

Captain Walt Lincoln

The Last Yesterday

by David M. H. Butler

Part 1. The Last Yesterday

“Yesterday, I was at the library and I saw Dorothy Kincaid.” Supper was over and Cedric and Rachel Lucas were doing the dishes. Cedric put another plate into the drainer and continued, “We were talking about the French course you and I are taking and the one she took last year. She gave me this great little method for remembering the difference between the words hier and demain.”

Rachel turned and looked at her husband. She knew she didn’t need to prompt him to go on. As long as he knew you were listening he would continue. These days learning French was one of his passions.

“I mean, I know that one means yesterday and the other means tomorrow. But in the midst of a conversation, it’s pretty easy for a non-native speaker to have a lapse of memory and use the wrong word.”

“Uh huh.”

“So Dot told me she uses a sort of rhyming scheme: Hier Dernière and Demain Prochain.” He paused a moment and not getting a clear indication of the beauty of this idea, he continued. “You know. Dernière means last, which kind of signifies the past. And Hier, yesterday, is in the past.”

“I see.” Rachel nodded.

“And prochain means next, future get it? Prochain rhymes with Demain; tomorrow. Which is in the future!” He concluded proudly.

“So last yesterday and next tomorrow. Yes, that’s clever.” Rachel agreed. “By the way, did Dorothy say if she can come to our party next week?”

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

* * *

“Aunt Rachel called this morning.” Jackie Lincoln said. “She was reminding us of the party she and Uncle Cedric are having this Friday.”

Walt Lincoln looked up from his computer. “We haven’t seen those two in quite a while. If this one is anything like their last party, we don’t want to miss it!”

“About 100 guests and a 3 piece band; a simple buffet and dancing is how Aunt Rachel described it.”

“Ah the simple things in life.” Walt chuckled. “Did she mention Uncle Cedric? He’s usually up to something. What’s his latest project?”

“From what I can tell, he and Aunt Rachel are planning a trip to France. He found some old letters while going through an estate sale. Turns out they were written by an officer who was in the same army unit as my great grandfather while in France during World War I.”

“Oh Boy!” exclaimed Walt. “If this isn’t the classic Uncle Cedric!”

“They want to go visit a couple of the places that get mentioned in the letters. They’re brushing up on their French and Uncle Cedric has been pouring over the letters digging out clues to town names and families.”

“He must be in seventh heaven.” said Walt. “So many Professors go into teaching History as a way to help us avoid making the same mistakes in the future. I think Cedric would prefer that we should all live sometime in the past. Mistakes and all.”

“But what a dilemma it must be for him.” Jackie joked. “Without a today how could there be a yesterday to study and prefer?”

“Whoa! You got me there, Jay-bird.” laughed Walt.

* * *

“Walt!” called Cedric as the tall, blond detective stepped up to the hors d’oeuvres table, where he and another woman were talking. “Have you met our friend, Dorothy Kincaid? She’s a professor in the business school at the University.”

After exchanging greetings, the woman excused herself and left the two men alone.

“That’s a lovely accent she has. Scottish isn’t it?” asked Walt.

“Yes. She and her husband have been over here for about 5 years but from what she was just telling me, I think she would prefer to be back home.”

Walt nodded.

“So. Jackie was telling me about a couple of your recent cases. That case you unraveled where the thieves were trying to outlast the statute of limitations by living in an underwater capsule — a bit of mystery mixed with your love for the sea — that sounded like just your cup of tea.”

Lincoln smiled at Cedric. “Your niece is my biggest promoter. But I hear you’re going to France soon. Where in France will you be going?”

“Ah that!” Cedric sighed. “My grandfather, Edward Lucas, was a Lieutenant in a motor transport company during World War I, part of what they called a supply train. He used to tell us about being in France but I don’t ever remember him saying where. Jackie probably told you that I found some letters sent home by one of his fellow officers in the supply train. And there in black and white were the names of the people and towns he saw. They were stationed in central France; a small town called Saint Amand-Montrond. Pretty far from the front, but based on his descriptions, I really want to see some of the sights he saw.”

Walt marvelled at Cedric’s ability to avoid speaking of the future. But then, how could he have doubted the man’s mastery? Walt, of course, had to put his own spin on the letters.

“Sounds quite like solving a mystery.” he said. “Places to discover, families to find...”

“Yes, there is all that. In fact one of the letters has a picture in it. There is no mention of who it is in the letter and no writing on the back. Just a heavy-set man and his two children. My guess is that the letter writer, whose name, by the way, was Lieutenant John Achorn, put the photo into the box of letters after he returned. Based on the letters I have three possible leads on who the man might be. I’m hoping that I can meet someone in France who recognizes the family.”

“Fascinating! And they were all written from France?”

“Now that brings up one of the interesting things.” Cedric continued, “But yes, except for two letters, they were all written from France to this fellow Achorn’s mother and father. There is one rather lengthy one he wrote on the voyage over to France, it was mailed from England. Based on some comments he makes about rest camps, it sounds like they landed on the west coast of England and traveled overland for the sailing to France. Then there is a very terse letter, apparently written on shipboard during his return trip. It’s not to his parents and appears to be a complaint against a fellow officer named Captian James Tripp-Sulky.”

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“Whoa! Now there’s a name to be reckoned with!”

“Quite something, I agree. Anyway Either this letter was never sent or it was his first draft. The envelope isn’t addressed and there is no salutation to give me a clue as to who he was going to send it to.”

“You’ve definitely got me hooked!” smiled Walt. “When do you go? What airline are you on?”

“Oh, Rachel has been taking care of all that! But it will be after the school year ends next month.”

“Well if you need someone to practice French with, give me a call. Si vous voulez!”

* * *

Walt could hear the band starting up and he went to find Jackie to see if she wanted to dance. When he got to the dance floor he saw her coming across the room looking for him. She looked radiant, her dark eyes sparkled, framed by her raven black hair. Several men asked her to dance. She gave them a winning smile and signaled that she had a partner.

“Seems I got here just in time.” Walt said smiling and giving his wife a kiss on the cheek.

“The honor of the first dance should always go to the handsomest man on the floor, mon cheri.” Jackie purred.

“In his absence, will I do?” Walt said with his best impish smile.

