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DEATH OF A MUTANT

by CHARLES V. De VET

illustrated by EMSH

He was born with strange and wonderful powers. But the world was not yet ready to accept the benefit of those powers. — The world kills what it does not understand!

THE boy stood on the low hill with his head tipped back and his throat exposed to the early morning chill. He was dressed in faded trousers—from which most of the tan coloring had long since been washed away—and a coarse blue-denim work shirt.

The wind swept his blond hair back in loose flat waves, and with soft insistence tugged at his slack-limbed body. He spread his legs wide, and breathed the morning air deep into his lungs. When he expelled the breath his shoulders relaxed, and his arms dropped to his sides, without strength.

Slowly, with an effort of will, he brought his attention back to his surroundings. Be-

low him a dog began an excited barking. The barking changed abruptly to a yelp, and stopped.

The boy straightened and drew back a step. Down below a figure darted suddenly from a low patch of brush and ran to another, kicking up splashes of red sand. To his right a man's voice sounded a sharp cry of warning.

The boy shivered. Somewhere below him a bird repeated, monotonously, a brief ripple of song.

After a few minutes a block-chested man stepped into view. His shoulders were hunched in a black leather jacket. He looked apprehensively up at the boy. When nothing hap-

pened, he called, "I'm coming up. Keep your hands in plain sight." He started up the hill, measuring his steps purposefully. Once he paused and pulled at his broad-brimmed hat, then came on resolutely.

There was a day's growth of whiskers on the man's chin and jowls, and despite the cold a shiny film of perspiration glistened on his cheeks. He drew a pistol from a chest holster as he approached.

Two paces away, the man halted. "I'm Sheriff Derwin," he said in a stilted, unnatural voice. "I'm placing you under arrest. Do not resist. We have you surrounded."

The boy made no reply, but continued to watch the man, blinking several times, as though considering what had been said. After a minute he spread his hands wide in a weary motion of acquiescence.

"Good." Derwin gestured. Three men left their places in the brush and began to move cautiously up the hill.

"I'll have to search him," Derwin said over his shoulder. His voice was too loud in the morning air. "Keep him covered. Remember, he's a killer."

He holstered his own gun and moved unwillingly closer to the boy. "Raise your hands."

The boy did as he was told; Derwin patted him quickly about the chest and hips.

The examination was only barely adequate. "When we take him in," Derwin said, "careful not to get too near him. He can kill you, just with his hands. Stay out of reach."

Derwin put his prisoner in one of the three cells in White Bear Lake's jail. The boy offered no resistance. He stood with his head resting wearily against one of the steel bars and watched without apparent interest as his cell door was locked. But when Derwin made as though to leave, he straightened and his features livened. His expression became one not quite of pleading, and not quite a question; but rather of hopeful expectation—as though he had some deep need which he expected Derwin to recognize.

The sheriff stood for a minute, meeting the boy's intent gaze, then shrugged and went on toward his office. He limped a little. An old knee cap injury

had been aggravated by his chase of the boy, and now it was swollen and stiff.

THE boy was lying on the floor of his cell asleep when the sheriff came back with a platter of food. Derwin unlocked the door quietly, brought the food in and set it on a table in one corner of the cell. As quietly, he let himself out again. Standing in the corridor, with the locked door again between them, he called, "Wake up!"

The boy's body did not move, but his eyes opened wide. With their instant awareness they were like the eyes of a big cat in a zoo, but without the cat's easy hatred. "Your dinner's on the table," Derwin said.

The boy rose swiftly to his feet and looked around him. He saw the food, went over and began eating. He used his hands, eating the meat first, in great wolfing bites. When the meat was gone he ate the potatoes. He tasted the moist cabbage salad, but did not eat it.

Derwin watched him for the few minutes it took. "I guess they never taught you to use

a knife and fork," he murmured, half to himself.

The boy came to the cell door and grasped the bars in his big hands. He looked at Derwin, and his expression was the same expectant one that had been so disturbing earlier.

The sheriff had stepped back, out of reach, as the boy approached. "Did you want something?" he asked.

The boy made no reply.

"Can you understand what I say?" Derwin asked.

After a brief, puzzled pause the boy nodded.

"You can?" Derwin asked doubtfully. "I know you mutants had some way of communicating with each other, without speaking, but I thought the profs at the University decided you couldn't understand us." He seemed to make a sudden decision. "I'll be right back," he said.

