

Wapshot's Demon

Frederik Pohl

HE KEPT ME WAITING on a hard wooden bench for three-quarters of an hour before his secretary came wandering out, glanced casually at me, stopped to chat with the switchboard girl, drifted in my direction again, paused to straighten out the magazines on the waiting-room table, and finally came over to tell me that the Postal Inspector would see me now.

I was in no mood to be polite, but I was very good. I marched in and put my briefcase on his desk and said, "Sir, I must protest this high-handed behavior. I assure you, I have no client whose activities would bring him in conflict in any way with the Post Office Department. I said as much to one of your staff on the phone, after I received your letter ordering me to appear here, but they"

He stood up, smiling amiably, and shook my hand be-

fore I could get it out of the way. "That's all right," he said cheerfully. "That's perfectly all right. We'll straighten it out right away. What did you say your name was?"

I told him my name and started to go on with what I had to say, but he wasn't listening. "Roger Barclay," he repeated, looking at a pile of folders on his desk. "Barclay, Barclay, Barclay. Oh, yes." He picked up one of the folders and opened it. "The Wapshot business," he said.

The folder seemed to contain mostly large, bright-colored, flimsy-looking magazines entitled Secret, Most Secret, Top Secret and Shush! He opened one of them where a paper clip marked a place and handed it to me. There was a small ad circled in red crayon. "That's it," he said. "Your boy Wapshot."

The ad was of no conceivable interest to me; I barely glanced at it, something about fortune-telling, it looked like, signed by somebody named Cleon Wapshot at an address in one of those little towns in Maine. I handed it back to the Postal Inspector. "I have already informed you," I said, "that I have no client involved in difficulties with the Post Office Department; that is not my sort of practice at all. And I most certainly have no client named aeon Wapshot."

That took some of the wind out of his sails. He looked at me suspiciously, then took a scrawly piece of paper out

of the folder and read it over, then looked at me suspiciously again. He handed over the piece of paper. "What about this, then?" he demanded.

It was a penciled letter, addressed to the Postal Inspector in Eastport, Maine; it said:

Dear Sir:

Please send all further communications to my Attorney, Roger Barclay, Esq., of 404 Fifth Avenue, New York, and oblige,

Yours sincerely,

Clean Wapshot

Naturally, that was a puzzler to me. But I finally convinced the Postal Inspector that I'd never heard of this Wapshot. You could see he thought there was something funny about the whole thing and wasn't quite sure whether I had anything to do with it or not. But, after all, the Post Office Department is used to cranks and he finally let me go, and even apologized for taking my time, after I had assured him for the tenth time that I had nothing to do with Wapshot.

That shows how wrong you can be. I hurried back to my office and went in through the private door down the hall. When I rang for Phoebe I had already put the affair out of my mind, as the sort of ridiculous time-waster that makes it so difficult to run a law office on schedule. Phoebe

was bursting with messages; Frankel had called on the Harry's Hideaway lease, call him back; Mr. Zimmer had called three times, wouldn't leave a message; the process server had been unable to find the defendants in the Herlihy suit; one of the operatives from the Splendid Detective Agency was bringing in a confidential report at 3:30.

"And there's a man to see you," she finished up. "He's been here over an hour; his name's, uh, WapShot, Cleon Wapshot."

He was a plump little man with a crew cut. Not very much like any Down-East lobsterman I ever had imagined, but his voice was authentic of the area. I said, "Sir, you have caused me a great deal of embarrassment. What in heaven's name possessed you to give the Post Office my name?"

He blinked at me mildly. "You're my lawyer."

"Nonsense! My good man, there are some formalities to go through before"

"Pshaw," he said, "here's your retainer, Mr. Barclay."

He pushed a manila envelope toward me across the desk.

I said, "But I haven't taken your case"

"You will."

"But the retainer¹ scarcely know what the figure should be. I don't even know what law you brwhat allegations were made."

"Oh, postal fraud, swindling, fortune-telling, that kind

of thing," he said. "Nothing to it. How much you figure you ought to have just to get started?"

I sat back and looked him over. Fortune-telling! Postal fraud! But he had a round-faced honesty, you know, the kind of expression jurymen respect and trust. He didn't look rich and he didn't look poor; he had a suit on that was very far from new, but the overcoat was new, brand-new, and not cheap. And besides he had come right out and said what his business was; none of this fake air of "I don't need a lawyer, but if you want to pick up a couple bucks for saving me the trouble of writing a letter, you're on" that I see coming in to my office thirty times a week.

I said briskly, "Five hundred dollars for a starter, Mr. Wapshot."

He grinned and tapped the envelope. "Count 'er up," he said.

