

THE SLAVES OF MADAME ATOMOS

Chapter I

Mrs. Doubrough did not look her age. At 72 she was obviously not a young girl, not even a young lady, but she knew “old ladies” at 65 who were not half the woman she was. It was true that Mrs. Doubrough took great care of her health and her life was calm, with no conflicts, under the watchful authority of a career military man who had passed away a few years earlier. A widow now, Mrs. Doubrough, even though she was deeply saddened, had practically not changed her way of life or her habits. The death of her husband had given her a respectable pension and when the material needs are provided for, everything is a lot easier.

Mrs. Doubrough had simply sublet the second floor of her house to an engineer who was married with three charming kids, and then, feeling a little lonely, she had adopted a cat. A fat, tawny Siamese, majestically calm and as dignified as a bishop. She had fallen completely in love with him. She named him Royal. So, when Royal ran away and could not be found for a whole month, Mrs. Doubrough could not sleep or eat. She spent a small fortune on signs and had given up hope when one Monday night Royal showed up calmly at the door of the house.

Mrs. Doubrough scolded him, picked him up and hugged him. Royal meowed and glanced at the kitchen where his dish used to be. He was fat, looked in good shape and his fur shined rather nicely. She gave him something to eat and went upstairs to tell her tenants the good news. They all fawned over Royal, who let himself be fondled and petted while making faces and then, since it was late, everyone went to bed.

On his cushion Royal looked like a big, fat, happy cat and Mrs. Doubrough fell asleep with a smile on her face.

On Tuesday morning at 7 a.m. the milkman left three bottles of milk at the Doubrough house: one bottle for the widow and her cat and two bottles for the Reynolds and their three children. At 7:15 a deliveryman tossed a newspaper over the gate without getting out of his car. He had had training and the paper fell exactly between two bottles. At 8 a.m. the school bus stopped at the crosswalk and honked its horn. Five children left their houses and ran to the bus. The driver checked his list, noted that the Reynolds were absent, then left.

In our day everyone lives selfishly, so no one worried too much about the curtains drawn over the windows of the Doubrough house. However, this was terribly abnormal. Mrs. Doubrough usually got up early to go jogging and do her stretching exercises in the nearby park before trotting merrily home. It was precisely for this and her attractiveness that people still called her Mrs. instead of Widow Doubrough...

At 9:35 Reynolds' boss called the house to know why he was not at work. Nobody answered his calls. He put on his angry face, swore to bawl out his subordinate and buried himself in work.

There it is: Mrs. Doubrough had not gone jogging, the children had missed their bus and their father had not shown up at work for the first time in ten years and no one gave a damn!

At 6 p.m. the curtains were still drawn, the three bottles of milk and the newspaper were still on the porch and life went on as if it was nothing. Over the course of the day the postman had slipped the mail into the mailbox, a vacuum cleaner salesman had leaned on the doorbell and in the afternoon a classmate of Bob Reynolds had come over at his teacher's request and also tried ringing the bell, but nothing happened until officer Edwards passed by.

He had already walked past the Doubrough house two times in the course of his daily rounds of the neighborhood. The third time, around 7 p.m., it seemed weird to him that the curtains were still closed and that the bottles and newspaper were still not picked up by the widow and her tenants. He went

through the gate, past the lawn and rang the doorbell. He could clearly hear the ringing, so he kept pushing, but in vain. Then he walked around the house while mopping his forehead because the evening was hot and muggy. In the backyard was a small vegetable garden, some gardening tools, a swing and a window that was cracked open. Edwards approached and called out before sneaking a peak through the open slit. The kitchen looked like any other but a strange smell leaked out. Edwards sniffed and thought it smelled like rotting meat or wet cabbage. A second later he changed his mind and would have laid his money on old fish.

Whatever it was, meat, cabbage or fish, Edwards' duty was to investigate because of the open window. If no one was there a prowler could easily enter the house and make off with some of their money or jewelry. He was thinking about exactly what to do when the odor, obviously riding on some unseen draft, gusted into his face. This time Edwards shuddered. After 15 years on the force he could recognize the distinct stench of a corpse.