“H’mmm. Maybe I should go find the most charming man instead.” she countered. She gave him a hug and they continued dancing.

Across the room, Walt saw Cedric answering the telephone. It certainly seemed like an odd time to be taking phone calls, but that was just a passing thought and he and Jackie swept along with the music.

* * *

Jackie and Walt were standing on the back terrace, sounds of the party filtering out to them as they looked out over the grounds of Cedric and Rachel’s home. The air was cool and gentle and the first stars were coming out in the late spring evening.

“We must have said this a dozen times now, but your uncle’s devotion to an earlier time is incredible. Even these grounds with their gravel drives, flagstone walks and extensive hedges help make the years just drop away.” Walt mused.

“It’s people like him who guard our yesterdays.” Jackie responded.

“You have an incredible way with words!” Walt laughed pulling her closer.

Just then Uncle Cedric came out. He looked extremely excited about something. Seeing the couple, he hurried straight over to them.

“Oh, Jackie! Walt! The most wonderful thing just happened. I just got a call from a contact in France. He thinks his father may have been the owner of the house where Lieutenant Achorn was billeted.”



“Billeted?” asked Jackie, “By that do you mean, where he stayed?”

“Yes. The French towns didn’t always have enough room for the soldiers and they had a system of putting people up in the villager’s houses and barns. Being an officer, Lieutenant Achorn — and my grandfather for that matter — would have been put up in a house. They filled out a ticket, or billet as it’s called in French, which granted the soldier the right to stay in the house. I think it was used for later reimbursement by the government.” Uncle Cedric explained.

“So you found a name and sent out a letter?” Walt asked.

“In fact I sent out about ten or twelve letters.” replied Cedric. “In one of Achorn’s letters he mentioned a M. Protisse. I did a search in the French online phone book, called ‘le onze’ for that name and came up with about a dozen possible candidates. I sent each a message giving the details of my search and asking if they might have any information.”

“So your French lessons are paying off.” said Jackie. “Or do they all speak English?”

“I wrote and spoke in French, of course!” responded Cedric with an air of being slightly offended. “Oh! And it was so tremendous to have an actual conversation in a foreign

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

language. Not just the dialogs we practiced as school kids or the grammar lessons we've been having in our night classes. I did say next week when I meant to say next month, but we sorted all that out."

"I must say, you seem to be enjoying this more than any other project I've seen you work on." Jackie marveled. "So what did you talk about with your contact?"

"His name is Thomas Protisse. He's about 70 years old. He was born after the war, but he has some contacts at the local Museum: Le Musée Saint Vic." Cedric stopped and reflected a moment, "would that be le or la — Oh, nevermind! There has been some compilation of records of that time and I'm hoping I might even find where my grandfather stayed!"

"Uncle Cedric. This is going to be one excellent trip." Walt shook his head in amazement. "I can't wait to hear what you learn."

* * *

Cedric called Walt several days later and asked if he could take him up on his offer to meet and practice some French conversation. When Walt arrived he was greeted by Cedric and another man. Walt hesitated a moment, fully prepared to start speaking in French, he was uncertain of what language was appropriate.

Cedric sensed Walt's predicament and laughed. "Walt, Je te presente Professeur Wilson Woodruff. Il peut parler Francais très bien," he said introducing the professor and explaining that he could speak French very well.

"Ah oui? Enchanté de vous rencontrer, monsieur." Walt and Professor Woodruff shook hands and greeted each other.

Cedric went on to explain in French that Woodruff was a French professor at the same university where Cedric taught History. Hearing of the letters from Lieutenant Achorn, he had asked to stop by and see them.

"Très bien, mon ami!" Woodruff congratulated Cedric on his French, then turning to include Walt, he continued in French, "I am starting a sabbatical in a couple of weeks. I want to visit what were called the areas of devastation in north-eastern France. The areas around the Argonne, Chateau Thierry, Bellau Wood. Cedric tells me that his supply officer made at least one trip up to the front after the hostilities were over and I was curious to see what he might have said about the former war zone.

Walt sensed just a bit of condescension in the professor's tone. Cedric might have felt it too, but he carried on, even giving Woodruff due credit for the fact that these letters were not from a fighting soldier.

“It’s true that the supply train was several hundred kilometers from the front, a point over which even Achorn seems to show frustration, but when he describes the front he sure shows his skills as a student of history. Here I have the letter where he describes the Cathedral at Rheims.”

Cedric pulled out a small, yellowed envelope. On the front was a very simple address: “Mr and Mrs George Achorn, Lowell, Mass.” No street address. In the upper right hand corner in place of a stamp was the notation “Officer’s mail.” In the lower left, the words “Censored by Lt. Achorn” were scrawled.

“Even this envelope is full of history!” Walt marveled.

Cedric pulled out the folded sheet of paper and read:

“I arrived last night in France’s greatest ruin. On our way into the city we stopped to take a look at the great famous cathedral of Rheims which has been so badly damaged by German artillery. There is one medium sized hotel here which wasn’t very badly damaged, and has been able to reopen about a month since, so we are going thru the experience of sleeping in this great desolate city. We took a bit of a walk about thru the deserted streets, with the gaunt spectre-houses all along the route. What a solemn deathly stillness there is! From time to time, however, you pass a light which shows where someone has come back to their home, to try and recreate it. I have in mind one house which didn’t have a window in it, and was full of holes, and misshapen walls; where evidently the people had just gotten back; they had gotten some straw and some wood and had just started a roaring fire in the fireplace. For all that I doubt if it was possible to sleep very warm in that house.

“If it was an experience to wander thru the desolate streets of Rheims at night, it was equally so to be in its heart in the morning - to think that here, but 5 years ago all would be bustle and business, whereas now everything was still except a very few people, and a few birds singing just as though we were way out in the country. I should note, however, that the souvenir picture and postcard booths have already made their appearance outside the cathedral. What a harvest will be made there from tourists in the years to come!”

Professor Woodruff whistled. “They sure knew how to write letters back then. I have a heightened respect for this Lieutenant of yours!”