I stared at him, but I did what he said. I dumped the contents of the manila envelope on my desk.

There was a thick packet of U. S. Postal Money Orders a hundred and forty-one of them, according to a neatly penciled slip attached to them, made out variously to "aeon Wapshot," "Clion Wopshatt," "C. Wapshut" and a dozen other alternate forms, each neatly endorsed on the back by my new client, each in the amount of \$1.98.

There was a packet, not quite so thick, of checks, all colors and sizes; ninety-six of these, all in the same amount of \$1.98.

There was a still thinner packet of one-dollar bills thirty of them; and finally there were stamps amounting to 74c. I took a pencil and added them up:

\$279.18

190.08

30.00

.74

\$500.00

Wapshot said anxiously, "That's all right, isn't it? I'm sorry about the stamps, but that's the way the orders come in and there's nothing I can do about it I tried and tried to turn them in, but they won't give me but half the value for them in the post office, and that's not right. That's wasteful. You can use them around here, can't you?"

I said with an effort, "Sit down, Mr. Wapshot. Tell me what this is all about."

Well, he told me. But whether I understood or didn't understand I can't exactly say. Parts of it made sense, and parts of it were obviously crazy.

But what it all came to was that, with five appointments and a heavy day's mail untouched, I found myself in a cab

with this deon Wapshot, beetling across town to a little fleabag hotel on the West Side. I didn't think the elevator was going to make it, but I have to admit I was wrong. It got us to the fifth floor, and Wapshot led the way down a hall where all the doors seemed to be ajar and the guests peeping impassively out at us, and we went into a room with an unmade bed and a marble-topped bureau and a dripping shower in the pint-sized bath, and a luggage rack and on the luggage rack, a washing machine. Or anyway, it looked like a washing machine.

Wapshot put his hand on it with simple pride.

"My Semantic Polarizer," he explained.

I followed him into the room, holding my breath. There was a fine, greasy film of grit on the gadget Wapshot had not been clever enough to close the window to the air-shaft, which appeared to double as a garbage chute for the guests on the upper stories. Under the gritas I say, a washing machine. One of the small light-housekeeping kinds: a drawn aluminum pail, a head with some sort of electric business inside. And a couple of things that didn't seem connected with washing clothes two traps, one on either side of the pail. The traps were covered with wire mesh, and both of them were filled with white cards.

"Here," said Wapshot, and picked one of the cards out of the nearest trap. It was a tiny snapshot, like the V-mail

letters, photographically diminished, soldiers overseas used to send. I read it without difficulty:

Dear Mr. Wapshat,

My Husband was always a good Husband to me, not counting the Drink, but when his Cousin moved in upstairs he cooled off to me. He is always buying her Candy and Flowers because he promised her Mother he would take care of her after the Mother, who was my Husband's Aunt, died. Her Television is always getting broken and he has to go up to fix it, sometimes until four o'clock in the Morning. Also, he never told me he had an Aunt until she moved in. I enclose \$1 Dollar and .98 Cents as it says in your ad. in SHUT UP!, please tell me, is she really his Cousin?

I looked up from the letter. Wapshot took it from me, glanced at it, shrugged. "I get a lot of that kind," he said.

"Mr. Wapshot, are you confessing that you are telling fortunes by mail?"

"No!" He looked upset. "Didn't I make you understand? It hasn't got anything to do with fortunes. Questions that have a yes or no answer, that's all I can give them a definite yes or a definite no, I do it and keep the dollar ninety-eight. If I can't I give back the money."

I stared at him, trying to tell if he was joking. He didn't look as though he was joking. In the airshaft something went whiz-pop; a fine spray of grit blew in off the window

sill.

Wapshot shook his head reproachfully. "Throwing their trash down again. Mr. Barclay, I've told the desk clerk a dozen times"

"Forget the desk clerk! What's the difference between what you said and fortune-telling?"

He took a deep breath. "I swear, Mr. Barclay," he said sadly, "I don't think you listen. I went all through this in your office."

"Do it again."

He shrugged. "Well," he said, "you start with Clerk Maxwell. He was a man who discovered a lot of things, and one of the things he discovered he never knew about"

I yelled, "Now, how could he"

"Just listen, Mr. Barclay. It was something that they call 'Maxwell's Demon.' You know what hot air is?"

I said, meaning it to hurt, "I'm learning."