Derwin returned to his office and picked up his desk chair, carried it to the corridor opposite the boy's cell and sat down. "If you do understand what I say, maybe we can have some kind of confab.

Can you speak?"

The boy made no reply.

"No, I guess you can't," Derwin said. "Or they'd have found out about it before this."

He considered a moment. "How about us setting up some kind of code," he suggested. "I'll ask questions, and you nod if I'm right, and shake your head if I'm wrong?"

The boy made no answer except for his continued expectant gaze.

Derwin shrugged. "O. K. If you can't, you can't. The profs had a theory that you couldn't understand what they said, but that you got some of the meaning of the words from the sound and the inflections."

Still there was no response.

"**M**AYBE you can read my mind?" Derwin waited a moment. "You're a strange one, whatever the answers might be. When you eight mutants were found in the lost islands area of the Lake of the Woods the doctor who had brought you there—evidently when you were very young—had been dead for years. He had been a famous genetics specialist, and had probably cared for you from birth. The

profs even believe he must have influenced your development before birth. Anyway, there was no doubt that you were all geniuses of a high order. But there was a screw loose somewhere. When you were brought to the University of Minnesota you soon turned into a pack of murderers.

"And you were brilliant enough to get by with it for months before the authorities learned what you were doing. The other seven were killed, either fighting or trying to get away. You're the last one left now. Wouldn't you like to make your peace—before it's too late for you, to?"

There was no suggestion of truculence or stubbornness in the boy's lack of response. It was as though Derwin's statements had not merited answers, or that the answers had been too obvious to need saying.

Derwin leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. "All right," he said. "If you aren't interested in that, let's get back to your immediate problem. You know what you were arrested for?" He did not wait for an

answer. "You're accused of killing at least thirty people," he said. "And they have plenty of proof—enough to hang you. I'd say your only defense would be that you didn't know what you were doing."

Derwin made an impatient motion to rise. "Oh, there's no use going on," he said. "Either you can't understand me, or you know all this already."

Abruptly the boy was nodding his head: nodding it vigorously.

Derwin remained sitting. "Why are you doing that?" he asked.

The boy blinked his eyes, pressing the lids tightly together, and opened them again.

"What's that mean? Do you want help of some kind?" Derwin paused. "I'd like to do what I can, but if you don't tell me, or show me—how can I help you? If you have any way of communicating, use it now, or we'll never get anywhere."

The boy's forehead creased with lines of effort. His mouth opened—but no sound came out.

Derwin ran his fingers along the stubble of his jaw line. "I

suppose if the pros and psychiatrists at the U couldn't find a way to talk with you, I can't. I understand when they couldn't learn how you mutants read minds—or even if you did—they tried to teach you to speak, and to live like human beings. You couldn't, or wouldn't, learn either. You wouldn't work, and nothing seemed to interest you. Until toward the end you turned surly, and scratched and even bit people who annoyed you."

Derwin paused again. "Have I touched on what's troubling you yet?"

The boy moistened his lips and nodded, his face eager.

With a puzzled shake of his head Derwin tried again. "All right. The first person your group killed, I've read, might have been the doctor who raised you. Though personally I don't believe that. But there's no doubt that you did kill others."

Derwin frowned. A smile had come to the boy's face as he listened—as though he were recalling something pleasant.

The sheriff cocked his head to one side and shifted his po-

sition. He spoke with less enthusiasm now. "After the others were killed, they lost all trace of you until the day you visited Anchor Hospital in St. Paul. The attendants there didn't recognize you, and assumed you were just another visitor. But when you left, twenty-seven patients were dead!"

A small shiver ran through the muscles of Derwin's back. The smile had returned to the boy's pink cheeks; a smile almost of delight.

Derwin leaned forward, making no effort to hide his annoyance as he spoke. "You'll hang for those killings!" he said. "We still don't know how you do it, but the other patients in some of those wards saw you put your hands on the people who died, and saw them go limp. They didn't realize at the time that you had killed them."

The smile on the boy's face was as tranquil as the smile of a cherub.

A flow of angry blood crept into Derwin's face. "Just in case they can't pin any of those murders on you," he said, "we sure as hell can con-

vict you of the three here in White Bear Lake." Derwin pulled himself to his feet. "I'll do my best to see that you hang for them," he said deliberately. His voice was low and flat. He limped away, dragging his chair at his side.