* * *

Walt and Jackie had offered to give their uncle and aunt a ride to the airport and Cedric and Rachel had gladly accepted the offer. The day had come and Walt and Jackie arrived at the house a bit early for a quick aperitif before leaving.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

The luggage sat by the front door ready to be loaded into the trunk of Walt's car. There were two smallish suitcases and a third fabric tote-bag, holding some papers and books, sitting neatly together.

"Only carry on bags for your three week stay." said Walt. "I salute you. It's the best way to travel if you can do it."

"We've rented a house which has a washing machine," said Rachel, "So we shouldn't need a lot of clothes."

They had heard a lot about the small stone farmhouse in the French countryside. Even seen a small picture from the catalog that Cedric and Rachel had used when searching for a place to stay. The description in the catalog said that beside the washing machine, the house came with sheets and towels, had room for 4 to 6 people, there were bikes available and was only a short distance from St. Amand-Montrond.

"Any more calls to or from France?" Walt asked.

"No. But yesterday I did get a strange call." Cedric replied. "Remember I said that there was a letter complaining about a fellow officer on the homebound ship?"

Walt and Jackie nodded or made a noise to indicate "yes."

"His name was Captain Tripp-Sulky. I have been making inquiries to try and find descendants of his as well. I may have hit a nerve because last night I got a call from a grandson of his telling me to leave his grandfather's name and reputation alone. I apologized and told him that I was just intrigued by these letters and that I meant his family no harm." It looked like the memory of the call was a small blemish on their upcoming trip. "Even after the apology he was still pretty rude. I guess I will just drop that part of my investigations. I mean, it really didn't have anything to do with my grandfather."

"That sounds best." said Walt. "But looks like it is getting on time to leave. Any last things to do before we pack up the car?"

* * *

Walt was at police headquarters looking up the case numbers of some recent investigations for a report, when Chief Jim Kennel interrupted him. Kennel indicated the phone and said simply, "Call Jackie."

Walt looked up quizzically at Kennel but could see that something was wrong and rather than waste time asking questions picked up the phone and called. It was picked

up on the first ring and Walt noticed that Chief Kennel was already closing the door on his way out. Something was really wrong.

“Jackie. What’s going on?” Walt asked.

“Uncle Cedric is dead.” she sobbed. “Aunt Rachel just called me. It happened several hours ago. He was run off the road by a car while riding his bicycle. Apparently it was a hit and run. He wasn’t found until hours later! We have to go to France right away. Aunt Rachel needs our help. She is crushed by all this.”

“Whoa, Jackie. This is terrible.” Walt was doing a quick calculation in his head. Cedric and Rachel had been gone about four, no it was five days. “I’ll be right home and let’s see if we can’t get onto tonight’s flight to Paris. Meanwhile, I’ll call my friend Christian Fontaine over in Bordeaux. Maybe he can get to Rachel sooner.”

“Let me give Rachel a call first. The proprietor of their farmhouse said she would stay with Rachel. They are about the same age, and it might be less stressful if we just got there as soon as possible.” Jackie replied. Then before Walt could respond, she continued. “In fact, I was hoping you might call in a few favors and get us a flight before this evening. I’ve been thinking about it and there are two possibilities: The Coast Guard owes you one for that underwater adventure, and possibly better, the General Manager over at FedEx owes you big-time for finding her daughter last year.”

“Jay-bird, you’re the best.” Walt replied. “I’ll make the calls and see what I can arrange. We’ll get over to your aunt Rachel just as soon as we can. Be ready to fly at a moments notice.”

* * *

They were on board an aircraft and in the air by 2:30 that afternoon. Commander Bob Atwood at the Coast Guard station had a connection at the air force base and got them on a courier flight. With the 9 hour difference between California and France and the 7 hour, no-frills flight, that would put them into the Romorantin air base in central France at about 6:30 the next morning. They would be met by a customs agent and from there they would rent a car and be in St. Amand-Montrond by 9:30 at the latest.

Jackie and Walt slept for about the last three hours of the flight; just enough to call it a bona fide rest. When they woke up, they had about three quarters of an hour before landing. Walt pulled out a map of France and studied it for a while to get the roads and names of the towns through which they would be passing. It looked like maybe 100 miles, or 160 kilometers if you wanted to get into the French mindset. A bit of a zig-zag to get over to Bourges and then south to St. Amand-Montrond.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

As they came in for a landing, Walt wondered whether they were headed for a murder investigation, to comfort an aunt in distress or both.

* * *

There was quite a flurry of activity when they reached the farmhouse. A small white van with a police insignia sat out front. As they parked the car and started for the door, Rachel rushed out.

“Oh, I’m so glad you are here!” she said nearly collapsing into Jackie’s arms. “The house was robbed last night!”

Walt gasped. “Robbed? What was taken? Your passport and money?”

“I had that over at Jacqueline’s last night. The only thing we can say for sure that is missing are Cedric’s ...” saying the name made her pause for a moment to compose herself. “... his package of letters by Lieutenant Achorn.”

Walt felt like he was almost out of breath. Jet lag, lack of sleep, worries for their aunt and uncle. He liked to hit the ground running, but this was going to be a test.

A short dark haired woman was walking up to them. Rachel turned and gave her a smile. Even in these trying times she displayed an old world grace.

“Walt, Jackie. Je vous presente Jacqueline Hordesseau.” said Rachel introducing the proprietor. “Elle ne parle pas de tout anglais.” she added explaining that her host could not speak English.

“C’est pas grave. Nous parlerons en francais.” Walt replied. It wouldn’t be a problem for them to speak French.

One of the police officers came up to tell Rachel and Jacqueline that they had done all that they could for now. They would have someone come by occasionally to make sure everything was alright. He turned to Walt and Jackie and asked who they were. Walt explained that they were Rachel’s niece and nephew and had flown over from the United States when they had heard of Cedric’s death.

“But that happened only yesterday. “ the surprised gendarme said in French. “That is quite an amazing feat, Monsieur.”

Taking it as a compliment, Walt simply smiled and said “Ah. Je vous en prie.”

* * *

Shortly after the police left, Jacqueline, having a small farm to attend to, left as well. Jackie and Rachel sat at the small kitchen table while Walt put some water on the stove. Maybe for tea or coffee. Maybe just to be doing something.

Rachel pointed at a door below the stove. "Sorry. You need to turn the gas on. We've been turning it off when we aren't here. There is a little knob on the top of the tank."

