

A MURDER IN MONTREUX

BY MICHAEL ALLAN MALLORY

Inspector Graf struggled to focus on the body. It was too early in the day to look at dead people. Luckily, for the moment his job was to stay out of the way of the forensic photographer who circled around the man on the beach. Graf let his gaze wander beyond the crime scene to the picturesque waters of Lake Geneva and the snow-capped French Alps on the other side. It was a much more uplifting sight.

Movement drew his attention back to the beach. An energetic man with a pointed chin had disengaged from the cluster of police and was walking toward him. Dressed in the same blue and navy of the Montreux Gendarmerie, Officer Durig marched across the sand to join Graf. A little too fresh-faced and eager for the inspector, Durig jutted his chin toward a distinguished figure in a gray suit approaching from the *Quai des Fleur*, the lakeside promenade of flowers.

“Is that him?” Durig asked.

Graf nodded. “That’s him.”

Detective Chief Inspector Alec Blanchard, the most well-known and respected member of the Geneva Cantonal Police, made his way down the steps to the small spit of beach.

Graf made introductions to the grinning young officer. “Durig was the first on the scene,” he added afterward.

“An honor to meet you, sir.” Durig pumped the chief inspector’s arm as if he were drawing water from a well. It was all Graf could do to keep from kicking the overzealous officer in the rear. It pleased Graf to notice a hint of bemusement tugging at the corner of Blanchard’s lips. The chief was a good sport and was known for taking a genuine interest in all members of his team.

After a few questions about Durig's time on the job, Blanchard turned toward the crime scene.

"What do we have?" he asked in a voice as smooth as cream.

Graf summarized. "Deceased white male. Aged sixty. Name's Michel Dafflon, a local fruit merchant. Shot through the heart. Robbery does not appear to be a motive. He had fifty Swiss francs in his pocket."

"Who found the body?"

With a nod Graf indicated a young woman sitting on a wooden bench by the walkway of flowers, the alpine cityscape of Montreux looming behind her in the distance.

"The American woman?" Blanchard said without missing a beat.

"Yes." Graf nodded. The chief knew she was American the same way he did, from her neon green tank top and beet red Nike athletic shoes. Americans did tend to stick out like the proverbial sore thumb in Europe. "Her name is Cindy Johnson," Graf went on. "She's on holiday. She was out walking this morning when she found the body."

Blanchard turned to Durig. "Did she see anything?"

The officer seemed startled at being addressed directly by the chief inspector when Graf, his superior, stood right there. He recovered quickly, snapping to attention. "Mrs. Johnson didn't see anything or anyone," Durig reported. "The beach was empty by the time she got here."

"Which was when?"

"Seven forty." Durig stood proud as if he'd just given the correct answer to a pop quiz.

Too eager to please, Graf decided, a go getter. A little too ambitious for Graf to deal with before lunch.

Durig waited for the next question. It didn't come. Blanchard whirled about to examine the beach. The photographer was gone and the other officers stood along the perimeter. He made a wide circle around the body, stepping carefully to avoid disturbing the multiple sets of footprints in the sand. He stopped to view the murder victim. Dressed in navy pajamas and slippers, he had the rough cheeks of a hard working man who had little time to

care for himself. A Gallic nose rose prominently above a brush mustache. Blanchard straightened suddenly at a realization. "I know this man. What did you say his name was?"

"Michel Dafflon, a fruit seller," Graf said.

"Yes, that's it." Blanchard's gaze shifted to the *Quai des Fleur*, beyond the orange and yellow poppies, colorful tulips and daisies to the storefronts on the other side of the walkway. His eyes narrowed on a whitewashed building with a green awning. "I've been to his shop. Sorry, the name didn't register earlier. I'm still waking up. Didn't sleep well last night." The chief swung round to appraise the dead man once more, then extended an arm toward a fuzzy walnut-like object coated in sand near the body. "That probably explains this."

"What is it?" Durig couldn't quite make it out.

Blanchard stared at the object. "A plum pit. Fresh. Hasn't been here long. A few hours. Possibly left by the killer."

"We'll bag it. And we'll take dental stone casts of the footprints."

The chief grunted approval. "The damp sand is ideal."

"Agreed. A few of the impressions are near perfect. You can see Dafflon's tracks paralleling the other set in front of his, the killer's. The footprints turned to face Dafflon. Probably when the suspect shot him. Our American friend's tracks got close but she had the presence of mind to keep her distance."

"Good thinking."

"The other set belongs to Officer Durig."

The young officer blanched. "I had to see if Dafflon was alive or dead," he said defensively.

Graf shot him a censorious look for interrupting.

Blanchard squatted on his haunches to inspect the footprints. "The killer was barefoot. And missing a toe," he said surprised.

