

The Friend of Man

Ronald M. Corn

RUFUS was worried. It was getting late and he had not accomplished anything all day. He had visited almost all the restaurants and taverns in the neighborhood and could find no one. And he thought it strange, for everyone seemed so happy. But surely, he reasoned, there was at least one person that needed his help. Sighing, he clutched his overcoat collar tighter around his neck and ears. He had to find someone soon, for it was getting colder by the minute and the wind was becoming stronger. He stood shifting his weight from one cold foot to the other, and every so often he curled his toes inside his shoes—trying to increase the circulation. Standing hidden in the shadows of a store-front, he searched the scene in front of him for a prospect. He scanned the people who dashed in and out of a barroom across the street. From experience he knew that they were the likely ones. But so far, the barroom had attracted and given up only what appeared to be satisfied customers. He yanked off a glove and fumbled deep inside his clothing, plucking out a large and blackened pocket-watch. It was eighteen minutes past ten o'clock. Not much time left. The restaurants would be closing by now and in less than two hours the taverns would lock their doors for the night.

It started to snow—blurring his view with a reeling whiteness. He shivered, pressing his arms against his bundled body. He despised the cold and he hated more the sting of snow. He pulled his head deeper within the protection of his coat and stepped back into the darkened recess of the store-front. He grew impatient as he watched the scurrying forms. The wind moaned like the distant cry of a bugle, whipping the snow into swirls, and the people quickened their steps, bending against the force of the gusts. They trundled past him—their individuality fading away in the snow and the night. But Rufus remained vigilant, for he had ways of knowing them—knowing their peculiarities despite the veiling effect of the weather. It wasn't hard for him. At first it had been difficult and he had made mistakes. But now, after many years of devoting himself to helping others, he had learned to know the signs, and these signs had not failed him in over—well, not for a long, long time.

Surely, someone would soon appear. He glanced hopefully in both directions, but not a soul was in sight. Behind tight cold lips, his teeth clattered uncontrollably. A red glow flared behind the frosted plate glass of the barroom, beckoning to his chilled and shivering body. For Rufus, a man with such a warm and congenial nature, the allurements were great. But he was used to temptation, and besides, he disliked sitting in a tavern by himself. It made him self-conscious. He forced his mind from the torment of the weather. Instead, he mused over the many whom he had helped in life. He

was proud of his success. All those people through the years that had known nothing but trouble. Now they had found refuge. And it was all because of him. Yes, he was proud, for not many could say that they had spent so much time in the true service of their fellow man. He recalled the first one to receive his attention. Let's see now. What was his name? He often had trouble remembering names, for there had been so many. Was it O'Malley? Yes, that was it. Michael O'Malley. What a fine man he was, but so impetuous. He was a policeman and a traffic officer at that. But then being a traffic officer had been Michael's plight. It had been such a trying job. All those cars and the drivers with their excuses and arguments. It had virtually ruined Michael's good nature. He had become obsessed with punishing law breakers. Soon, he was handing out more tickets than any other policeman on the force. And his reputation had grown as the toughest cop in the department. Such an unhappy man and such an unhappy life! But Rufus had changed all that. Michael O'Malley was no longer the hated policeman.

Oh, there had been many like Michael O'Malley, and Rufus had been able to help them all. There had been distraught husbands, nagging wives, prostitutes, successful business men, thieves, and even an undetected murderer. Rufus meditated a moment about the women. He hoped that the next one would not be a woman. They usually carried on so, crying and sobbing as they told him their troubles. He hadn't taken count recently, yet it did seem like there had been more women than men. Ah well, no matter, he thought.

But what of his last recipient? Rufus's heart swelled with pride whenever he thought of this. The man had been devoted like himself, though confused in his methods. Rufus would never forget his name, for the man represented the pinnacle of his own success. This unfortunate had been the Reverend Marcus Blount—a man well liked and respected in both church and community. But he had been such a tortured man when Rufus met him. And in his torture he had preached with the power of thunder until the congregation verily quaked in their pews. There was one in the congregation who had quaked more than the others. That was the widow Clark. Mrs. Clark played the organ every Sunday. And when Rufus had first heard her play, he had been intrigued, for it was immediately after Reverend Blount had finished his sermon—a sermon that dealt with "The Woman at the Well." And Mrs. Clark had pounded the organ until it sounded as though the church might very well burst from its foundations with the music's soul-searching discords. It was then that Rufus realized the trouble, and in order to help the good Reverend Blount he had also to help the good widow Clark. But then, all ended well and Rufus had been very pleased. Every bit as pleased as he now was in retrospect.