He turned around, left the yard and hurried to the phone box on the corner.

Twenty minutes later two detectives provided with a warrant crawled into kitchen. On the ground floor they found the widow Doubrough dead in her blood-spattered bed. At first sight it looked like her throat had been cut with some strange weapon which did not so much cut as mangle, like a saw or a cheese grater for example.

On the first floor the policemen discovered the Reynolds family, likewise corpses with gaping throats, but there were bloody paw prints on their beds, on the beige carpet and on the stairway landing.

The detectives called headquarters. First the photographs, then the coroner. The investigation would only start after that.

That very night at 8 p.m. the police knew for a fact that the widow Doubrough and her tenants had been attacked by a wild animal with strong fangs and claws. It might be a small puma or a panther or some other carnivorous wild cat. They also thought that it could be a regular cat because of the bloody prints, but this seemed so unlikely that the hypothesis was quickly set aside.

Moreover, they had to admit that the affair was shrouded in mystery. The animal, if animal it really was, undoubtedly possessed superior intelligence. To kill six people, even while sleeping, with such precision was practically a magic trick. There was no struggle, which was amazing given the fact that the wild cat in question was not powerful enough to kill them with one swipe of its claw or one bite of its fang but rather "gnawed" on the throat of its victims. The word made them shiver, but it was nonetheless true.

Therefore?

While the police asked themselves questions, Margaret Anderson was peeling potatoes in front of the kitchen window. Under the stormy skies you could sweat even while standing still. In their yard Robert Anderson was working hard to mow the lawn. Since his bungalow was the smallest in the neighborhood, the young engineer made it a point of honor to keep it the best maintained. The lawnmower purred merrily along as the grass flew off emitting a heady odor. Robert finished the corner by the fence, turned around and found himself face to face with a fat cat sitting calmly on the lawn. It was a Siamese with huge green eyes that seemed to have materialized out of nowhere in the Anderson's yard.

Robert cut the lawnmower's power, dried his sweaty forehead and said, "What are you doing here, big boy?"

Of course he was not expecting the Siamese to answer. The cat just sat there, but from the kitchen Margaret asked, "Who are you talking to, Robert?"

"We have a visitor. Come and see."

Margaret left her potatoes, went into the yard through the French door in the living room and saw the cat which turned to look at her. Right away she knew that it did not belong to any of the neighbors. Margaret knew all the cats and dogs in the area, but obviously had not the slightest chance of meeting Royal anywhere since he came from far away.

“He doesn’t look like an alley cat,” Robert noted. Margaret leaned over and petted Royal who stretched and started licking his paws. Margaret picked him up and thought he was very heavy but still carried him into the kitchen where she gave him a bowl of milk.

“At least,” Robert said following after them, “he doesn’t look like he’s dying of hunger. He’s as fat as a pig!”

Since the day was waning, he turned on the four lights in the kitchen and scratched Royal’s back before going back outside to put the lawnmower in the shed. Margaret went back to peeling potatoes while keeping a lazy eye on the Siamese. The window was still open so the cat could leave anytime he wanted. Before getting married the young lady had had a cat. She knew that you could not rush a touchy cat or hold one back if it wanted to go out hunting. Royal lapped the milk, then jumped onto a chair, curling up on the cushion before closing his eyes.

Robert came in a minute later and washed his hands. “Your protégé looks like he’s comfortable,” he frowned. “You figure on adopting him?”

“Don’t start grumbling,” Margaret enjoined as she set the table. “You can’t adopt a cat, it adopts you. And if it wants to leave...”

“Okay! But I think we’re going to have a boarder. He looks like he’s making himself at home, anybody can see that. I hope he’ll earn his keep by getting rid of the rats in the shed...”

They did not talk about Royal during dinner and he did not move an inch. He gave the impression that he was exhausted and, in fact, he was. After leaving the Doubrough house, he had crossed the city from north to south, which was a mighty long stroll. In a train parked on a side track he had relieved himself and cleaned off his bloody paws, whiskers and belly, then after a short nap had gotten back on the road. To all appearances his arrival at the Andersons had nothing deliberate about it.