"No, no, not that kind of hot air. I mean just plain hot air, like you might get out of a radiator. It's hot because the molecules in it are moving fast. Understand? Heat is fast molecules, cold is slow molecules. That's the only difference." He was getting warmed up. "Now, ordinary air," he went on, "is a mixture of molecules at different speeds. Some move fast, some move slow; it's the average that gives you your temperature. What Clerk

Maxwell said, and he said it kind of as a joke, you know except a genius never really jokes, and never really makes a mistake; even the things he doesn't really mean sometimes turn out to be true Anyway, what Clerk Maxwell said was, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we could train a little demon to stand in the window of a house. He could direct the fast-moving molecules inside, giving us heat, and direct the slow-moving ones into, say, the kitchen refrigerator giving us cold.' You follow me so far?"

I laughed. "Ha-ha. But I'm not a fool, Mr. Wapshot, and I have had a certain amount of education. I am aware that there is a law of entropy that"

"Ha-ha," he interrupted. "Hold on for a minute, Mr. Barclay. I heard all about the law of entropy, which says that high and low temperatures tend to merge and average out, instead of separating. I heard about it, you heard about it, and even Maxwell heard about it. But there was a German fellow name of Hilsch, and he didn't hear about it. Because what he did, Mr. Barclay, was to invent something called the 'Hilsch Tube,' and all the Hilsch tube is Maxwell's demon come to life. Honest. It really works. You blow into it it's a kind of little pipe with a joint sticking out of it, the simplest-looking little thing you ever saw and hot air comes out of one end, cold air comes out of the other. Don't take my word for it," he said hur-

riedly, holding up his hand. "Don't argue with me. After World War II, they brought back a couple of those things from Germany, and they're all over the country now. They work."

I said patiently, "Mr. Wapshot, what has this got to do with fortune-telling?"

He scowled. "It isn't fortune Well, never mind that.

So we take my Semantic Polarizer. I put into it a large sample of particles what we call a 'universe.' These particles are microfilmed copies of letters people have sent me, along with their checks for a dollar ninety-eight, just like I told them to do in my ads. I run the Polarizer for a while, until the particles in the 'universe' are thoroughly randomized, and then I start tapping off the questions. The ones that come out at this end, the answer is 'yes.' The ones that come out at the other, 'no.' I have to admit," he confessed, a little embarrassed, "that I can only pull about sixty per cent out before the results begin getting unreliable the ones that come off slowly are evidently less highly charged than the ones that come off right away, and so there's a chance of error. But the ones that come off early, Mr. Barclay, they're for sure. After all," he demanded, "what else can they be but definite? Don't forget, the particles are exactly alike in every respect shape, color, weight, size, texture, appearance, feel, everything

every respect but one. The only difference is, for some the answer is 'yes,' for some the answer is 'no.' "

I stood looking at him silently.

A bottle whizzed and splintered in the airshaft; we both ducked.

I said, "It works?"

"It works," he said solemnly.

"You've tried it out?"

He grinned almost for the first time. "You took my case, didn't you? That was a yes. Your price was five hundred? That was a yes. It works, Mr. Barclay. As I see it, that ends the discussion."

And so it did, of course permanently.

The Semantic Polarizer was remarkably easy to run. I played with it for a while, and then I sent the white-haired bellboy down for the Sunday papers. He looked at me as if I was some kind of an idiot. "Excuse me," he said, scratching his head, "but isn't today Wednes"

"I want the Sunday papers," I told him. "Here." Well, the five-dollar bill got the papers for me, but obviously he still thought I was crazy. He said:

"Excuse me, but did the gemmun in this room go out?"

"You mean Mr. Wapshot?" I asked him. "Yes. That's right. He went out. And now, if you will kindly do the same...."

I locked the door behind him. Oh, Wapshot had gone

out, all right. I pulled the papers apart they were a stack nearly a foot high and crumpled them section by section, and when I had dumped them down the airshaft piece by piece, stare how I might, lean as far out as I would, I could see nothing at the bottom of the shaft but paper.

So much for Cleon Wapshot, gone early to join the immortals.

I checked the room over carefully. There was one small blood spot on the floor, but in that room it hardly mattered. I pulled the leg of the chair over to cover it, put the Semantic Analyzer in its crate, turned off the light and rang for the elevator. The blasted thing weighed a ton, but I managed it.

The elevator starter at my office gave me a lot of trouble, but I finally got the thing into a freight elevator and for another five bucks to the porter in the private door to my office. Phoebe heard me moving around and came trotting in with a face like cataclysm. "Mr. Barclay," she cried, "they're here! They've been waiting ever since you left with Mr. Wapshot."

"God rest him," I said. "Who are you talking about?"

"Why, the men from the Bar Association," she explained. It had completely slipped my mind.

I patted her hand. "There," I said. "Show them in, my dear."