But Rufus's reverie was interrupted by a brittle, grating sound that shrieked from a large metal sign, hanging on the front of the building that housed the tavern across the street. Its lettering was

blanked out by a plastering of driving snow and its creaking sounded on the wind as it swung back and forth upon wet hinges. To Rufus, standing there in the loneliness of his shelter, it was a comforting sound. And then, he almost shouted aloud, for the swinging sign had been an omen. At that moment he saw the person he had been waiting for. Yes, it was true! There could be no mistake about it. There he was, a young man walking slowly along the street. Rufus's heart leaped at the sight. Now he could consummate his service. He restrained himself though, watching to make doubly sure. But he could not be wrong, for this young man had the most obvious symptoms. His shoulders were rounded with despair, and instead of hurrying like the others he shuffled along as if he pursued an aimless goal. Yes, here was a troubled heart, and Rufus watched with renewed vitality and warmth. The young man stopped in front of the tavern. He stood motionless, without looking up, and then turned toward the tavern door and went in. Oh, this was too much to ask for, thought Rufus. Now he would not only be able to help someone but he would also be able to warm his aching bones at the same time. Happily, Rufus sauntered across the glazed street and followed the young man into the tavern. Inside, he welcomed the warmth. Rufus really felt fortunate this night.

His furtive eyes searched the people sitting at the bar and then turned to the booths along the opposite wall. And there he found his young man sitting in the last booth near the back of the room. Rufus took his time, gently shoving his way through the crowd of extended elbows and overhanging rumps along the bar stools. He stopped near the pay telephone and hung his dampened ash-grey overcoat on a wall hook, then carefully settled his glistening homburg on top of the coat. With his hat off, Rufus's bald head, embraced with a halo of silver ringlets, glinted in the red lights that flickered above the bar length mirror behind him. He was beginning to feel better already as the warmth and pungency of the smoke-filled room closed around him. Turning, he looked down at his long awaited prospect and greeted him cheerily.

"Good evening, young man, may I join you?"

The man's head jerked up. He grunted and Rufus could see that he was squinting up at him through tears that were spilling down his haggard young face. Rufus tried again.

"See here. I just thought you would like to talk to someone. May I sit down?"

The boy mumbled something and then stammered a reply.

"Well, I . . . I guess . . . Sure, go ahead if you want to."

"Thank you."

Rufus slid in on the seat across from the young man. He noticed that the boy's hands held a sheaf of papers that had been ripped in half. Then a waitress, heavily rouged, hipped her way to their table and asked for their order. The boy muttered that he wanted a

Sterling, while Rufus asked for a double shot of old Bacchus and water. Neither of them spoke until after the waitress had returned with their drinks and Rufus had felt the warming glow of the whiskey as it radiated down through his chest to his stomach. Then Rufus opened the conversation.

"Well, now, young man, you seem to be distressed about something. Would you like to talk about it?"

The boy had regained some of his composure and he looked at Rufus curiously and a little amazed before he said, "Look, Mister, whoever you are, I . . ."

"Allow me, young sir," Rufus interrupted. "I am Rufus Lockiman, friend of all men, philosopher, and at your service."

The boy blinked his eyes as if startled by what Rufus had said and then he continued his remark.

"Look, I don't care who you are. You asked to sit down and have a drink, not to drag out anybody's family skeletons." The boy's eyes were hard now, and his voice was bitter.

Rufus looked at the young face for a moment, trying to find softness behind those steely eyes and finally he said quietly and with slow deliberation, "My boy, I watched you as you walked along the street out front, and I knew that you were in some kind of trouble, and I . . . well I just thought maybe I could help you."

This time the boy's eyes did seem to soften and his face looked confused, as if he did not know what to say next.

Rufus saw his chance and he said casually, "Suppose we begin with your name."

"It's . . . it's Richard. Richard Long."

"Well, then, Richard, I'm very glad to know you."

Richard lowered his eyes, sipped at his beer, and with his left hand drew the torn papers out of sight beneath the table.

Rufus eyed him closely, and at the same time questioned, "What do you do Richard? You look like you might be young enough to be in college. Are you?"

"No. I graduated last year. I'm a writer."

"Well, that is nice. What sort of things do you write?"

"Fiction. Humorous stuff mostly."

"Wonderful, wonderful! We need more humor now-a-days. Tell me, have you published anything yet?"

Richard's eyes again resumed their hardness and the sensitive line of his jaw tightened as he said with bitter emphasis, "No!"

