

**WILDCLOWN
HARD-BOILED**

The Case of the Bog Bride and others.

G. Wells Taylor

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Second Printing 2008

ISBN: 978-1-4357-1392-5

WILDCLOWN MYSTERIES

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Cover Design by G. Wells Taylor

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Richard Van Dyk, Robert A. Cotton and Peter Ciokan
Thanks.

Wildclown Hard-Boiled

A collection of Detective Wildclown's case files.

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The Cat Lover

I don't like cats, so don't tell me that deep down, I do. And don't suggest that there was something wrong with my childhood. I didn't have one. I just don't like cats. They're not substantial enough for me. If there's a dog in the room, you put your hand out and he'll put his head under it. But cats are like unfriendly ghosts. They appear out of nowhere, and then fall back into the shadows without a sound. I like to know when an animal's in the room with me—especially one that eats meat.

I have never liked cats, and I've grown close to hating them since the Change. Along with the resurrection of the dead, all animals, even our faithful dogs turned on us, left us to our fates, or worse attacked us outright. Feral pets have become a real problem, but none are more dangerous than the cat. There have been attacks, many, and though they're rarely fatal, they maim, and disfigure. Greasetown Authority has a shoot on site rule for cats. But they move quickly, and you never hear them coming, suddenly you're bleeding and they're gone. Cat lovers say it's the Change, that whatever happened to the world, caused them all to go mad. Me, I think the cats have just been biding their time.

At least I never liked them so I've never felt betrayed.

A recent brush with success had left me with more money in my pocket than I owed. I even had some in the bank, so I decided to take a little holiday. A vacation was just what the doctor ordered.

It was Elmo, my business partner, who couldn't appreciate the finer aspects of rest and relaxation; and so, he obsessively answered the phone

and accepted any business and made appointments with anyone who flashed a couple of hundred dollars our way. Like most dead people, Elmo's a workaholic. I'd spent the last few months in and out of trouble, getting my chops busted, my head sapped and my shins bruised but I was working. I'm a detective and you have to take the jobs as they come; but success can kill in my business. Oh, in case you don't know, I dress like a clown. No fashion statement; it's a complicated deal I have worked out with the guy who owns the body I drive around in when I'm working. His name's Tommy Wildclown; but that's another story.

So, I knew that this kind of success would get me killed. If I didn't take some time off—I'd get sloppy and catch a bullet between the shoulder blades. As it was, my right wrist was broken, and bound up with a flexible plastic and plaster cast. It's what happens when a 200-pound man, that's me, punches a 400-pound man, that's the killer in my last case, in the forehead. Didn't help that he was sitting down, and that his chair was braced up against the wall. I let him have it, actually I let the building have it, and knocked him out so fast he didn't hear me scream. So, some time off to nurse the wound.

To get it, I packed Elmo up and sent him on a luxury bus liner to Old Orleans to track down acquaintances and buy some sensible clothes. Fashion was Elmo's only weakness. I dropped him at the bus depot, and then hung around to wave goodbye. I halfway expected him to get off and hire me out to find missing luggage.

After the bus's taillights disappeared into the fog, I went to my favorite eatery to read newspapers and have the best breakfast a clown with a broken wrist could buy. Then, I bought the biggest and oldest bottle of Canadian Club whisky I could find. My plan was to slip into a haze of delightful convalescence, talk to imaginary people, say what I'd like to say to people who pissed me off in the past, and maybe make a few crank phone calls.

I had a bag of groceries under one arm—man food, pickled stuff and pretzels, good for working up a thirst—plus my vintage whisky, as I fumbled inexpertly with the office key. I juggled my packages briefly, almost lost the jar of mustard, breathed a sigh of relief when the lock finally clicked, and pushed my way in. I'd left the lamp on by the couch in the waiting room. Unable to move freely now, I pressed my groceries against my hip, and clutched the slippery bottle of Canadian Club in my armpit as my left hand stupidly tried to pull the key out of the lock. Feeling an avalanche building energy, I abandoned the key to limp as quickly as possible, contorting my body, to push the descending package outward, so it landed on the couch when it fell. That perilous situation

dealt with, I turned back to the key—yanked it out, then shut the door.

I snatched up my bottle of whisky, passed quickly across the waiting room and into my office. There must have been something in the air, because I paused. *The window was open.* I had opened it to air the place out—if that was possible with the flatulent backwash Greasetown called air—but I had planned to shut it before taking Elmo to the bus station.