Rituals settled and a cup of coffee in front of each, they got down to the grim business of getting all the facts in the case.

"Cedric went off for a bike ride yesterday afternoon. He had done this a couple times before. He would be gone for about an hour or a little more. The bikes aren't in great shape, kind of old, with squeaky chains; but Cedric loved pedaling around the French countryside. It really does feel like the area has held onto its old time charm. After an hour and a half I got concerned, I waited a few minutes thinking I was being silly, but finally I took our car and followed the route that he usually took. I got to the point where he should have turned around and I hadn't found him. I didn't know what to do — go further or turn back. I went about another mile and then turned back. I was only a couple miles from the house when I saw a couple cars stopped. Oh Lord, I prayed for a different outcome, but it was him. He must have been laying there for close to two hours before anyone found him. He looked so peaceful ..."

"Oh Aunt Rachel. This must be so hard. I can't believe Uncle Cedric isn't going to come in and tell us about his project." Jackie sniffed and turned her head trying to compose herself.

"What about his project. Was he making progress? With his death and the theft of the letters, it sure seems more than coincidence to me." Walt said trying to switch to a safer topic. "That fellow, Tripp-Somebody, did he contact you?"

"Tripp-Sulky? No. No calls from him. But we talked on the phone with Thomas Protisse. He's the man Cedric talked to the night of our party. We were supposed to meet him on Monday. We'd also been to the library hoping to find any records of the American Expeditionary Force. There is an interesting booklet, put together by a local historian, called 'The Sammie's in Saint Amand,' but we still hadn't located Cedric's grandfather's billet. That seems a world away now."

"Well I'd still like to meet M. Protisse." Walt replied. "And I sure wish I could have seen some of those letters. There just might be a clue in them somewhere."

"Actually that is possible." Aunt Rachel said.

Walt and Jackie turned and looked at each other then back at Aunt Rachel.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“Cedric had typed up all of them on his computer. We brought them over on a diskette in case someone was interested in having a copy.” she explained.

“Thank you, Uncle Cedric!” Walt sighed.

* * *

Part 2. The Next Tomorrow

“Tomorrow is Monday.” Walt said, “Where were you supposed to meet M. Protisse?”

“His house is on Rue Ernest Mallard, a fairly short walk from the post office. We had agreed to meet him there, just after lunch. Two o’clock is what we had settled on.” Rachel replied.

“I guess we should call him and inform him of the turn of events. But I would still like to go visit him. We’ll just have a few different questions to ask.”

“For Uncle Cedric’s sake I would like to ask at least a couple questions about my great-grandfather as well.” put in Jackie.

While Walt called M. Protisse, Rachel went and got the diskette with the letters. Jackie jumped up and went with her. She was concerned how her aunt would react having to see things that would remind her of Uncle Cedric.

“Jackie, you are such a dear.” her aunt said with a sad smile. “Right now I feel torn between yesterday and tomorrow. There is a part of me that is crying out for the times that the two of us had. But I have another side that wants to get things settled and back into some semblance of order. I only have you and Walt to help me and I don’t want to let you down.”

Jackie gave her aunt a hug as several tears ran down her own cheek. She hoped she could be as strong in such a situation.

* * *

Walt decided to keep news of the copied letters to himself, so when talking to M. Protisse, he merely said that they were still interested in visiting with him. M. Protisse had heard of Cedric’s death on last night’s news. He had found it hard to believe that it could have been the same man to whom he had talked only a few short days before. He said that he would be glad to have them visit and hoped that Mrs. Lucas understood that she had his deepest regrets.

Next came the problem of printing out the files on the diskette. But Walt figured he could solve two problems at once. He called the police station and asked if he could come down and use one of their computers and at the same time find out about either seeing Uncle Cedric's body or the coroners report.

Walt had enough credentials to get him the okay for which he hoped. He could come down that day to get a print out. As to the body or report, he would have to wait until the next morning.

While Walt was gone, Jackie and Aunt Rachel packed up all of Cedric's things and put the suitcase in the room that Walt and Jackie were going to use. At the last moment Rachel took out his pen and spiral notebook and put them on the bedside table.

"I'm not ready to let go of all of him quite yet." she explained.

* * *

Walt arrived back at the farmhouse with two print outs of the letters as well as some lunch he had picked up at a charcuterie. He put out the lunch on the table and got some bottled water out of the refrigerator.

"I made two copies of the letters in case you wanted to do a bit of investigating." he said to Jackie. "I was hoping that Uncle Cedric would have put a scan of the photo of the man and his children on the diskette, but it only contained the text file with all of the letters."

"Well that should give us plenty to work on today." Jackie replied. "Any place special we might want to concentrate on?"

"Two main places that interest me are the letter of reprimand concerning his fellow officer and any mention of the Protisse family. Other than that we can just start browsing, looking for places that your great-grandfather might be mentioned."

Rachel looked up. "I think there is at least one mention of Lieutenant Lucas. And it's kind of an interesting letter as I remember it. Some of the officers had been invited to a local chateau by a woman who was involved in helping the red cross. She was a marquise or countess or something like that. I think it happened in the fall."

"Here it is!" Jackie exclaimed after a couple minutes and then read out loud.

"This afternoon the Major, Lt. Lucas and I visited the Marquise, whose husband has an estate in a nearby village. She is connected with refugee relief work. She speaks excellent English and is a most charming woman.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“For the afternoon they had a hunt all prepared for us; you’ve seen that caricature of King George hunting in India haven’t you - with a big tiger blindfolded & chained with all four legs to trees; well this might remind you a bit of that. Her foreman had about all the boys in the neighborhood gathered, each with a stick and a voice. They formed a skirmish line a mile or so away and drove all the partridge our way - where we were ambushed with our shotguns. The foreman asked me “Vous Tirez bien?” and before I realized he was asking if I were a good shot, the fatal “Oui” had passed my lips. We were always about 250 ft. apart along some hedge. After about four battles we came home with four dead partridges and a hare, to grace our mess to-morrow. It has been a beautiful clear autumn day and we have all enjoyed our outing thoroughly.

“You asked in your last letter if I hear the sound of the guns. I heard a few shotguns today. This sounds a lot like fighting the Hun, doesn’t it? A cruel war, this.”