Rufus's tone was consoling. "Hmm. That is a shame. But I have known a few writers in my time, and I must say their lives were not easy. Even the successful ones had difficult times at first. And they suffered. Some of them never stopped suffering. I suppose it's because of their conception of the reading public. Writers can be very vain sometimes, you know. And they are a jealous lot. Jealous of themselves and jealous of their public. Yes, writing is a hard life in a cruel world. . . ."

While Rufus talked he observed Richard's face. He saw the boy's eyes widen and the sensitive mouth soften. And he saw that tears were welling back into the eyes. Now Rufus knew that he was making headway.

" . . . Yes, Richard, writing is indeed an exacting art. But now let's talk about you. Do you write novels or stories?"

"Both," Richard answered.

"Good. That's fine. How many novels have you written?"

"One."

"And it was rejected?"

"Yes."

"Didn't they make any comments about it?"

"Oh yes, they did that all right."

"Well, what did they say?"

Richard stared downward at the slipping foam in his beer glass and he answered the question with a whisper.

"They said it was . . . that it was . . . they said it was putrid."

"Oh, I am sorry, Richard. That is too bad. It really is." Rufus paused. Noticing the boy's shoulders slump forward, he reasoned that he would make a success of the situation yet. He continued with his questioning.

"Now then, what about your stories? You say that you write mostly humorous things. Have you written many?"

Richard's reply came dully. "About a hundred."

"A hundred humorous stories. Say, that is a lot. But out of a hundred stories they all couldn't be bad. What do the publishers say about them?"

Richard's reply was again dull and this time his voice dropped to an almost inaudible low.

"They said they weren't funny."

Rufus waited a moment before he said anything else. He wanted to make sure that Richard Long was looking at him before he continued. Finally Richard looked up and Rufus stared deeply and fixedly into the boy's troubled eyes. Then Rufus began slowly and in a monotone, what he had been waiting a long time to say.

"Richard, those papers in your hand beneath the table—they're a story you've torn up, isn't that correct?"

The boy nodded affirmatively.

"And it's another humorous story, isn't that also correct?"

Richard nodded again.

"Well, then, it seems to me that you should try your hand with a different tone in mind. I should think that you'd try something more serious, especially after so many failures with humor. Yes, Richard, if I were you I would write, at least try to write, about more serious things in life. After all, Richard, though we need more humor in the world today, the fact remains that when we look around us, we fail to see much that is funny. Of beauty, there is plenty, but of humor there is little. So, as an example, Richard,

why don't you turn to beauty. It can be a wonderful thing. You can find it in the living and you can find it in the dead. . . ."

He paused, leaning closer to Richard's attentive face.

" . . . A very close friend of mine, you would know his name, Richard, once said, 'Beauty is the virtue of the body, as virtue is the beauty of the soul.' Now what about your soul? What about its fathomless beauty?"

Rufus's voice became more intense.

"Just think of it, Richard. The beauty of your soul. Shall you know your soul, Richard? Shall you know its beauty? Of course you will. You will know it Richard, because you have suffered."

Rufus leaned closer, his voice reaching a higher pitch.

"And if you come with me, you will know it. You will have your chance. The chance that only I can give you, Richard. So come. Know the victory. Know the beauty. Know the wonder of total release that shall be yours. Come Richard. Come. Come with me."

Rufus's voice rose to the words. So also did he slowly rise from the table and Richard rose with him and they left the tavern, leaving their coats where they hung, and they walked through the whiteness of the snow and they walked to the pale river and it was not far away.

Regina—Oh No!

Ruth Paller

GAYLE carried her pecan roll and cup of steaming coffee to the window seat in an alcove of the dining room.

"I'll have my coffee now before the crowd gets here. Then I can pour for you, Susan. Is your symphony speech all ready?"

Susan placed a tray of hot rolls on the table. They gave off a smell of caramelized sugar and toasted nuts.

"I don't have to say much," she replied. "Mrs. Bingham will give the speech. After all, she's supported the orchestra for years. All I have to do is pass out the names to be solicited by the committee."

Gayle put down her cup and lit a cigarette. She stretched her legs and leaned back in the sunny alcove.

"It's lucky the painters got out of here in time for the meeting. You must be exhausted! I love what you've done to this room. The soft coca walls, this gold drapery print—it's perfect. It's—"

She sat up abruptly.

"Look who's coming up your driveway! I could swear Regina Lord's name wasn't on the committee list. I crossed it off myself when I heard she was going to Florida—thank goodness."

"She flew home yesterday. Seems she couldn't stand the service in three different hotels."

"Well, for Pete's sake! Did you have to call her right up and invite her. I know your husbands are in business together—but