Graf had wondered if the chief would notice that detail. He shouldn't have doubted him. The chief inspector didn't miss much. Studying one footprint in particular, his expression grew more and more disturbed. Over the years Graf had learned much from his mentor, how to listen for the meaning behind the spoken word and to not take anything for granted. Among the Swiss police,

Blanchard was renowned for his passion for getting at the truth, and his doggedness at sifting through minutia for the one meaningful element that could turn a case around. For that reason Graf was not surprised to see the chief transfixed by a sandy footprint, though he did seem to linger on it longer than expected.

After a dozen seconds, Durig leaned closer to Graf. “What’s he doing?”

Graf shrugged. He didn’t know and it bothered him that he didn’t know. What had the chief seen he hadn’t?

Finally, Blanchard rose to his full height, brushing off the sand from the bottom edge of his suit coat. “I’ll want to see those footprint casts.”

“Right.” Graf nodded.

“Anything else?” Blanchard looked between the two men.

“Dafflon’s shop.”

With one graceful sweep of his arm, Blanchard motioned for Graf to lead the way.

The interior of Dafflon’s shop was an array of neat rows of green plastic fruit racks tilted on wooden stands. The three policemen stood in an aisle in the center of the store surrounded by strawberries, pears, pomegranates, mangoes, and a host of other succulent delights.

Graf said, “There was a break in. Durig located the source of the intrusion. He can explain.” The inspector could have finished the summary but he knew the chief liked to get his information firsthand whenever possible.

Once again all eyes trained on the young officer, who looked slightly unnerved at being under the spotlight. Durig cleared his throat and straightened his tunic. “There’s a broken window in the back. As far as we can tell nothing valuable was taken. No cash. Nothing was vandalized. It seems the only thing disturbed was this rack.”

The rack in question was beside them. Unlike the neat rows of fruit in the adjacent racks, the contents here were in disarray.

“There’s also this,” Durig added, pointing to a purple object under the stand, which stood out like a blight against the otherwise immaculate floor.

“*Plums*,” Blanchard said in an undertone. “The intruder stole plums.” He considered the fruit silently for a moment before continuing. “They’re a favorite of mine, plums. My wife used to make a wonderful *Zwetschgenkuchen*.”

Graf also enjoyed the plum tart; yet its key ingredient seemed a bizarre motive for burglary, let alone murder. “You see how peculiar the crime is, sir. Nothing of value was taken. The thief, it seems, broke in to steal fruit.” He shook his head. Graf had few expectations of the Universe, though he did expect it to make sense. He suspected the chief felt the same as Blanchard contemplated the rack of plums with a taciturn expression.

Graf felt it prudent to interrupt. “The proprietor lived upstairs. Most likely Dafflon heard something and came down to investigate. By then the intruder had left by the front door and was headed to the beach. Dafflon followed and confronted him.”

“Seems probable,” the chief agreed.

“We’re certain that’s what happened.”

“You seem very confident.”

“We have a witness.”

“A witness?”

“A kind of witness,” Graf equivocated. “An old man who lives in the apartment next door. Hard to explain. He’s waiting outside.”

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The sun had risen above the Alpine peaks by the time they stepped outside. A tourist boat from Geneva was cruising on the lake, a large red and white Swiss flag waving from the stern mast. On the walkway of flowers, the three policemen stood by an elderly man with a stooped posture. His gangly frame was clad in simple clothes of gray and white. Wispy hair fluttered in the light breeze as ancient, uncertain eyes regarded them from behind thick spectacles.

Inspector Graf got the old man’s attention. “Monsieur Lecomte, this is Chief Inspector Blanchard. He’s in charge of the investigation.”

“*Bonjour*,” the chief greeted pleasantly.

“Bonjour,” the old man said in a voice as dry as dust.

Graf spoke his next words with care. “Monsieur Lecomte, would you tell the chief what you told Officer Durig?”

“Everything?” Wispy eyebrows rose incredulously.

“Just the part after you heard the disturbance, after it awakened you.”

“I can do that.”

Except he didn’t. An awkward silence followed in which the old man smiled blankly at the others. In the end, Graf felt compelled to move things along.

“You heard shouting.” Graf rotated his hand to fan the witness’s memory.

“I did,” Lecomte agreed. “It came from outside, on the promenade. A loud and angry voice. It woke me out of a sound sleep. My apartment is there.” He extended a bony finger toward a row of windows on the upper level of the building behind them. “My bed is near that first window.”

“The shouting woke you,” Graf reminded, hoping to keep the aged witness talking before he ran out of energy or forgot what he was going to say. “What happened next?”

“I sat up and put on my spectacles. Can’t see a thing without them.”

