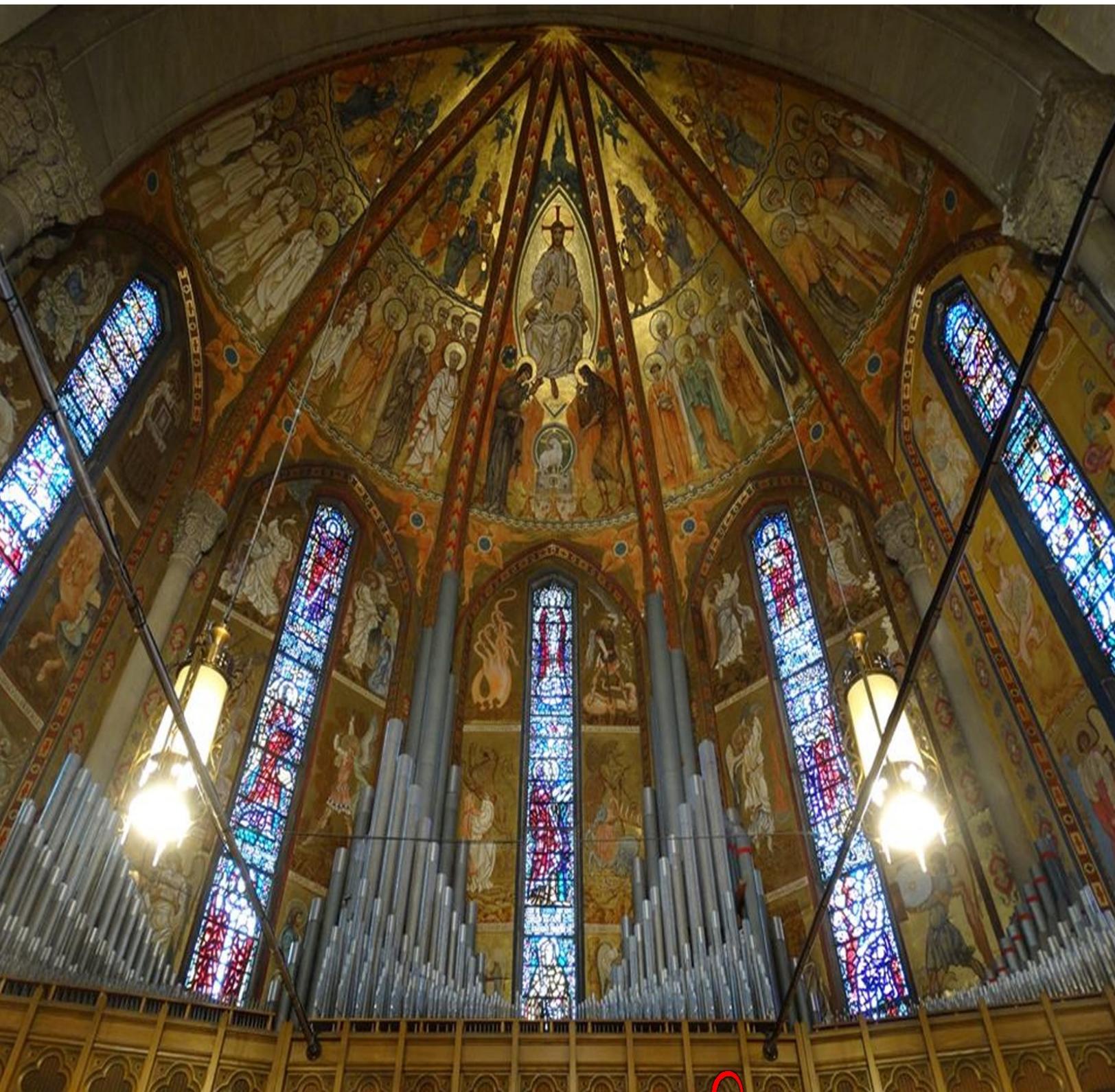


PAYING THE PAPER



A Cooper Wright Mystery
by Rob Steele

Paying The Piper

By Rob Steele

If you've ever heard me talk about my cases, I'm sure you've probably noticed that I'm not really the religious type. Do I believe in God? Eh, doesn't bother me one way or the other. If he, she or it is there, I'm sure he, she or it can take care of him, her or itself. It's God, right? It's religion that I have issues with. There are so many, well, charlatans, for lack of a better word, that will tell you that something is evil, or going to send you to hell, because it's in the Bible.

