A Carnival Confession

Looking back, it just could not have gotten any better. For we LeComptes, it was the best of times. My baby sister, Eugenie, had been Queen of Carnival in her debut year, father had been named King of Comus, our racehorses were seemingly unbeatable, and I was named partner in the law firm of LeCompte &Masterson. Even mother smiled gladly and seldom drank before nightfall. Apart from poor cousin Bourgeois´ (Boo to us) IRS problem, the LeCompte name ascended throughout New Orleans society. Grandpere LeCompte would have been pleased. Mardi Gras that year was uniquely our season; we waited excitedly for the day itself. Eugenie would review the Krewe of Rex parade from the Boston Club balcony, while father prepared to preside over Comus. In those days, Comus paraded on Mardi Gras evening with the masked king´s identity secret to the public. No two members of the same family had ever been in such regal position on Mardi Gras Day. Thus rose the LeCompte Family star.

Now, on that busiest of days, we LeComptes would also be running our prized three year-old colt, Krewe Captain, in the Louisiana Derby. Time would be scarce between parades for us to hasten to the Fair Grounds to watch the race. Father was convinced that Krewe Captain was the best horse he had ever bred: a bold statement from a man not given to exaggeration.

None of the local horses was a danger to Krewe Captain, but we feared two invaders from New York and California. Their presence promised to make the race a major trial for the Kentucky Derby. Father was planning to place a large bet on Krewe Captain in the Louisiana Derby, a bet he fully expected to collect.

Ambroise J. LeCompte, Sr. was such a better gambler than his son was. So much more disciplined than I, a wager was business to father but sport to me. Father always waited for the right spot; I bet at every opportunity. Not surprisingly, his returns were far better than mine were. The Louisiana Derby, we were sure, would be a triumph for both of us.

There is a signal characteristic of the diseased gambler: as the compulsion grows more severe, so do the wagers rise in size and desperation. The failure to foretell the outcome of the events, upon which he gambles, produces compounding losses. Those losses, in the end, effect a certain clairvoyance. At the climactic moment, the gambler knows the go-for-broke play is a loser as he makes it.

That Sunday morning before Mardi Gras, we had just returned home from eleven o´clock mass at St. Louis Cathedral when the call came. Most uptown Catholics attended Holy Name, but the LeComptes had been parishioners at St. Louis´ since early in the last century. Other worshippers walked into church, our family processed behind father´s march. Though he and the archbishop had been high school classmates more than a half-century ago, father´s erect stride gave a far more youthful appearance than did the stooped figure of his friend in the pulpit.

These days the church was filled with tourists and French Quarter types. Oddly, Father preferred that since he didn´t view church attendance as a social event. "I don´t care to take communion with my gin rummy partners," he often said.

Madison had just served milk punches on the back porch, when he brought father the phone. Within seconds after saying hello, father´s normally plum- hued face turned the color of the contents of his glass. The call was brief; father´s hand trembled uncontrollably as he attempted to place the receiver in its cradle.

,"Buddy, I don´t believe this. That call. . .the man said. . . he told me if Krewe Captain wins the Louisiana Derby, I will be a dead King of Comus. Who would do. . . .who would say something of that sort? "

A gulp of the milk punch restored father´s color, but he was no less upset. "This was hardly a crank; the voice was deadly serious. Someone who knows I am King of Comus this year made that call. The members are all my friends and none cares about racing. It´scrazy. Should we call the police, the racing authorities?"

Cautioning against calling anyone, I pointed out that it was surely a hoax and we didn´t need any adverse publicity for the family or the racetrack. Our best course of action was to ignore the whole thing. At length father agreed reluctantly but insisted on alerting our trainer, "Booger" St. Amant in case he might have a clue as to the caller´s identity.

Father reached the trainer on his barn phone at the Fair Grounds. Honore St. Amant looked the part- all Cajum and all horseman. With the physique of an overfed ex jockey, he looked a human foie gras candidate. His two pack a day Picayune habit and years of breaking yearlings in the Louisiana sun gave his skin an alligator texture that contrasted sharply with his ill-fitting porcelain colored dental implants. An early Parkinson´s ailment caused his left hand to move circularly in a manner suggestive of a conductor patiently directing a Sousa March on the Fourth of July. His loyalty to father was such that St. Amant was the only non-family member entrusted with the Comus secret.

"Boogah, I´ve just received a death threat by phone concerning Krewe Captain. I was told that he must not win on Tuesday or I am a dead King of Comus . Have you any idea who would make such a call?"

St. Amant answered coolly. "Mistuh Ammy, don´t worry bout a ting. Dat´s the oldess trick goin´. Somebody tink dey gonna cash a big bet by tretnin you. Dat big colt ain´t a scairt an neither me. Dey ain´t gonna see nuttin but his backside."

Some small-minded track urchin could have made the call, but Comus´ bond of secrecy had surely been violated. The three of us decided that the matter was best forgotten, although father´s anxiety still showed through. He ate little at brunch, but the family attributed it to pre-carnival and pre-derby jitters.

The voice watched Booger´s side of the conversation from a neighboring barn. The visitor unzipped his stifling, quilted parka better suited for the Chicago winters it normally protected against. His profession was making the highly unpredictable business of horse racing, well, more predictable. Putting in the odd fix during winter racing in Chicago was not daunting. Riders of flexible character plus the veil of compromising weather conditions provided a high level of success in targeted contests. Only the most subtle of threats were needed to insure cooperative partners. An important race such as the Louisiana Derby would not normally be the province of a fixer. A nearly one million dollar purse would tend to keep all parties honest. But with the large purse came a national television audience and a betting pool accommodating to a major investment. For the voice, the Louisiana Derby would be a major step-up in class, a road game against a tough opponent.