“What a great experience!” Jackie exclaimed after finishing. “I’d never heard about any of this. But then great-grandpa died when I was about five.”

* * *

“Lt. Achorn seems particularly offended when he wrote this letter of complaint about Captain Tripp-Sulky. It was written on the homeward bound ship. Sounds like the good Captain was trying to force his attentions on one of the French war brides returning with her American husband. It is written in a very straight laced style, couching his concerns in very careful wording. But he alludes to the fact that the Captain had tried to force himself on several woman.”

“He tried to seduce another soldier’s wife?” Jackie said with shock. “I’m surprised the husband didn’t toss this guy overboard!”

“It’s even a bit worse. The husband had committed some infraction for which Tripp-Sulky had put the man in confinement for a day. It was during that time that the incident happened.”

“Eesh. I don’t think I would have been as brave as Uncle Cedric to try and contact that family. Do you think the family still holds a grudge and for some reason killed Uncle Cedric to get the incriminating letter?”

“I believe,” said Aunt Rachel, “that there are other letters with more sympathetic references to Tripp-Sulky. Cedric only made references to them. Not this disgusting incident. Though I agree: This is one family around whom I would have made a big detour.”

“It feels a bit hard to believe the Tripp-Sulky’s would go so far as murder,” Walt said, scratching the back of his neck. “but I will have to put some inquiries out to contacts in America.”

* * *

The next morning Walt stopped into the police station. He was directed to an Inspecteur Gillet who was heading up the investigation of Uncle Cedric’s death. He had both an accident report and the results of the autopsy.

“Ah, Monsieur Lincoln. I am delighted to meet you.” Gillet said in near perfect English, reaching out to shake Walt’s hand.

“Monsieur Inspecteur, vous êtes très gentil.” They exchanged the customary French shake, a firm, single up and down motion.

“First let me say that I am proud to hear of the work your uncle was doing. His research would have benefited not only his family, but a much larger anglo-french community as well. Reminding us of a time when our countries were working so hard together.”

“Inspecteur Gillet! I am touched with your words. Thank you.”

“And now for the less pleasant news that I must give you. I have the reports that you were hoping to see. But I am afraid that we have nothing on which to base a case.”

“Oh really? What were your findings?”

“At the accident scene there are several tire marks. But it is on a bend in the road and they could have been made before, during or after the accident by someone going a bit too fast.”

“And you have found no witnesses I suppose?”

“That is correct. Your, uncle, M. Lucas, appears to have gone over the handlebars of his bicycle and was thrown onto a rocky embankment lining a water run-off ditch. The bicycle is pretty banged up, but we really can’t say if it was hit by a car or not.”

“No footprints in the area?”

“That is a bit harder to decipher. Once we heard of the theft of his letters, we went back to the scene for a second look. We considered an assailant who was on foot using some form of club to knock him down. The trouble with that is the person who found him obliterated many clues when he stopped his car and tried to see if your uncle was alive.”

“So what does the autopsy tell us? Anything to go on there?” Walt asked.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“There are several bruises on his body, a couple that one might well imagine are from being struck by something, but his death is from a broken neck.”

“And I suppose that the bruises could have come from hitting the rocks as easily as being hit by a car.”

“I am afraid that is correct, monsieur.”

“Would you be able to do one other thing? It regards a man who telephoned M. Lucas the day before he came to France. A man who might have felt some need to steal those letters.”

“Ask and I shall do my best.”

“Could you see if anyone by the name Tripp-Sulky recently came into or left France? It’s a pretty unique name so I’m hoping that it won’t be too hard to verify.”

“It might take about a day but we will look into it.”

* * *

They ate their lunch out on the side lawn of the farmhouse. There was a white plastic table with matching chairs. They sat under a large green and white umbrella. A sunny sky and a slight breeze made the temperature just right.

Walt leaned back and gazed around him. Across a meadow and sitting on a rise stood a small chateau. A slight movement drew his attention to a small lizard moving into the shade of a window sill on the house. The sounds of several white cows as they swatted off flies added a lazy rhythm to the landscape.

He thought it was a wonderful spot for a vacation, but wasn’t sure whether or not to bring it up. Instead he gave a brief and careful report of what he had learned at the police, finishing up by saying, “So while the police deal with Tripp-Sulky, we can have our talk with M. Protisse. Hopefully by tomorrow we will have some solid clues to this case.”

“There is something else I suppose I will have to deal with tomorrow.” Rachel sighed. “I need to let the hospital know what to do with Uncle Cedric.”

“As you said: Don’t think about that right now. I’m sure they’ll understand if you take the extra day.” Walt replied. “If you want, I will go with you tomorrow and make sure everything gets settled. But for now let’s pack up our lunch and go see M. Protisse.”

* * *

For a 70-something senior citizen, Thomas Protisse was a pretty spry old man. A touch overweight perhaps, but his hair was still salt and pepper and he seemed to move without the guarded movements of someone with arthritis. He met them at the door and gave them a warm smile and invited them in.

As they were sitting down in his front room, Rachel let out a small gasp. Everyone turned to see what she was looking at. On the mantel were several photographs. She pointed to one in a simple wooden frame and said “Ca c’est le meme photo que le notre!” Indicating that it was an identical picture to the one that had been stolen.

M. Protisse smiled. “Is that true? You have this photo?” he replied in French. “I brought it out to show you because your husband was interested in seeing any pictures of my father. That is my older brother Maurice standing with him and my sister Jaime on his lap.”

“Maurice!” exclaimed Rachel. “Lieutenant Achorn mentions him in one of his early letters. Cedric and I wondered several times if that might be little Maurice. I’m so glad to have one of our little mysteries solved! I do wish Cedric was here to enjoy this moment.”

“What beautiful children.” Jackie cooed. “So this is before you were born?”

“Oh yes! I was born almost 9 years later. It was said that my parents had a rough time right after the war. When things got better they had two more children. I have another sister about two years older than me.” Protisse smiled. “It is one of family’s little mysteries; why did they wait seven years? When we brought it up, my papa would laugh and say that the war caused a lot of anguish, our family was touched like so many others.”

“I’m sure the war left many scars which are still felt today.” Jackie agreed.



