wrong investments, like slavery, which mined so many people after emancipation. We're getting good advice, even if we don't know it, even if it comes to us only in our dreams.

"Grandpapa paid the usual price, and I'm sure he paid it gladly. He didn't care much about souls, including his own. He wanted the glory of the body, even if it only lasted twenty years. Goodbye, darling. I'll be dead soon and I'm leaving you the most interesting thing I own for the same reason Papa left it to me -- because it'll mean more to you than it would to anyone else."

At home it was dinner time. Mama was talking about debutantes and my brother Ned was feeding his face and occasionally, when his mouth cleared, asking Daddy a question about debentures. That covered the deb front, so I could spend my time eating -- our cook, Rawanda, had whipped up one of her greatest specialties, shrimp Creole -- and slipping an occasional shrimp to Grits IV, who crouched under the table, whining softly.

I also studied Pierre Carcassonne's face. Had he really done that for all of us, signed that contract so that we could enjoy the good things of the world for centuries or forever, while he paid the price? Even that poor tomb-- had it been a mere formality? Had there been anything left to bury after the contract fell due and the Creditor came to collect what was owed him? How could anybody do more for a family than that?

That afternoon I went swimming in the Shah's Pool with Grits. It was the first really hot day. Through a screen of azalea bushes I could see the golfers in their super-bright clothes moving languidly around the green hummocks of the course. Horsemen cantered by on the bridle path, and a wind like a furnace stirred the huge old branches of the oak trees. Could it really be that we Carcassonnes would succeed at whatever we tried, because we were protected by the contract that Pierre had signed with the God of This World? If so, why was I wasting my time with scholarship?

That night I dreamed about the tintype. The dark metal turned into a dark pool and Pierre's big gnarled hand reached out of it and gripped mine.

"Join me!" he roared in a voice incredibly hoarse and hollow.

And so I did.

