

DEATH IN A CLOSED ROOM

By
John P. Seiler

Copyright 8/2000, DEATH IN A CLOSED ROOM, ALL Rights Reserved

This story may not be reproduced in any form for profit, or on another website without written permission of the author. The story may be freely distributed with this entire notice attached. The author may be contacted by e-mail at: seilerjp@telerama.lm.com

[Note: This story is the second in a series of stories drawn from the same socio-political-economic background found in the story entitled "Satisfaction".]

My name is Nick Reardon, intelligence officer extraordinaire, confirmed bachelor, and dedicated pipe smoker. Varten von Eckman has sent me to the planet Chrisongas in the Spirelli System on an assignment from Emperor Leopaldo. This was to be a short investigation job. On my last assignment, I prevented a Carnish shape changer from murdering the head of the Vermelli Family. This job was supposed to be a welcomed change of pace.

There had been a number of strange, unsolved deaths in the main city, Polomos. Polomos was the only city of major size on the planet. The deaths were all of asphyxiation, in a locked room. A morbidity statistical analysis had shown an unusual factor; ninety-eight percent of the deaths were to non-smokers. Local investigating authorities had come up empty-handed. My assignment was to find out what was going on?

I landed at the Polomos spaceport at night and was quickly whisked to the city. I met with my old friend Paul Oom. Early in our careers, Paul and I had seen much duty together. I went into the Emperor's intelligence service; Paul went into the government administrative branch. Paul was the head of the local branch of the Empire's Administration.

The Chrisongans main source of income came from the wexel plant that grows on the low land marshes. Once the wexel plant is processed, a very fine pseudo-tobacco is produced. This "wexel tobacco" is aged and used in making the finest pipe tobacco, cigars, and high-priced cigarette tobacco in the Empire.

A secondary find on the planet was a curious animal called a Tex-mebe. This animal is an amoebae type creature with some amazing characteristics. A normal Tex-mebe is roughly the size of an Old Earth baseball. However, it expands itself until it covers the surface area of the volume it is in. If placed in a room, it would expand to cover the walls, even though it would only be a few thousandths of an inch thick. It also is phototropic; that is, it becomes the color that a creature entering the room would desire it to be.

“Here on Chrisongas, you will not find any use of any solvents or paint. Our paint is biological rather than chemical. It is very beneficial to the ecology of the planet.” Paul said, “If you walk into a room and think blue, the walls become blue. The Tex-mebe adheres to the walls, and senses the colors, and either becomes it or psychically/telepathically makes you believe it is the color of the room that you wished.”

I really did not quite believe this, but did note how the appearance of the room was very satisfying. I thought blue...and the walls became blue. I thought red...and they became red. If I did not think of any specific color, I just did not pay any attention to the color. I wondered if the colors appeared the same to Paul?

I asked Paul if I could light up my pipe. He said sure and asked if I would like some well-aged wexel tobacco. He handed me a very old tobacco jar. I opened it, breathed in the aroma, and was in love with it. Paul told me that the blend was called wexel-virginia, and was aged over ten years.

I took my Old Earth pipe out of its special travel case. It was a bent apple made by an Old Earth firm named Larenzetti, from Italy. I filled it up and lit it. Paul did likewise with a very nice new pipe from Rencell-IV, made of Krenellian B'iar.

As soon as the pipes were lit, I noticed a feeling of general well being settle in the room. Paul and I felt very mellow. I also noticed or it became evident to me of the colors becoming very vivid in the room.

We finished our pipe in silence. I complimented him on the quality of the wexel tobacco. He saw me to the guest apartment where I retired for the night.

-2-

The next morning, I awoke to a buzzing door ringing. I found a messenger at the door. “Mr. Reardon, there has been another mysterious death! It was right here, in the administrative household! Please come at once!”

I dressed and followed the messenger to the other side of the building to one of the apartments. Paul awaited me at the door. “Nothing has been touched, pending your arrival, Nick.”

We went through the door. Sprawled upon the floor was a man around forty years of age. He showed all the signs of suffocation, but there was no signs on his body as to the cause of his death.

“I take it that this man is a non-smoker.”, I asked Paul.

“That is correct.” He replied. “He also has no enemies, but found out yesterday that all his investments were basically bust! The door was locked from the inside.”

I asked Paul to instruct his people to perform a full set of laboratory tests and let me know what they found. As I left the room, I noticed brief flicks in the room color. It was as if the Tex-mebe was having trouble maintaining the color in the room.