Walt asked if he might take down the photo and have a closer look. He really didn’t want to treat Protisse as a suspect, but he would be derelict if he didn’t at least make sure that the photo wasn’t just recently placed into the frame. He turned the frame over and it was covered with paper glued to the frame. On the paper was written the date “4 June 1919.” The ink looked genuinely old. Turning the photo back over, he looked at

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

the two children looking straight and unflinchingly at the camera as if staring down their own future selves.

“Are either of them still alive?” Walt asked.

“Maurice was a prisoner of war during the second world war. It took a lot out him and he died several years after the war. Jaime is living up near Bourges. She lost her first husband in the war as well. But she met a pretty nice guy named Jean-Claude Allart after the war and they been married ever since.”

They talked for a while longer and then, deciding they didn't want to wear out their welcome, they thanked him for his time and headed home.

* * *

Since they were in town they decided to walk around and see a bit of the town. Across Rue Ernest Mallard ran a large muddy stream called the Marmande. They walked along it a ways coming to a narrow stone bridge that crossed the river at a point where it split into two channels. They marveled at the narrow winding streets where you could almost imagine the carts pulled by heavy oxen that must have once plied these roads.

Walt tried to imagine the proud officers of the American Expeditionary Forces as they strode though the town conducting their business. He had a feeling that the 80 years since the war hadn't changed the town so much that the officers would have noticed. Sure there was traffic, a few traffic signals and they had seen a super market on their way into town, but this was an older section of town where you could imagine that someone had pressed the pause button.

They came to the town's cathedral that dated from the 12th century. Certainly not as massive as some of the other churches that France boasted, but one for which Saint Amand could be proud.

They walked a while longer and then sat in the shade of a tree in a small park behind the post office, watching the Marmande slide quietly past and soaking in the sights and sounds of Saint Amand-Montrond.

“Where are the bells?” asked Aunt Rachel. “In his letters Lieutenant Achorn says that the bells are forever ringing. We, that is Cedric and I, imagined they would ring the hour, but we've been here several hours and I haven't heard a peep. I guess some things had to change in 80 years.”

Walt was glad to hear Aunt Rachel being able to talk about Uncle Cedric without too much trouble. He sensed that their walk around town might have helped her settle on tomorrow's decision about Cedric.

They decided to have dinner in town before returning to the farmhouse. They chose the restaurant in the Hotel de la Poste. The host was pleasant and the food good. The furnishings seemed a bit worn but the trio had an enjoyable hour and a half as they went from the first course of soup through to the coffee.

As they were finishing the coffee, Rachel took a deep breath and cleared her throat. "I have made up my mind. Uncle Cedric will be cremated. We had discussed that plan long ago. But half of his ashes will stay here in France as a magnet to future members of the Lucas and Lincoln families. The rest will return home with me for a burial there."

Jackie's eyes were misty as she leaned over and held her aunt's hand. "That's a beautiful idea."

* * *

The next morning they called to make arrangements with the coroner's office. It was agreed that Jackie and Rachel would go down to sign the needed forms, pick up Cedric's personal effects, and if desired they could view the body one last time before it was sent to be cremated. They would be able to pick up his urn tomorrow.

Walt called Gillet at the police station to see if there was any news.

"So far there has been no success, I am afraid." Gillet replied. "But Customs has indicated that they should have the information by three this afternoon. I asked that they search for names that are similar or even the names 'Tripp' and 'Sulky' as a precaution."

"That's excellent. I'll contact some people in the states to see what else I can learn about the family."

"Ah. If you are going to do that; We were considering checking on telephone calls coming into France from M. Tripp-Sulky. Perhaps your contacts could more easily do that from the United States?"

"I'll check. That's a good idea."

Walt called Police Chief Kennel back in California. There was no answer. Walt looked at the clock and discovered that it would be about one in the morning back there. It wasn't surprising that he was out of his office. He left a message detailing what he was hoping to find out.

Having several hours to kill, he retrieved the print-out of the letters and started looking for places where Tripp-Sulky was mentioned. The letters spanned almost a year, starting with the long letter written on their trip over in August 1918 until their return in late

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

June of 1919. Lieutenant Achorn had written a letter almost every week. However the Supply Train had been reassigned to a new city in December of 1918, allowing him to narrow his search to the months they were in Saint Amand-Montrond.

The first mention of Tripp-Sulky was in September. Apparently he was an Engineer working in “a dusty logging camp” north of the town. They had gone up to the camp to see about getting scrap lumber to use in building a camp for the Supply Train.

The next reference came in late September.

“Capt. Tripp-Sulky, the engineer I told you of from the logging camp, stopped by my billet today. He’s been in France for almost 6 months now. When we were visiting him last week, we learned that he had been billeted in this same house for a month before moving into living quarters up at the lumber camp. I had asked him if he had heard that Madame Protisse is expecting a child, which he hadn’t. He is quite fond of the family and so stopped by today to ask how the mother and baby were doing.”

Walt finished reading the excerpt and realized that the young girl in the photo was probably the yet-to-be-born baby that Achorn was talking about in his letter.

“Boy! Wouldn’t Uncle Cedric have loved to add this piece to his puzzle.”

* * *

When Jackie and Aunt Rachel returned, there was a bicycle sticking out of the trunk of the car. As Walt helped get it out he realized it was the bike that Cedric had been riding. He was struck by its condition. Apart from the bent frame and scratches from the accident, the front tire appeared to have been slashed. On closer inspection, Walt could see that the tire had burst. In fact both the front and back tires were old and cracked.

“I’d say these tires are an accident waiting to happen.” Walt told Jackie. “It doesn’t rule out someone running him off the road, but if he was going fast when that tire burst it might have been difficult to keep control of the bike.”

Rachel came out of the house and called to Walt. “You have a phone call from Chief Kennel.”

Walt looked at his watch. It would only be 5:30 am back home. Kennel must have gone in pretty early.

“Hey Walt.” came the familiar voice. “I got your message, but I wonder, do you have a first name for this Tripp-Sulky character?”

“Hang on, I’ll check with my aunt and see if she knows.” Walt turned to Rachel and asked if she knew the name.