Another lengthy pause.

“And then?” Graf coaxed with a hint of impatience.

“What d’you expect? I went to the window to see who was making all the noise. It was Dafflon. He was shouting at someone on the beach.”

“You knew M. Dafflon?” Chief Inspector Blanchard interjected.

“*Oui.* I was a regular customer. It was definitely his voice. No doubt about it.”

“Did you see his face?”

“I didn’t. But it was Dafflon.”

“What time was this?”

“Two thirty.”

“What happened next?”

“Dafflon shouted at the man.”

“Did you hear what he said?”

The old man shook his head. "My hearing isn't what it used to be. I couldn't make out the words. Dafflon was angry, that's all I know. The man on the beach ignored him, which made him angrier. He ran down after him."

Blanchard asked pointedly. "This other man, did you get a good look at him?"

"*Non*. It was dark and he was too far away."

"Of course. Are there any general impressions you have that might help our investigation?"

Lecomte's mouth twisted as he dredged the depths of his memory. "There was something familiar about him. Can't say what exactly." Rheumy eyes narrowed behind the spectacles onto Durig. "Come to think of it, the other person reminded me of this young man."

Blanchard and Graf turned toward the startled officer.

"Me?" Durig blinked. "You must be mistaken! You're so nearsighted. How could you tell in the dark?"

Durig went silent when Blanchard touched his arm. "Monsieur Lecomte," the chief addressed the witness, "as my officer points out it was dark. You had a very brief look at the man from your window. Why do you think Officer Durig reminds you of him?"

Lecomte adjusted his glasses, studying Durig up and down. "Nothing in particular. He just looks familiar."

Durig threw up his hands. "Maybe I look familiar because I patrol this neighborhood. You've probably seen me a dozen times."

The old man gave an indifferent shrug.

"What about the shooting?" Blanchard pressed.

Graf braced himself. He knew what was coming but wasn't going to forewarn the chief.

"Shooting?" Lecomte pooh-poohed. "I saw no shooting."

"You didn't?"

Graf leaned in and spoke softly in Blanchard's ear. "Monsieur Lecomte went to the bathroom."

"The bathroom?"

The elderly witness heard the comment and nodded. “*Oui*. After the shouting stopped, I saw Dafflon run after the man on the beach. I lost interest and went to the bathroom, then to bed.”

“So you missed the actual shooting entirely.” Blanchard cracked a smile.

The old man grinned back at the chief’s kind face. The chief had an ingratiating manner that disarmed people. It was a trait Graf tried to emulate but while it came naturally for the chief, his second-in-command struggled at it.

“Thank you for your time, Monsieur Lecomte,” Blanchard said, bringing the interview to a close. The witness bobbed his head and trundled along the *Quai des Fleur*, where he blended in with the tourists.

Blanchard looked to Graf. “What about Dafflon’s family?”

“He was married. His wife’s away in Schaffhausen visiting her sister. I’ve already sent a message to her. I’ll follow up to see if she can tell us anything.”

“She was away last night then?”

“For the last two days.”

Blanchard nodded. “Good work, both of you.” He sighed heavily. “Go back to the team. I’ll join you in a little while.”

A short time later, while supervising the crime scene team, Inspector Graf looked back at the walkway of flowers. Tourists and locals strolled along the floral promenade, taking in the mountains and cityscape, some curious at the police presence on the beach below. The chief stood at a scenic overlook, his hands resting on the metal guard railing, gazing across the tranquil turquoise waters, lost in thought. Graf could only wonder what was on Blanchard’s mind. Graf had seen that faraway look before. Except this time it was different. The chief looked troubled. Was it something in the evidence? Graf’s eyes narrowed. What had Blanchard seen that he hadn’t?

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Graf returned to the station the next afternoon, weary from a long day working on two other cases that had taken him to Lausanne and around Geneva. He’d barely walked to his desk when he saw

the note from Blanchard, a simple missive written in the chief's fluid hand: *Please see me at your earliest convenience.*

Graf wasted no time. He didn't even bother to hang up his coat, instead tossing it across the seat of his chair.

Blanchard's office was a tidy space of orderly file cabinets, neatly stacked papers and pencil holders, all in proper alignment. The chief inspector sat behind his desk, engrossed in filling out a report. On the wall behind him was a large poster of the Grand Canyon, which always amused Graf. They worked in the shadow of the French Alps. Perhaps their constant proximity had inured the chief inspector to their grandeur, for his choice of art was a massive hole in the earth, the antithesis of mountains. A conscious choice? The juxtaposition was noteworthy. Graf wondered if the contrast satisfied Blanchard's need for balance.