Except, I have actually read the Bible. It sounds like a sci-fi novel. But most of the stuff that they say is in there... just isn't. Jeff Sessions keeps droning on about how Jesus thinks marijuana is a killer drug. Yeah, he says that in Bullshiticus 4:20. (That means it's not in there.) It's not that I want there to be another way for people to get inebriated, but it has so many beneficial side-effects. It cures some cancers, for crying out loud! If it's the "devil's drug," does that mean *Satan* wants us to live longer, healthier lives?

But I digress. The reason I bring this up is because of my case today. I get a call out to St. Bernard Catholic Church. I get a kick out of that name. I just picture a priest in a cassock with one of those little barrels of brandy around his neck. That is not who was murdered, though. This time it's an organist and I'm told that I'll just have to see the cause of death for myself.

St. Bernard's looks like your typical catholic church – a large stone building with lots of stained glass and crosses. As you enter the church proper, there's the typical aisle between rows of pews leading to the altar and probably the biggest pipe organ I've ever seen. Not that I've seen that many, but this thing is huge! As I approach the altar, where the body is, I get over my fascination with the organ. There are a few steps between the pews and the altar, and the body is splayed over the top several. Dr. Seongho Young, our medical examiner, is looking over a young man, maybe mid-20s, light complexion, dark hair... and what looks like a wad of cash shoved in his mouth.

I look to Det. Manny Vasquez, who has beaten me to the scene because of my dentist appointment, for the details, which he is ready to deliver without

any prompting from me. “Morning, Boss. Our victim is Gary Beck, age 27. He works in the church, mostly as the organist. Doc says cause of death appears to be asphyxiation due to the money.” As I look over the body, Doc Young looks up, shrugs and gestures to the victim’s overloaded mouth with both hands as if to silently say *well, what does it look like he died from?*

“Do we have any suspects?” I ask Manny. “Who found the body?”

“I did,” responds a voice that isn’t Manny. I turn to see a priest in a typical black suit with a brilliantly white, possibly overbleached, collar. His extraordinarily pale complexion makes him almost glow – that or the lack of hair on his head. This aging priest’s appearance matches his holier-than-thou voice. “I’m Father Lucas Stephanos. I found him when I opened the chapel this morning. It’s all a bit ghastly for my taste.”

I look at the body, fully clothed, who, apart from the money in his mouth, looks like he could be sleeping, then I look above the altar where a replica of a beaten and mostly naked man is nailed to a few pieces of wood that’s being suspended from the ceiling. Right, the organist is the ghastly one. “Father Stephanos, how well did you know Beck? Did he have any enemies? Or ex-girlfriends?”

“No, Lieutenant,” he droned, “Mr. Beck worked in the church. He lived in a spare room downstairs in our basement. He rarely left the church grounds. And when he did, it was on Church business. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to prepare for this week’s services.” And with that he, well, I want to say walked, but it was more like he floated to, and through, a doorway next to the organ. Remember the scene in *the Blues Brothers* with the penguin? Yeah, it was like that. Very creepy.

“Well, if I have any more questions...” I mutter. “Manny, check out this guy’s background. Let’s see what he was before he came to St. Bernard’s. Doc, let me know if you find anything besides money. I’m gonna go check out this guy’s room.”

Now that everyone had their assignments, I found the stairs to the basement and rather quickly found the room of Gary Beck. It wasn’t hard to do. Despite the length of the rather dimly lit hallway, and the number of doors on either side, it was the only one that was closed, and, as it turned

out, locked. As I turned to try to find someone with a key, I found myself standing face to face with Father Stephanos. I hadn't even heard him. He seemed to show no sign of emotion at my obvious surprise. He simply held up a key. I stood aside as he unlocked the door to Mr. Beck's room. I looked in to see a rather small room with a single bed, a small dresser, a bookshelf and a small desk with an older model PC and monitor. I turned to thank Father Stephanos for opening the door, but he was gone. Just as quickly and quietly as he appeared, he was gone.