The boy's expression of urgent request changed to one of reproach when he realized that Derwin was leaving; disappointment showed bleakly on his face. It was as though he had expected something more from Derwin.

THE next morning Derwin drove in the last car in a funeral procession and waited at the fringe of the crowd as the coffin was lowered into the ground. The deceased had been the last victim of the boy killer.

The mourners filed out quickly after the services, and Derwin found no opportunity, that would not have involved an awkward intrusion, to talk with any of them. However, as he walked slowly back to his car, a young man of about twenty-five drove up in an old automobile and parked at the edge of the grave. He got out

from behind the wheel of the vehicle and went around to the back. From the trunk he removed a shovel and carried it to the grave. He nodded to the sheriff and began pushing dirt from the edge into the hole.

Derwin strolled over and stood across the open grave from the shoveler. Neither spoke until the young man stopped to wipe his forehead. "You're the sheriff, aren't you?" he asked Derwin.

Derwin nodded.

"I understand you think that the wild boy killed Carl?" The young man inclined his head toward the grave.

"Was Carl his first name?" Derwin answered noncommittally.

"Yes. Carl van Sistine. He was a good friend of mine. When we were kids we used to play here, right in this graveyard. We hunted rabbits with sling shots. I don't remember that we ever killed any. We were always going to make a fire and roast the rabbits we shot, but as I said, we never got any."

Derwin waited.

"The wild boy didn't kill him."

"What makes you think not?" Derwin asked. "No one saw him do it, but two witnesses did see him run out of the house, and they found Carl dead right after."

"I know that." The young man rolled his shirt sleeves up over hairy forearms. "But did you know that Carl had something wrong with his head—a tumor or something? He'd had it ever since he was a little boy. Sometimes we'd be playing and all at once he'd stop dead still. If there was a chair, or anything that moved around, he'd grab it and holler for me to hold onto the other end. I'd hold it and he'd pull, until he couldn't hang on anymore. Then he'd fall over backwards. He'd lay there with his eyes rolled back until all I could see were the whites. His face would be pale, and screwed-up looking, and sweat would come out all over his body. His clothes would be wet with it. All the time he'd be groaning and crying."

The young man took off his striped workman's cap and ran his fingers through wavy brown hair. "The last few years he couldn't leave the

house. I used to visit him at first, but at last he didn't even recognize me. And when his attacks came on he'd holler with pain, and finally I couldn't stand to hear him anymore. That's what he died from—the tumor in his head—and not the wild boy killing him."

"The doctors said it shouldn't have killed him—yet," Derwin demurred.

"I know. But the doctors were wrong." The young man began shoveling dirt into the hole again.

THE sun was directly overhead when Derwin climbed out of his car, pushing his game leg stiffly ahead of him. He went up the flight of steps at the front of a large, white house and pressed the button beside the door. He rang three times without an answer.

On the way back down the steps he heard the sound of iron on iron coming from the back of the house. He walked around and found an old man with stooped shoulders throwing horseshoes at a peg set in the ground.

"Good afternoon," Derwin said.

The old man paused in his throwing and nodded in reply.

"I'd like to talk to you again about your sister's death," Derwin said. "I presume you heard that we caught her killer?"

The old man sighted a shoe carefully and threw at a farther peg.

"Will you tell me again just what happened?" Derwin asked.

"I was sitting with her when he came in." The old man had a red face and neck, with a border of white just above the collar line. "He hadn't knocked. At least I didn't hear him. Just all at once he was standing by the bed, smiling. I was going to say something, but he looked at my sister, then at me, and he seemed so young, and kind of fresh-looking, that I just smiled back. Then he sat on the bed alongside Louise, and put his hand on her chest, and she closed her eyes, and her moaning stopped—for the first time in almost a week. I didn't know until after he'd gone that she was dead."

"How did it happen you didn't report her death to my

office? We only learned about it from the doctor."

The old man's attention seemed absorbed by something on the roof of a neighboring house. He stood for several minutes, then slowly looked down at his hand in mild surprise. He had been gripping, and twisting an iron shoe in his hand so hard that a corner had cut a ragged gash in the meaty forepart of his thumb. Blood flowed from the cut down the end of the shoe and dripped sluggishly to the ground.

Irritably the old man tossed the shoe aside and took a handkerchief from a rear pocket of his trousers and wrapped it around the injured thumb. "I was glad she died," he said half-defiantly.