Margaret did the dishes before joining her husband who was watching a variety show on the television. A minute later Royal crept into the living room, looked around, then finally jumped into Robert’s lap.

Purring little, plaintive meows, etc. Royal was a pro at seduction.

The next morning Robert went to work. Margaret did the cleaning and Royal disappeared for exactly five and a half hours. Margaret was thinking that she would never see him again when the animal leaped over the fence and dashed into the kitchen. The young lady tried to pet him but for some unknown reason the cat would not let her near him. He ended up hiding on top of the armoire in the bedroom where Margaret could not reach him and he sulked there until Robert came home at 7:15 when he acquiesced, came down from his perch and acted normally.

At dinnertime Mrs. Hubsher, the Andersons’ next-door neighbor, showed up to ask Margaret for some vinegar. Mrs. Hubsher noticed the big Siamese but carefully kept her distance. She hated cats, saying with a sour face that “they’re bad luck and my dog will gladly snap this one’s neck if he catches it on the other side of the fence.”

To which Margaret snapped back that her dog kept the whole neighborhood up with its crazy barking and that if he broke her cat’s neck she, Margaret Anderson, would not hesitate to shoot it in the rear-end. In a huff, Mrs. Hubsher stomped out leaving the vinegar on the table and swearing that she would never set foot in this house again.

Margaret was upset, but Robert doubled over laughing. He could not stand the sight of “old Hubsher” and figured that it would be a good thing if he never saw her again in his house.

The Andersons had dinner in the kitchen as the storm, which had been threatening for two days, broke out. It cleared the air and calmed the nerves of the inhabitants of Casper, Wyoming, but the Siamese’s fur bristled eerily and had a strange metallic hue. He hid under the table for a few seconds, scurried into the living room whipping his tail in the air, then came back to snuggle against Robert’s leg while meowing absolutely deliriously.

“Calm down, pal,” Robert said as he petted him. “It’s just an old thundercloud letting loose.”

“Let him be,” Margaret advised. “If you bother him, he’s going to scratch you.”

“Him? You think? He’s as gentle as a lamb... Even if he smells awfully funny. Look, it’s like his fur is secreting some kind of powder.”

Margaret leaned over and clearly saw that the cat's fur was emitting a kind of fine dust as her husband petted it. And it had a peculiar odor that the young lady could not identify. She sniffed hard.

"D.D.T.?" Robert asked.

"No, it's more like a mix of ether and chloroform."

Robert had a good laugh. "The lab assistant has returned," he joked, referring to his wife's occupation. "Poor cat, he keeps this up he'll sleep like a log!"

They left it at that and like every night they sat in front of the television after Margaret did the dishes. This Wednesday night had a local news show and a good fifteen minutes was devoted to *The Mystery of the Doubrough House*. It was very good, as far as news, but concerning the actual police investigation the viewers understood right away that it had not made any headway. Then the reporter resorted to melodrama by speaking about a strange, bloody-thirsty creature that fed on the gore of its victims... It was as if they were back in the times of vampires! It was stupid but fascinating and it took the Andersons quite a while before they surrendered to the overwhelming need to sleep.

Robert turned off the television and followed Margaret to their bedroom on the first floor. With his green eyes Royal watched them undress. Then he stuck out his pink tongue, extended his claws and stretched out on the couch. Margaret glanced down into the living room, slipped on a see-through nightie and started closing the door.

"Oh, no," her husband protested in a sleepy voice. "If you close the door, we're going to suffocate in here." He buried his head in the pillow and fell asleep.

Margaret hesitated, but finally left the door wide open and went to bed. She turned off the bedside lamp, settled in and dropped off to sleep right away.

Time passed.

The televisions and lights were turned off throughout the neighborhood and silence fell over the sleepy town.

Around one in the morning, Royal awoke, stretched, stood up and jumped to the ground. Slowly he headed for the Andersons' bedroom where he crouched and then leaped onto the bed.