"Because that's not creepy," I muttered to no one. I entered Mr. Beck's room and found the bookshelf had only two books on it: *The Bible* (of course), and *The Bible for Dummies*. I give the second book a smirk. As I go through his meager belongings, I realize that I could never live in these conditions. That hallway had that green sanitarium paint, the creepy priest, and this room with clothes and only two books, just not my way of living. Not that I want that much but this was poverty level living. I realize it was probably free for him but...

I turn on the computer, which takes a while to boot up. I'm not expecting to find much here as the label on the CPU says *Pentium II*, and there is no internet connection. No ethernet cable, no wi-fi antenna. Frankly, with the surroundings, I'm surprised there's an electrical outlet. It's certainly not solar powered – no windows in here. I look back at the monitor, a CRT, not a flat screen, and realize there are no windows on the computer either. I haven't seen a C:\ in years! I guess I will have to have someone take it in and give it a once over. I tape off the room and head back to the office, stopping by IT guy Darryl Silverstone's office to get him to check out Mr. Beck's computer.

As I enter the office, I'm flagged down by Detective Vasquez, who is at his desk, looking quite befuddled at his computer. "We've got stuff for you, boss. Lots of it." He points at his computer which has a window showing our victim... with a different name. "We ran prints on him and this is what came back. Ernest Dixon, blackmailer wanted in four states. His MO is pretty consistent though. He got a music degree, right? He sets himself up as a church organist and finds out secrets of the church itself, or, more often, the church goes. Somehow, he keeps escaping custody, although I

think his first one they let him go.”

“They let him go? Why?”

“Well, he was blackmailing the priest, who had been fooling around with the altar boys. But he eventually turned the priest in and they thought he donated all the money to a sex abuse charity. It wasn’t until later that they found out that he kept most of it.”

I glance over Manny’s shoulder at the monitor and read a bit of the case.

“Where does a priest get that much money?”

Manny shrugged and continued, changing the dominant window on the screen. “We also tracked his financials. He received three large payments by check recently. One check each from Mr. and Mrs. Donnelley - \$50-thousand each. And one check from Mr. Emil Craft. Same amount.”

“Sounds like he found some targets. Manny, go talk to Mr. Craft and see what you can find out. I’ll take the Donnelley’s.” Assignments handed out again, we went our separate ways. The Donnelley’s, Arlen and Mary, lived in a rather posh part of town. Apparently so does Mr. Craft, as Manny and I play car leapfrog through traffic on the way over. The Donnelley residence is a large, mostly brick, mansion with an arced driveway in front, both ends connected to the street, and a pair of new looking BMWs in the drive. Between this family, Mr. Craft, and the priests, I seem to be the one in the poor house. I can only imagine how Mr. Beck must have felt. Then I remember he’s a con artist and shake that feeling quick enough.

Mr. Donnelley answers the door and leads me to a rather elaborate, and very white, sitting room, where Mrs. Donnelley is seated on a divan sipping tea, her blonde hair draped over one shoulder. As I almost expected, Mr. Donnelley sounds very similar to the priest, Father Stephanos – just as holier-than-thou, just a little younger. “So, Lieutenant, you’re telling us that we’re somehow related to Mr. Beck’s murder? I don’t see how that can be so. We barely knew the man.” He looked to his wife, who nodded.

“Then perhaps you could explain why each of you wrote him a check for \$50-thousand?”

“Each of us?” they exclaimed together. “We’re you being blackmailed, too?”

Mr. Donnelley demanded of his wife.

“Yes,” she said almost sheepishly. “He found out that I’ve been sleeping with Emil.” Emil Craft? I have a feeling I’m going to know what Manny is about to find out, if he hasn’t already. I expected Mr. Donnelley to explode in rage when he found out his wife was cheating on him. That would be a typical reaction. Except, he didn’t.

“Oh, that’s rich,” he laughed. “I paid him off because I was sleeping with Gwyneth!” The couple began laughing, as though they’d just heard the punchline of a good joke. I, on the other hand, felt like I was watching an episode of *Seinfeld* – I never understood that either.

“Does someone want to let me in on the joke?”

“Oh, we’re sorry, Lieutenant,” said Mrs. Donnelley. “It’s just that while I was sleeping with Emil Craft, Arlen was sleeping with his wife, Gwyneth! It’s all rather silly, really.” I’ve been a cop for almost twenty years. I’ve seen cheating spouses before. But I have never seen a situation like this before. “I guess we never really needed to pay him at all, did we?” she asked her husband.