One thing you have to remember about the Change is you just don't leave your windows open. Things can get in—awful things. In a city that had a rising population of corpses walking its streets, you just don't leave your windows open. And there was the problem of animals hating people now. Even pigeons and sparrows had developed a hostile attitude—doves had become hawks. I had only started to work into a good curse when I heard the growl. It was a bad one. Sort of the worst kind of growl you're going to hear in a nearly dark office. There is nothing like the sound of an angry cat. Nothing at all. They produce an alien and monstrous noise, half growl, half wail. There doesn't seem to be a human analog to it. I'm sort of stretching a point calling it a growl at all. It was a noise I'd expect to hear at the dawn of time, when there were just swamps and reptiles. And worst of all a cat only growls when he means business. I just had time to flip the light switch.

A high-pitched scream came with the light and a wiry black tangle of fur slightly bigger than a football hit my chest. I barely had time to get my left hand up. Needling pressure tore my skin, as the cat rocketed toward my face. My arm deflected it. The cat scraped toward the elbow—its rear legs ripping at my gut. I swung the hand but the creature clung like a burr—fire leapt up my arm when it sank its fangs into my palm. On impulse, I flung the fist at the wall. Tightly wrapped around my whisky bottle it should have been a crushing blow, but the cat sensed the impact before it happened and tore up my arm toward my shoulder.

The Canadian Club thumped dully against the wall and bumped on the carpet when I released it. With my right hand, I clawed at my .44 automatic where it hung from my pink skipping rope belt. My fingers wrapped around it, but the cast had thickened my palm by an inch and I could not hook a finger around the trigger. Instead I whipped the weapon up and slapped the cat across the room with it.

I just managed to slip the gun into my left hand when the cat launched itself again. This time, I felt its claws dig into my scalp—felt them lacerate the skin around my right ear. I swung the gun at the cat again, and it leapt out of range, ran across the top of the door. I am not ambidextrous and have never made the claim. I try to be proficient in small arms fire with both hands, but bullets are expensive items, and I'm

usually broke.

I fired the big gun, tore the top corner off my inner office door, fired again and killed a picture of a brewing company I kept over a small shelf of books. I fired again and mortally wounded my dictionary.

The cat bounded and bounced from shadow to shadow and landed on my desk yowling—cursing, I cradled the gun on my broken wrist and aimed at the cat as it sprung.

Cats do not do well against .44 caliber handguns when they're aimed properly—and even worse at a range of two yards. Evolution had not prepared them for this. And what was left of my feline attacker formed a red shrapnel cloud that littered my desk, and sent wads of black fur onto the wall behind it.

Somewhere in all that crashing, screaming violence the phone had started to ring. When the .44's roar subsided the bell was all I could hear.

I walked around the desk, still quaking with adrenaline. Pausing to flick the cat's tail off my chair, I forgot I wasn't going to answer the phone, and answered it.

"Hello," I said, surveying the bloody wreckage of my relaxing afternoon.

"I'm looking for Wildclown Investigations," came the voice, more clipped and officious than mine could ever be.

"You found it..." I muttered, leaning forward to shove the black cat's lower jaw into the wastebasket. "I'm supposed to answer the phone with it."

"With what?"

"With *Wildclown Investigations*." I leaned back, and noticed a good quantity of blood up and down my arm. *Mine*, and there was a constant slow drip from the right side of my head. It pattered slowly onto my shoulder. Scalp wounds bleed like pigs. "How can I help you? I'm kind of busy."

"I would like to employ your services," said the voice.

"I'm on vacation," I said, dully aware of an ache in my knitting wrist.

"Then why did you answer your phone?"

"Okay you got me there." I cradled the blood-dappled receiver under my chin, reached into my pocket for a cigarette. Paused. "One moment," I said, snatching up the bottle of Canadian Club where it lay mercifully unbroken. I snatched off the seal, took a slug. Then resumed searching for my cigarettes until I found one and lit it. "How can I help you?"

"My name is Jonathan Kradzyk. I'm the curator of the Greasetown Metropolitan Museum of Antiquities." His voice really flowed around those words. I took another belt from my bottle as I listened. "And, well

there's been trouble, strange trouble involving animals.”

“Call the Humane Society.” I watched a tuft of black fur waft toward the floor.

“It's more serious than that. It's one of our board members. Margaret Meadows of the Meadows Culinary Delights family.” I knew the company. They made plankton and krill taste like hot dogs and hamburgers. “She's been killed at the museum.”

“Call Authority.”

“By CATS!” Mr. Kradzyk said, impossibly.

I paused to study the remains of a cat on my desk. “I'm all ears,” I said, absently hoping I still had two.

“Can you come to the museum? I need this cleared up for our legal defense. In case her family suggests we bear any responsibility.” He cleared his throat, uncomfortable. “I'm told that to protect ourselves we have to be sure there's nothing we could have done to prevent it.”

“Sure, I'm on vacation. A trip to the museum fits.” I knew the address, so just said two o'clock and hung up. Then I picked up the telephone book and looked through it for cleaning companies.