“Let me get Uncle Cedric’s note book. I’m sure he wrote it down in there.” She went into her bedroom and brought back the spiral notebook. “Yes here it is: Jason Tripp-Sulky of Worchester Massachusetts.”

Walt passed on the information and hung up. “Aunt Rachel, would you mind if I took at look at that note book?”

Before he had a chance to open the book, the phone rang again. This time it was Inspecteur Gillet.

“I’m Sorry to report that unless your man found a way to sneak in and out of the country, there are no records of a Tripp-Sulky entering France in the last week.”

Instead of feeling let down, Walt was already sure that a check of Tripp-Sulky’s phone would also turn up negative on calls to France. But the name Worchester had triggered a memory that he would have to check into.

He called Thomas Protisse and asked if they could possibly meet once more. He said he would be happy to see them again and invited them to come over around ten the next morning.

* * *

Part 3. The First Today

“Today we should start seeing a few things fall into place.” said Walt putting down the telephone. He had just completed a call from Chief Kennel and as he had suspected there were no phone calls on the Tripp-Sulky phone to France. But Kennel had given him two very intriguing bits of information: Jason Tripp-Sulky was running for office in Worchester, and a bit of digging had turned up that Captain James Tripp-Sulky had lost a bid for a senate seat back in the early twenties because of a court inquiry into some misconduct charges while in the Army.

Because of the time difference it was only 6:00 am. Kennel had waited to call, but figured Walt might want to act on the information right away. That made it midnight in Massachusetts.

Walt decided to take the chance and call Jason Tripp-Sulky. The woman who answered sounded like she was half-suspecting the call to be some marketing pitch.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“Hello, Is Jason Tripp-Sulky there? This is Walt Lincoln calling with information about his grandfather.”

The woman hesitated and then said. “Just a moment.”

“Who is this!” demanded a new voice on the other end of the phone line. “Are you that wretched meddler again who sent me the nosy letter about my grandfather?”

“Mr. Tripp-Sulky, before you continue this tirade, I think you should know that the person you are speaking of, Cedric Lucas, died in a very suspicious accident this past weekend.”

There was a short pause, followed by a snort. “Dead?” he asked. “What are you trying to tell me? Do I need to know this information?”

“For one thing, as a man running for office, I think there are people who would find it interesting that, a week before the death, you made a rude and somewhat threatening call to Mr. Lucas.”

“Now hold on Mister. As a candidate I have to fight everyday to keep the media from dragging my name through the mud. I may have come across a bit heavy-handed, but his letter was just an annoyance. He told me he would drop his inquiries and that was enough for me.”

“Do you know where Mr. Lucas is right now?”

“I think I still have his letter. He lives in California somewhere. Why are you asking?”

“Let’s just say that what you know about him helps me in my investigation. Good day and good luck in your campaign.”

The Tripp-Sulkys still had a part to play in this mystery. But Walt felt certain that Jason was not involved in the current matters.

* * *

After breakfast. Walt re-read Uncle Cedric’s note book. It was set up as a series of ideas and notes. For example, one of the first entries was:

“Idea 3: Write a history about the business of running a war. Of the men who formed a supply pipeline to the front. Possibly provide insights into the differences between France then and now. Collaborate with Woodruff or Kincaid?”

Later there is a note:

“Note 6: M. Protisse appears to be a local businessman. Was he too old to fight in the war?”

At 10:00 they appeared once again at M. Protisse’s door. He greeted them with the same cheerful smile that they had seen the last time they were there.

“Well.” He said in French. “How can I help you?”

“M. Protisse, I think it is I who can help you.” Walt said.

Rachel and Jackie looked at Walt and then at each other.

“Have you been keeping a secret from us?” Jackie asked.

“I just wanted to get one last bit of information before I made any announcements.” Walt replied. To M. Protisse he asked, “Do you know either of the names Achorn or Tripp-Sulky?” He spelt them out on a piece of paper to make sure Protisse would understand the names.

“M. Achorn? Bien sûr! From time to time my parents use to get letters from him and they even had a picture of him and his wife. Though I can’t say what has come of it. But this other name? Tripp-Sulky? It is not familiar at all.”

“And your sister, Jaime, when was she born?”

“December of 1918.”

Walt nodded. He took a few seconds to compose his thoughts and weigh the effect of his information.

“M. Protisse, there is a bit of conjecture in what I am about to say, but I think I know the answer to your family’s secret. The reason that there were those years between children and trouble between your parents. Please, I hope what I am about to say does not offend you.”

“You have me at a disadvantage, for now I must know!” he responded. “Please, continue.”

“Yes, please do!” Jackie added.

“It is my belief that your sister is the child of an American officer named Capt. James Tripp-Sulky. I believe he seduced your mother while he was billeted here and that, at some point, your father discovered that the child wasn’t his. This caused the difficulties that took them several years to reconcile.”

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

The room was still for a moment as this news sunk in. Jackie looked at M. Protisse and over to Walt. She hoped he hadn't gone too far by revealing such a shocking idea.

"You know, that does have an air of truth to it. I never heard of this man, but the older kids often wondered if it wasn't papa who had the affairs which caused their problems. Maybe they both did!"

"According to our letters Captain Tripp-Sulky was billeted in your parents house in March of 1918. That is the required 9 months. The Captain's first name was James. Could it be that your mother picked the name Jaime for that reason? Lastly, I find it interesting that your parents never spoke of him, even though he had stayed at the house and even professed to Lieutenant Achorn that he was very fond of your family. I think we can guess who he was most fond of!"

"M. Protisse, do you think you will tell the rest of your family this information?" asked Jackie. "I mean, how will your sister take this kind of information?"

"I'm not sure. It will be a shock, obviously. But, you know, I think she will want to know. Besides, now I couldn't keep it to myself. I have to tell her! We have seen so much, in living through the aftermath of the first war and hardships of the second war. Our parents treated us well as children and certainly papa never treated Jaime any differently than the rest of us."

* * *

After they left, they sat in the car for a few moments talking. Aunt Rachel asked. "So if you don't think Tripp-Sulky murdered Uncle Cedric and stole his letters, who do you think did it?"