“I guess not,” he replied. “We can be open about it now, I suppose. Ooh. Think of the next dinner party!”

I throw up my hands. “No! No, no, no. You can talk about that part after I’m gone. I need to know where each of you were this morning between seven and nine.” Seong-ho had texted me the estimated time of death.

“Oh, Lieutenant,” started Mr. Donnelley, “Don’t you watch *the Featured Home* on the channel 12 morning program? It simply is the best part of the news. We were featured this morning on live television! Most of our neighbors and friends were here, too!”

Mrs. Donnelley wrinkled her face and looked thoughtful. “Arlen, I don’t recall seeing Gwyneth. Do you?”

Mr. Donnelley’s face scrunched as well. “By Jove! I don’t recall seeing her either.” I have never actually heard anyone say *By Jove* before and mean it. This is all a bit weird for me. I thank them for their time and excuse myself. Back in the call I call Manny and have him get the footage of this morning’s

broadcast.

We also exchange notes and, sure enough, Manny found out about the affair circle as well. Although he tells me that Gwyneth was not there. “She told Mr. Craft that she had something to do at the church this morning. Maybe she was paying off our victim in cash rather than a check.”

That would make sense. Checks are traceable, and if you really didn’t want your significant other to find out... “Manny, did Mr. Craft know about his wife’s affair?”

“Si, he said he knew, but since he was having one of his own he didn’t mind so much. Said something about a dinner party, too, but it tuned that part out. It sounded kinda creepy.” I’m with him on that. Anyway, I head to the church to see if I can find Mrs. Gwyneth Craft. As I pull into the church parking lot, I notice only three cars. One I had previously identified as Father Stephanos, an AMC Gremlin, of all things. The new BMW (another one?) with a customized license plate that says CRAFT 2, is probably Mrs. Craft’s car. Not sure about the bright red Chevy Vega. I call that in to Manny, just in case.

This time I enter the church through the offices on the left side of the building. The door to the church was open, as I expected since it was still regular office hours. What I wasn’t quite expecting was that the main hall of offices looked very much like the basement hallway, only better lit. Out of the last door on the left, floated Father Stephanos. With the better lighting in this hall, I could see his feet move, but it still looked more like floating. It was very disconcerting, especially since he made no sound as he walked. “May I help you Lieutenant?”

“Uh, yeah, Father, thanks. I’m looking for Mrs. Gwyneth Craft. Have you seen her?”

“Not today. Mrs. Craft *is* one of our regulars. Let’s see if Mrs. Petersen has seen her.” He floated two steps back down the hall before stopping and turning to me. “She’s our secretary,” he said before continuing to an office three-doors down on the left. As we entered the room, which looked much like a waiting room in a doctor’s office and made me rather confused as to why the church offices were laid out this way, we noticed two things. One, a

woman in her early 50s wearing a red sweater with a dark pixie haircut was sitting at a wooden desk typing on a computer. In the corner, was a younger woman with red hair and a stylish dress was bound, gagged and tied to a toddler sized chair.

I crossed to room to free the bound woman, presumably Mrs. Craft, and did a double-take with the priest as he said, "Oh, Linda, not again!"

I untie the woman, who is oddly not struggling much despite being obviously conscious. "What the hell is going on here?" Father Stephanos obviously bristled at the mention of hell, but I shot him an equally poignant *oh shut up* glare.

"I caught her giving money to that, that, organist. She should be punished for trying to influence him that way. He has a modest position and we allow him to stay on the grounds. That should be enough for him. I made him eat that money. I hope he choked on it. He should know his place." She turned and pointed to Mrs. Craft. "Just like she should. Everyone has their place and should stay in it. Just like I do. I wanted her to know that so I sat her in the punishment chair like we do the insolent little brats who act up in Sunday School."

"Do you use the ball gag on the kids, too?" I ask, holding up the device.

"Wait, why do you have a ball gag at a church? Never mind! You're under arrest!" As I read her her rights and take her into custody for the murder of Ernest Dixon / Gary Beck and the kidnapping of Gwyneth Craft, I realize, this is the most prime example of why I don't do religion.