I pointed this out to Paul. He told me that this was often an effect noticed when the room host, a termed used to denote the “primary room user, died. The flicks ended when a new “host” took possession of the room. This was noted at all the earlier death scenes.

I went back to my apartment, packed my pipe with some Old Earth tobacco called Mc Clelland Deep Hollow that I received in trade from an old space jockey. I lit the pipe and settled back to think over the situation. Again, I noticed a feeling of well being upon me. The feeling reminded me of someone in total satisfaction.

After ten minutes, the communicator broke my train of thought. It was Paul. He told me that the laboratory reports all turned out negative.

“Paul, could you have a finer statistical breakdown of the deaths conducted? I want to know of the two percent of the population that were smokers, what percentages were pipe smokers, cigar smokers, and cigarette.”, I inquired.

“Hang on while I request the numbers!” “OK, of the two percent of smokers, there were 78% that smoked cigarettes. Twenty-two percent smoked cigars. None were pipe smokers. Now, that is interesting!”, Paul commented.

I turned off the communicator. “Interesting, the majority of the deaths were non-smokers, and of the smokers, they were either cigarette or cigar smokers. None of the deaths were from pipe smokers.”

As Nick puffed on his pipe and thought over his classical “three-pipe problem”; he paced around the apartment. He observed that as he walked near the Tex-mebe coating on the wall, it blurred and cleared as he walked close, and then backed away from the wall. It reminded him of placing a magnet near and away from a video communicator screen.

Immediately, Nick reached for his pocket communicator. He called the communications division, and waited.

-3-

Five minutes passed.

Ten minutes passed.

His communicator rang. The voice on the other line spoke one word “DONE”. He left immediately for Paul Oom’s rooms. He knew the door would be locked, so he kicked down the door, ran inside, and found a bare walled room. Paul was in his chair covered by a slime-like layer or outer skin of many colors, gasping for air.

He quickly set off a smoke bomb in the room and remembered happy, joyous thoughts. He thought of the day Emperor Leopaldo decorated him and presented him with his gift pipe from Old Earth. The layer of slime rolled off Paul, slithered to the walls and ran back up them and covered the ceiling. The room took on a uniform hue of blue.

Paul caught his breath.

“Sorry old friend, but I had to have Proof!”

“What do you mean, Nick?”

“Well, actually, it is quite simple. All of the deaths were suffocations. We also noted that while predominantly among non-smokers, some of the deaths were to cigarette and cigar smokers, and none to pipe smokers. You also told me that the Tex-mebe had some psycho-telepathic abilities. That is, in some way it reads your thoughts or senses your emotions and it reflects them by selecting a suitable hue or color to display.”

“Let me tell you what I have observed.” Nick continued.

“I observed that the Tex-mebe respond directly to smoke. Smoke contains Carbon Monoxide. There is no detectable carbon monoxide in the atmosphere. The Tex-mebe enjoys it, which is why they enhance your perception of emotional well being when you smoke. This turns out to be a positive factor for smokers, and a negative factor for non-smokers.”

“Secondly, the Tex-mebe are telepathic or capable of reading or sensing emotions. They sense the host’s emotional state.”

I am sorry for the trick I pulled on you but let me explain. You were in your room. You received a message from communications to the effect that your daughter perished in a commercial transport accident. You were not smoking; however, you felt great depression and despair. Let me assure, your daughter, Christiana, is fine.”

Nick continued, “The Tex-mebe was not being exposed to any pipe smoke, but was being overloaded by your emotional distress. It essentially collapsed off the wall on to you and you started suffocating. I entered the room, and drove it off using a combination of carbon monoxide from the smoke bomb, and what were good thoughts on my behalf. Let me assure you, everything that happened is a natural reaction for the Tex-mebe, and was not planned nor on purpose.”

Nick observed, “I think we now know enough to prevent this from happening again. Since the atmosphere of Chrisongas has no free carbon monoxide, we put a tiny carbon monoxide generator in each location that has a Tex-mebe. Second, we contact the Emperor’s research group to develop a body worn screen that either projects only positive emotional vibrations, or blocks the projection of anything of a depression or

negative vibes. The threshold will be low enough so that the Tex-mebe can still be phototropic. These units will have to be used by non-smokers.”

“Another solution would be implementation of a program to encourage smoking by the population, but I don’t believe this solution would be politically correct”

I guess the least favored solution to the problem would be to end the use of the Tex-mebe, however, I understand this would not be economically feasible.”

Paul asked, “But why were the pipe smokers not affected?”

Nick responded “Have you ever met a depressed pipe smoker?” He winked, and left the room to continue his well-deserved vacation.

END