Derwin's eyebrows raised questioningly.

"That may sound heartless." The old man's voice was mild now. "But it isn't. My sister had cancer—had it bad. She was dying from it. And she was suffering horribly. Even drugs gave her no relief toward the last. During her periods of consciousness she begged the doctor to give her

something so she could die, but he wouldn't. I asked him to put her out of her misery, too. But he wouldn't listen to me either.

"Mr. Derwin..." The old man brought his face closer to Derwin's. "Every human being should have the right to die. When the time comes that medicine can't help them any more, and they have nothing to look forward to, except suffering, they should be allowed to die if they want to." Abruptly he turned his back and walked into the house.

DUSK was edging into darkness when Derwin reached the home of the boy's third victim. The family lived in an upper duplex apartment. A large wreath hung on the apartment door. The woman who answered his knock was middle-aged, with dark hair and dark eyes, and quick, nervous hands. "Come in," she invited listlessly, as she recognized the sheriff.

Derwin followed her to a chair in the front room and sat down. "Can you give me any details of your husband's death that you might not have

remembered when I was here before?" he asked.

"You've got to see that that maniac pays for his killings," the woman spoke rapidly, excitedly, ignoring the sheriff's question. "If you don't, I'll..." Her voice broke and she began to cry. After a few minutes she wiped her eyes with a square of tissue which she took from her apron pocket. "I'm all right now," she said. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything you remember. You might tell me first what time of day it happened."

"About the same time in the evening as now," the woman answered. "We had already finished eating. George was lying here on the davenport and I..."

"Pardon me a minute," Derwin interrupted. "How ill was your husband?"

"He was too sick to work, though he could still get around a little. He had silicosis of the lungs, you know."

Derwin nodded. "Go on, please."

The woman needed no urging. Apparently she enjoyed talking. "Where was I? Oh,

yes. I heard something scratching at the door—it sounded like a cat—and I went to see what it was. The boy was standing there, smiling. I didn't know who he was then. He looked so young, and so sweet-like, that I didn't ask what he wanted; I just let him come in.

"When George saw him I thought, at first, that he knew him, because he sat up straight and spoke to the boy. He said something like, 'So you've come?' He looked glad, as though he was happy. Then he changed and looked scared. But he didn't say anything more, and neither did the boy. Finally he sort of relaxed, and sighed, and let himself ease back on the davenport. He asked me to make a pot of coffee, and I left and went into the kitchen."

The woman stopped and blew her nose. "That's all, except that the boy was gone when I came back—and George was dead."

Derwin looked down at the hat on his lap and searched for a way to express what he wanted to say. At last he looked up. "Some people be-

lieve the mutants killed only people who were very sick—people who had no chance to live a n y w a y, and probably wanted to die quickly?” His voice rose doubtfully as he finished.

“That’s not true.” There was no expression in the woman’s flat voice. “I read where they killed some that weren’t sick at all. And how would they know how sick the others were? Or if they wanted to die?”

“How about your husband?”

“George did suffer quite a bit. But I’m certain he never wanted to die.”

“Was there any chance that he might have recovered from his particular illness?”

“The doctors said not, but what right did that boy have to play God and kill him? And how do any of us know that there won’t be a new treatment or a new drug discovered, maybe next week or next month, that could have saved George?

What justification can you have for a cold-blooded murderer like that?”

Derwin looked down again

at his hat and shifted his feet uncomfortably.

The woman said, “George had a pension that supported us. But it stopped when he died. How am I going to live now? Who’s going to support my children—or take care of them while I work?” There was still no emotion in the woman’s voice, but tears which she disregarded ran down her cheeks.

Derwin stood up. “I don’t know,” he said. “I was just wondering if what seems wrong to us might not seem right to him,” he apologized.

THE next morning Derwin stopped in at a store on Mahtomedi Avenue and bought a pair of trousers, a shirt, a set of underwear, and a pair of socks. Two doors down he stopped in at another store and bought a pair of shoes.

He drove to the jail and shoved the clothing through the bars to the boy. “Here’s something better for you to wear,” he said and walked on to his office.

The boy carried his bundle to the rear of the cell and began changing. He was button-

ing his shirt when he glanced through the small barred window in the wall and saw Derwin crossing the street toward a corner lunch room. A flush of excitement appeared on his cheeks and he finished dressing hurriedly.