The two men from the Bar Association came in like corpse robbers. "Mr. Barclay," the fat one said, "speaking for the Committee, we cannot accept your explanation that \$11,577.16 of the Hoskins Estate was expended for 'miscellany.' Lacking a more detailed accounting, we have no choice but to"

"I understand perfectly," I told him, bowing. "You wish me to pay back to make up the deficit out of my own pocket."

He scowled at me. "Why yes, that for a starter," he said sternly. "But there is also the matter of the Annie Sprayragen Trust Fund, where the item of \$9,754.08 for 'general expense' has been challenged by"

"That too," I said. "Gentlemen, I shall pauperize myself to make good these sums. My whole fortune will go to it, if necessary."

"Fortune!" squawked the short, thin one. "That's the trouble, Barclay! We've talked to your bank, and they say you haven't two dimes to rub together!"

"Disbarment!" snarled the fat one. "That's why we're here, Barclay!"

It was time to make an end. I gave up the pretense of politeness. "Gentlemen," I said crisply, "I think not."

They stared. "Barclay," snapped the fat one, "bluff will get you"

"There's no bluff." I walked over to my desk, patting

the crate of the Semantic Polarizer on the way. I pretended to consult my calendar. "Be good enough to return on Monday next," I told them. "I shall have certified checks for the full amounts ready at that time."

The short, thin one said uncertainly, "Why should we let you stall?"

"What else can you do? The money's gone, gentlemen. If you want it back, be here on Monday. And now, good-day."

Phoebe appeared to show them out.

And I got down to work.

Busy, busy, busy.

Phoebe was busier than I, at that after the first day.

I spent the rest of that day printing out yes-or-no questions on little squares of paper, microfilming them and bouncing them through the hopper of the Semantic Polarizer. While the drum of the machine spun and bounced, I stood and gloated.

Wapshot's Demon! And all he could think to use it for was a simple mail-order business, drudgery instead of wealth beyond dreaming. With a brain that could create the Semantic Polarizer, he was unable to see beyond the cash value of a fortune-telling service. Well, it was an easy way to pay his bills, and obviously he wasn't much interested in wealth.

But I, however, was.

And that was why I ran poor Phoebe ragged. To the bookmakers; to the bank; to the stockbrokers; to the track; to the numbers runners; back to the office. I loaned her my pigskin case, and when that wasn't big enough the numbers bank, for instance, paid off in fives and tens she took a hundred dollars out of the bottom file drawer and bought a suitcase. Because it was, after all, simple enough to get rich in a hurry. Take a race at Aqueduct; there are eight horses entered, maybe; write a slip for each one: Will win the first at Aqueduct today? Repeat for the second race, the third race, all the races to the end of the day; run them through the Polarizer, pick out the cards that come through the "yes" hopper

And place your bets.

Numbers? You need thirty slips. Will the first digit of the winning number be 1, 2, 3, 4etc. Ten slips for the first digit, ten for the second, ten for the third; pick out the three that come out "yes," put them together, and

A bet on the numbers pays odds of 600 to one.

It took me thirty-six hours to work out the winners of the next three weeks' races, fights, ball games and tennis matches; the stock quotations of a hundred selected issues, and the numbers that would come up on the policy wheel.

And, I say this, they were the happiest thirty-six hours of

my life.

Of all my life.

It was a perfectly marvelous time, and too bad that it couldn't go on. I had everything ready: My suitcase of currency, my lists of the bets to place in the immediate future, my felt-lined wardrobe trunk for transporting the Polarizer, my anonymous letter to the manager of the late Cleon Wapshot's hotel, directing his attention to the air-shaft; even my insulting note to the Committee on Disbarments of the Bar Association. My passport was in order, my reservation by Air France to New Guinea was confirmed, and I was only waiting for Phoebe to come back with the tickets. I had time to kill.

And Curiosity is a famed killer. Of cats. Of time. And of other things.

When Phoebe came back she pounded on the door for nearly an hour, knowing I was in there, knowing I would miss my plane, begging me to come out, to answer, to speak to her. But what was the use? I took my list of bets and tore it in shreds. I took the Polarizer and smashed it to jangling bits. And then I waited.

Good-by, Wall Street! good-by, Kentucky Derby. Good-by, a million dollars a month. I suppose they'll find Wapshot's body sooner or later, and there isn't a doubt that they'll trace it back to me the bellboy, the postal inspec-

tor, even Phoebe might provide the link. Say, a week to find the body; another week, at the most, to put the finger on me. Two months for the trial, and sentence of execution a month or two after. Call it four months from date until they would put me in the chair.

I wish I hadn't asked the Polarizer one certain question.

I wish I were going still to be alive, four months from date.