Chapter II

Mrs. Hubsher was a good woman and immediately regretted her argument with Margaret Anderson. She spent her Thursday morning waiting for her neighbor to appear, but when she had not seen Robert Anderson leave for work she started to worry at 10 am.

At 10:30, seeing that the house remained desperately quiet, Mrs. Hubsher made up her mind. She went through the fence, marched down the walkway and knocked hard on the Andersons' front door. At this very moment, her dog started barking. Mrs. Hubsher had put him in the shed to avoid an altercation between him and her neighbor's cat and now he showed up, the stubborn beast, right when his master was about to make things right.

Mrs. Hubsher grumbled to show her disapproval of the barking in case Margaret was listening behind the door and she knocked again. After four tries without an answer, she went over to the kitchen window, which was cracked open, and was startled to find traces of blood on the sill. A jumble of ideas rushed into her mind associating these traces with the news the night before about *The Mystery of the Doubrough House*. No blood was visible on the lawn, but inside the house on the kitchen tile and in the living room she could see a lot more. With a knot in her throat, ready to flee, she cried out, "Mrs. Anderson!"

No one answered, but her dog's barking got louder. Under the circumstances Mrs. Hubsher knew for a fact that her dog was howling bloody murder. She backed away and ran straight into her house to the telephone...

They found Margaret and Robert Anderson slaughtered in their bed, exactly like the widow Doubrough and the Reynolds family had been. The preliminary investigation almost got sidetracked because Robert Anderson and John Reynolds had the same job, but they concluded that this was a minor coincidence. The two men were both engineers, but they worked for different companies and held no State secrets. Consequently, there remained the bloody tracks...

When questioned Mrs. Hubsher responded, "Yes, my neighbors had a cat for just a little while. A big, mean-looking Siamese that came from who knows where."

Well, one of the policemen remembered that the widow Doubrough had lost a cat answering to Mrs. Hubsher's description, except that the old lady's neighbors said the cat had never returned home. Nevertheless, the tracks found at the Andersons looked a lot like those at the Doubrough house and even if it sounded insane, they had to start suspecting Royal!

At the late widow Doubrough's house they found a picture of Royal and that very evening the inhabitants of Casper were surprised to find a photograph of the cat on the front page of the local paper with the headline: His name's Royal. He's already killed 8 people. Kill him on sight!

They were banging their heads against the wall.

Because of the rain that had fallen Wednesday night, the police dogs could not pick up the scent of Royal beyond the fence. The men from the pound went out in the field and through the press and all the news outlets the authorities in Casper mobilized the population.

Someone offered a reward for the cat's hide so that Royal very quickly became the prey of a mad hunt. In different parts of the city they killed a dozen Siamese cats that were rushed to police headquarters to get the reward, but none of them turned out to be Royal. The SPCA spoke out alongside the owners of the cats who were unjustly killed and all of them got together to release a statement saying that a house cat could not be the perpetrator of such atrocious crimes. In their view the police had invented this despicable excuse to cover up their incompetence. The murderer of the widow Doubrough, the Reynolds and the Andersons had to be a man!

Meanwhile, Royal proved to be decidedly intelligent and avoided all the traps set in his way until he arrived quietly in the yard of a run-down workshop near Children's Home. Only a year ago a certain David Millay, a manufacturer of plastic containers, had up and fired his staff and for reasons of health

shut the shop down temporarily. Since then it had been deserted, covered with dust and cobwebs, surrounded by high walls and a gate that was starting to rust.

Royal slid through a hole, crossed the yard, snuck between two loose boards and strolled into David Millay's old office where a small, yellow man, hideously ugly, was toying with a device which had six telescopic antennas sticking out of it. On seeing Royal the little man cracked a smile but did not utter a word. He simply turned a knob and Royal walked softly to his place between a huge boxer and a beautifully feathered parrot.

All around the room, under the table and on the old file cabinets, were other sleeping animals. Rats, monkeys, cats, dogs and birds all tagged with the names and addresses of their owners. Being tame these small creatures were naturally not dangerous and yet every species still possessed its offensive and defensive weapons: a strong beak, powerful jaws, sharp claws, etc.