Moving to the front of the cell he spread out his right hand and flexed the fingers several times. His face assumed an expression of deep abstraction.

A faint haze began to waver along the edges of the hand, and its flesh appeared to move in small ripples. The boy pressed the hand against the door lock—and it passed through the metal. The lock gave a muted metallic click. The door swung open.

The boy's hand returned to its normal appearance as he withdrew it, but it hung limp and pale. He massaged it vigorously as he stepped out into the jail corridor. He was careful not to let himself be seen when he left the jail.

An hour later he had left White Bear Lake.

When Derwin returned to the jail and found the boy gone he was not much sur-

prised. He walked slowly to his office and picked up the phone. "Let me speak to the sheriff," he said. . . . "Gibbons?" . . . "This is Derwin, out at White Bear Lake." . . . "Fine." . . . "The wild boy escaped about an hour ago. He's sprung his cell lock somehow." . . . "No, I don't know which way he went, but I figured he might head back to St. Paul." . . .

"O. K." . . . "I wish you'd do me a favor. Ask your men—and the police—not to shoot him. I'm sure he won't resist when you arrest him." . . . "I know." . . . "I know." He sighed. "That's right. You have to do what you think best." He hung up.

THE boy went directly from the jail to the railroad tracks, nearly a mile past the depot. He hid in the weeds along the track until a slow freight passed, then climbed into the open door of a boxcar.

The string of freight cars was cut out of the train in the St. Paul yards. The boy stayed inside his car until several hours after dark, when he left his hiding place and went

along the Mississippi, past Carlson's Landing, and up to the post office. There he stopped and seemed to be deciding what he should do next.

A half block away a policeman was checking the tires of parked cars. The boy saw him and began walking rapidly in the opposite direction. He hesitated at the street corner, then walked boldly out into the lighted area of the intersection. He had nearly reached the opposite sidewalk when he heard a shout behind him. He began to run. A police whistle sounded shrilly.

WHEN the boy entered the park he appeared to wander casually, with his interest centered on no particular person or place, but his steps took him down a diagonal walk that led to the young mother and the carriage. The child of about six inside the carriage had a large head that wobbled spasmodically above its thin frame.

The boy walked past the mother without attracting her attention, and bent toward the child.

A terrified scream at his side jerked him erect.

"The beast!" The woman screamed with all the power in her lungs. She sprang at the boy, still screaming, and dug clawed fingers into his cheeks. "Get away from him, you beast! You horrible beast!"

Fear blossomed up into the boy's face at the woman's scream. He pushed her aside and glared wildly about him.

The nearest exit from the park was just ahead. Swiftly he put his head down and scurried through the exit. Once in the street he increased his speed and ran for six blocks, past the auditorium, and across Seven Corners, until the breath whistled in his throat. As he staggered to a stop a police siren sounded behind him.

The boy forced his tired legs to move again and sprinted down an alley that opened to his left. Halfway through the alley he heard the screech of tires behind him—and the police siren was at his back. He came to a low fence bordering the alley, between an apartment building and an older, private, home. Without pausing he rested a hand on the

fence railing and vaulted over.

Beneath him as he hung suspended he saw a child's large sand box. His right foot, with his weight behind it, landed on the handle of a toy wagon, and his ankle twisted painfully under him. He sprawled forward, ripping the skin of his forearm on the side of the sand box as he fell.

As quickly as he was able he pulled himself to his feet and limped across the yard, past the small house, and out into the street. The police siren still sounded behind him, and now another started up in the block ahead.

He turned to the right and ran with all the speed he could command. A block ahead loomed the Mississippi. With his last remaining strength he stumbled toward it.

A police car arrived just as he dived into the murky water.

Two policemen scrambled

from the car and ran toward the river bank. Sergeant Robert Kirk pulled his pistol from its holster as the boy's head reappeared above the water.

"Halt!" he shouted. "Halt or I'll shoot!"

The boy never paused.

Kirk brought the gun up and sighted along the barrel. The boy's head came in line with the small v of the sight. "For the last time, halt!"

The boy's head turned up. His wet blond hair shone in the sunlight. Kirk squeezed the trigger.

Simultaneously with the report, the boy's hair sprang upward in startled protest; his arms gave one reflective jerk, and his face turned toward the sky.

Slowly, slowly, the white features sank beneath the water.

THE END