Proud and excited as we were for Eugenie, Father and I couldn´t get to the track fast enough at the conclusion of the Rex parade. Mother and daughter were left safely behind as we rushed to Fair Groumds.

As we approached the paddock, Booger stood impassively under an oak tree, legs spread, arms folded as a stream of perique tobacco smoke perfumed his territory. "Din´t say nuttin to the rider bout that phone call, men. Dat boy´s nervous as a cat in a room full of rockin´ chairs awreddy," the trainer imparted in a hushed voice. The truthful ring of Booger´s words was soon apparent.~

Krewe Captain was beautifully turned out and a model of composure in the post parade. Little Dewey Hebert, perched on his back, was not. Normally a cool rider, father remarked at how tense he appeared. When the gates opened, he took the horse, which always liked to race close to the leaders, straight to the back. Midway the race, unable to restrain him any longer, he repeatedly ran the colt into traffic yet still made up ground. Into the stretch, Krewe Captain had dragged Hebert to second but Chiseler, the California horse, was three lengths ahead and running well. Our best hope seemed only for the place when Chiseler unexpectedly bolted toward the Mystery Street gate, and threw his rider to the ground. There we were on the lead alone! The rest of the race was a canter with ten lengths back to the second place finisher. After pulling up, Krewe Captain galloped back to the finish line amidst war whoops from the local partisans.

In the winners´ circle, Booger was ecstatic, Dewey Hebert looked ill, and father wascast in ambivalence born of victory and fear. Father was unaware that our caller had also had a word with Dewey, whose best attempts to lose the race had not succeeded. Those attempts would have surely brought the rider before the stewards had he not won the race. As it was a scolding from the trainer was soon forthcoming. "Dewey you couldn´t have done anymore to get this horse beat unless you jumped off," reprimanded Booger shaking his head. Then the trainer calmed his boss with assurances about the worthlessness of the threat. The crowded Carnival schedule soon had us preparing for the evening parade of Comus.

On Canal Street, nearly all the businesses were closed. A few sold beers from behind barricaded entrances. The new moon provided a dark shadow for the carnival lights to sparkle. The voice climbed the fire escape at Woolworth´s from the Iberville Street side, carrying a small canvas bag that could logically contain a day´s collection off oat-born trinkets. A careful amble brought him to the Canal Street side of the roof where the fading moments of Mardi Gras were stumbling to conclusion before him.

A fraction of the daytime crowd lingered in wait for the last parade of the season to jag through the French Quarter. The Rex parade processed through the pressed streets at noon; Comus rushed past sparse, weary clusters of audience, the parade´s pilots eager to end the days work. The pause for the ninety-degree turn onto Royal Street would provide the only feasible opportunity for the voice to join his target. He opened the small bag and carefully emptied the contents onto the uneven Woolworth´s roof. Slowly he assembled the rifle and fixed the scope to the barrel. A steady level of human buzz below provided a cover for his undertaking. The voice was preparing to fulfi11 his commitment to Ambroise LeCompte.

Distant drumbeats and the closer sirens of the motorcycle police alerted celebrants and assassin that Comus was nearing Canal Street. King Comus moved in mechanical slow motion as he gestured papally to his subjects.

Suddenly he lurched forward, in what appeared to be a champagne induced loss of balance, as the first bullet entered his chest. The voice quickly fired twice more, laid down his tools, and departed Woolworth´s roof as casually as he had arrived. Ambroise LeCompte was a dead King of Comus.

Of all the myriad facial expressions I had witnessed in father´s life, the one he chose in death I´d seen but once before. He lay still at Charity Hospital with the same look of apparent disbelief that had followed the phone call. What manner of person could murder a harmless man over a horse race? With the inherited expression, I began to plan Father´s leave-taking.

The homicide of Ambroise LeCompte generated an intense investigation for a suspect: preferably a guilty one, but a suspect withal. And so it was that the hammer fell on poor Booger St. Amant. The prosecutors wove a credible tale of disloyalty and guile. The only non-Comus member with the secret and a known gambler, Booger was quickly railroaded with an assist from a perjurious Dewey Hebert. The voice was never apprehended; he returned to his craft in Chicago.

The sight of Booger being led away sickened all of the family. An innocent man, I knew, had been convicted of murderous conspiracy. Our inability to right the wrong tortured one and all. For months my headaches grew worse and the visits of Father´s wraith more frequent. Since my relocation, I feel much better. Though I miss the racetrack, life here really is not bad at all.

Buddy LeCompte´s monologue was interrupted by the conversational murmurs approaching him. He rose to greet his visitors, his arms involuntarily folded

Ah, my cousin! Etienne, you are now my cousin the Monsignor, yes? I know this is not your normal route of visitation, so to speak. But thank you very much for coming. As you can see, shaking hands is not an option. Ha! Not even a simple sign of the cross is possible. But enough, you are here professionally and your time is valuable. So let´s get on with the business at hand, dear cousin. Bless me father, for I have sinned. It has been years since my last confession. Monsignor, you see&helip;well, I was only trying to cash a bet.