"That is a two part question." Walt said. "First. I am almost positive that Uncle Cedric's accident was not a murder but just an accident. A cruel twist of fate that took him from us when an old tire ruptured at the wrong time and place, causing Uncle Cedric to lose control of his bike. If he hadn't gone down the embankment he might have been bruised but alive. "

"But what about the letters. They were stolen the same night." protested Aunt Rachel.

"Now, concerning the letters, something that Thomas Protisse said the first time I talked to him gave me an idea. As well as one of Uncle Cedric's notes about writing a book. M. Protisse mentioned that he had heard of Cedric's death on the news. I started asking myself who else might have heard that same broadcast? Hearing you say 'Worcester' the other day started teasing at my memory. Then it came to me 'Woodruff.' Once we accept the fact that Cedric's death was an accident, I see his colleague Professor Wilson

Woodruff as the only person with a motive and the means to come down here and steal the letters.”

“Professor Woodruff who is up north on Sabbatical?” asked Jackie.

“That’s the man. Uncle Cedric talked to him about collaborating on a book. Woodruff would have provided the French angle while Cedric with these letters added the American side of things. When he heard of the death, he must have worried that he’d never see those letters again. And he knew that they made a very compelling piece for a book. I saw him change from a doubter to a believer that day we met and Uncle Cedric read a couple passages from the letters.”

“Should we go confront him?” asked Jackie.

“I was thinking we might let the French Police deal with him.” said Walt. “We have other concerns.”

“Oh no, Walt!” cried Aunt Rachel. “He’s an old friend of Cedric’s. I would like to try and work this out some other way. If your assumptions are correct, I would almost agree with Wilson that it was important to insure that those letters were preserved.”

“But Aunt Rachel, He can’t get away with stealing the letters and Uncle Cedric’s idea for the book!” exclaimed Jackie.

“I won’t let him get away with any such thing!” replied Aunt Rachel. “He may write the book, but if he doesn’t want trouble with me or the French Police, Uncle Cedric will get the credit he deserves and his estate a share of any profits.”

“Then I guess we should plan a trip up north this afternoon.” Walt said. “But first we need to make a stop. I think Uncle Cedric might like to make the ride with us!”

* * *

They arrived in the town of Nancy in the late afternoon. Cedric’s notebook had contained both Woodruff’s phone number and address in France. They chose to make their visit unannounced. Woodruff’s rented house had a small patio on the side and as they got out of their car, they could see him sipping tea and reading or writing a letter. As soon as they reached the gate to his side yard and tapped lightly, it became evident that it was without doubt one of the missing letters.

“Rachel!” He nearly threw his tea cup into the air. He stammered for a few seconds trying to calm himself and cover the letter with some papers. They walked into the yard. “Um, how... er, where... uh. So, isn’t Cedric with you?”

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“As a matter of fact he is, Wilson.” Rachel said sternly. Woodruff flinched. She was holding the urn but made no effort to show it to him. If anything, she seemed to hold it just a little tighter. “But let’s not mince words. You knew of Cedric’s death and you took advantage of that knowledge by taking his letters and usurping his research project. In fact, if I didn’t know you, I would suspect you of his death.”

“Rachel, Rachel!” Woodruff pleaded. “I am so sorry about Cedric’s death. But we had been talking about this book project and it was such a wonderful idea. When I heard about his death on the news I was so torn up. Really. I can’t exactly tell you what I was thinking when I drove down that night. I’m not even sure that I know. I thought I might be able to help you, but I was equally worried about what might happen to those letters. I mean their story is so very compelling and without original documents our book wouldn’t have carried as much weight. But when I got to your house you weren’t there.”

“That’s true I had gone to stay with Jacqueline, my proprietor.”

“I tried the back door and it wasn’t locked so I went in. There were the letters on the table. At first I just took a look at a couple. But then, something about the letters just made me crazy, I guess. I HAD to have them.”

“I should have wondered why you hadn’t called.” Rachel said.

“It’s true. Once I took the letters I felt too guilty to call. And ever since then I have been wracking my brains trying to figure out what to do. The very letters, which I felt I needed for the book project, were going to keep me from being able to do it.”

“Well, that is what we are here to settle. But first off, until we have something in writing, the real letters are to be returned to me at once. I’ll let you have a print-out in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Rachel. You may not understand this, but I am so glad this nightmare is finally over.” Woodruff replied.

Rachel looked down at the urn in her lap. “You know. It’s true. I feel the same way: the nightmare is over.” Her body shook and she covered her eyes as tears poured from them. The nightmare was over, but reality was starting to set in.

* * *

Aunt Rachel asked if Walt and Jackie would stay with her until the end of the week. She decided she was going to cut the vacation short but she wanted a couple of days to compose herself and hopefully visit her new friends Jacqueline Hordesseau and M. Protisse. Without a moments hesitation they both heartily agreed.

However they did have one other important task to accomplish. They needed to decide where would be the most appropriate spot to spread the French half of Cedric's ashes. While Aunt Rachel and Jackie looked through Cedric's notes and scanned the letters looking for inspiration, Walt called Inspecteur Gillet and filled him in on the developments of the day before.

"I commend your Aunt. In a similar situation I am unsure if I could be so forgiving." He replied after Lincoln had given his report. "And I commend you as well for bringing this case to a close in such a satisfying manner."

On hanging up, he saw Jackie holding up a letter excitedly. "I think I have a good idea. Listen to this:"

"This afternoon I took quite a long ride with the Major and Lt. Lucas looking for a suitable gasoline tank station location, and in doing so passed a spot which is designated as the exact center of France. The monument built there claims to be the mathematical center as derived by the eminent mathematician and astronomer Theophile Mobeux."

"Oh! Cedric and I drove past that last week. It's a bit south of here near the town of Saulzais Le Potier. I think you've hit on an excellent idea. They aren't likely to tear that down, so it makes a perfect spot where future generations will be able to return and easily find."

"And since we are just mixing a few ashes into the soil near it, I don't see how anyone could object." added Walt.

Later, as they stood looking at the monument and the slightly disturbed duff next to it, Rachel turned to the others. "Cedric once told me a trick phrase for remembering the words yesterday and today in French: Heir Dernière and Demain Prochain. I remembered those words as I was trying to think of something appropriate to say. With matters of his death resolved it seems fitting to add: et puis, Aujourd'hui."

The End

Written: August/September, 2000.