The chief was fully absorbed at his task and was unaware of Graf's presence, so he rapped his knuckles against the door jam.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Ah, Laurent, please sit down." Blanchard offered a warm, familiar smile. He waited for his second-in-command to get comfortable, then drew in a heavy breath as one about to take on an unpleasant task. That put Graf's guard up. Something was about to happen.

"I've reviewed the Dafflon evidence," said the chief. "I'm convinced the facts support one and only one conclusion. I've looked at different interpretations but the same answer keeps coming back."

A chill wriggled up Graf's chest. Something was wrong. His eyes locked onto the chief's. "What conclusion?"

Blanchard held Graf's gaze. "I know who killed Dafflon."

"Who?"

The chief's face clouded. "Me."

Graf gaped at him in confusion. "I don't understand."

A somber Blanchard met his eyes, and in those eyes Graf saw bewilderment and anguish.

"Believe me, Laurent, I don't understand myself. But the evidence is clear. I must have shot Michel Dafflon." He leaned forward. "I don't remember doing it, have no recollection of being there, yet it must have been me."

“Sir, there must be some mistake—” Graf protested but was cut off by Blanchard’s raised hand.

“Thank you for your loyalty.” The chief looked back with gratitude. “Please, let me finish. The footprints in the sand, you noticed the killer was missing a toe on his left foot. I’m missing a toe on my left foot. Same toe. Same foot. That’s why I was eager to see the casts of the impressions. I wanted to verify them myself. There is no doubt. Those footprints on the beach are mine.”

The chief sighed. “It does explain something strange I noticed the morning of the murder. I woke up and found grains of sand on the carpet by my front door. It made no sense. Now I know I must have walked out in the middle of the night. To the beach.”

“And you have no memory of this?”

“No.”

“I don’t follow. Like sleepwalking?”

“I think so.”

Graf would have none of it. “It’s a setup, sir. Someone is making it look like you killed Dafflon.”

“Laurent, it was my gun. Ballistics confirmed the bullet that killed Dafflon came from my gun. My footprints. My gun. It was me.”

“How can this be?” Graf stared back, confused.

With a heavy heart, Blanchard elaborated. “When I was a boy, I used to sleepwalk all the time. Not every night but often, several times a month. I’d leave our house and wander the neighborhood and beyond. My parents took me to doctors. They could do nothing. It finally stopped when I went to University. Haven’t done it for twenty years. I thought it’d stopped for good. I guess not....”

Graf waited. In the back of his mind lurked a desperate hope that this was a cruel joke, part of some elaborate scheme to unmask the killer. Blanchard, he realized with heartrending dread, was actually confessing to Dafflon’s murder. Graf slumped in his chair.

“I’ve not been sleeping well,” the chief went on. “I might’ve told you that already. Since Gina-Maria died last year, it’s been a challenge. We were married for twenty-seven years.

The girls are grown and gone. I'm alone. Still adjusting. Perhaps that triggered the sleepwalking again."

"If you say so, sir. Yet, why kill Dafflon? I don't see the connection."

"Plums. It must be the plums."

Graf shook his head uncomprehendingly.

"I love plums," the chief explained. "They may be my favorite fruit. I've been to Dafflon's shop before. I must've had a craving and went there. I broke in. He caught me and I...I killed him." Blanchard shuttered his eyes and breathed a few silent, measured breaths. When his eyes opened again there was a sadness there Graf had never seen. From his drawer, the chief removed his badge and sidearm, placed them on the desk and slid them forward. "You must charge me with murder, Laurent. I've written my statement as best as I can imagine it, since I don't have a direct memory of the crime." He patted the sheet of paper on the desk.

Graf was beside himself. "This is insane. From what you tell me there are mitigating circumstances."

Blanchard's china-blue eyes regarded him with open appreciation. "Perhaps," he said wistfully. "That's for a court to decide. I spent the better part of thirty years bringing killers to justice. Everyone is accountable. Even me. You have to arrest me."

"Sir..."

"You must."

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps the court will show me some mercy."

Graf bowed his head, feeling he'd just lost part of himself. When his eyes came up, the chief was looking around the familiar surroundings one last time.

"I'm ready, Laurent," he said, rallying a supportive smile for the benefit of his number two.

Graf took it to heart. Chief Inspector Blanchard always did the right thing, even now at his worst moment. About to be taken into custody, he displayed remarkable composure and integrity. Graf had a bitter task to perform but he couldn't have been more proud of his mentor.



Michael Allan Mallory is the co-author of two novels featuring mystery's first zoologist sleuth. His short stories have appeared in numerous collections. Most recently, the crime anthology *Cooked to Death: Tales of Crime and Cookery*, for which he served as co-editor, was listed as one of the best books for adults of 2016 by the St. Paul Pioneer Press.