The little man obviously had no problems with his roommates. All the animals got along just fine in startling silence. The rats here were surprising, but less so since they belonged to the family *ondratras*, native to North America, relatives of the beaver, intelligent and easily tamable.

The little man lay down on a mat on the ground and dozed off until 8 pm. Then he went up to the boxer, took off the tag and buckled a collar around his neck. Sleepily the dog put up no resistance. And he did not budge when the Japanese man sprayed him with a gray powder that smelled of ether, but when the man flipped a switch on his device, the dog stood up.

The Japanese adjusted the screen of his transmitter and led the dog outside. He opened the front gate a crack so the dog could slip through and he watched it trot down the sidewalk into the growing darkness.

The Hoppers had given up all hope. Gib had been missing for three weeks without a trace in spite of his collar with the name and address of his owners on McKinley Street, not far from Washington Park. Gib was three months old when the Hoppers had adopted him. He was almost eight now. When a dog lives that long in a house, he is part of the family and his disappearance had created a great void. Like the widow Doubrough had done for Royal, the Hoppers had spread missing posters around but to no avail. It was an opportunity, however, to realize how many animals had been disappearing in Casper for a while.

Tonight around 9 pm the Hoppers and their three older children were studying a map for the itinerary of their next vacation. In the next room Mary, three years old, and Joan, five, had already been sleeping for an hour.

Ray Hopper drew a red line, made two crosses and said, "We leave Tuesday at daybreak. By evening we'll be in Sinks camp where I've reserved a spot for our trailer."

"Well," Gary said, "I'd rather go to Fox camp." Being the oldest he never agreed and felt it was his duty to challenge his father's decisions. Moreover, the family vacations were starting to be a drag for him. He had friends who were going together to a "bad" camp over by Provo. Boys and girls in two neighboring camps for fifteen days! And he was going to miss out!

"You," his father snapped back, "can go wherever you want when you're 18. Until then you go with the family. So, first Sinks and then..."

A short bark interrupted him. His pencil hung in mid-air. His wife and children were stunned.

"Dang," Gary said, "that sounded like Gib!"

"Don't be an idiot," his sister argued. "A dog doesn't just come home by itself after three weeks. Besides, I'm sure Gib was run over by a truck."

Gary shrugged his shoulders and went to open the door. Immediately Gib ran into the living room yapping and wagging his tail.

May Hopper started crying with joy and Ray Hopper, to hide his emotions, said, "Well, you big stupid mutt, where have you been running around?"

The children started screaming with joy so loud that they woke their little sisters who came in to see what was happening. Gib was cuddled, petted, spoiled and given enough food to stuff a tiger. For more than an hour they talked on and on about what Gib might have been doing over the past three weeks. Since he was fat and apparently in good health they figured that he must have been picked up by an animal lover whom he finally managed to slip away from to return home.

Then Gib went to lie down in his favorite spot. Mr. Hopper, whose eyes were getting heavy, sent everyone off to bed, put on his pajamas and ordered lights out. As he was falling asleep he wondered if dogs were allowed at Sinks camp.

It was May Hopper's mother who found the seven corpses on Friday morning at 10 am. The poor woman lost her mind and the news exploded like a bomb in Casper before spreading through the rest of the United States.

This time the matter was serious because Ray Hopper was also an engineer, and this was not the least of surprises because it was clear from the start that the Hoppers had not been mangled by a cat but by a dog with particularly powerful jaws.

Right away the investigators found out about Gib the boxer and were obviously struck by the fact that, just like Royal, the dog had disappeared a few weeks earlier not to be seen again. They learned that Gib had a collar and tag so it was strange that the animal had eluded both the dogcatchers and all the inhabitants of Casper. If he were lost, a dog like this would certainly have been picked up and thereafter returned to its rightful owners. Nevertheless, even though they knew that the Hoppers had been the victims of a dog's powerful jaws, nothing proved with certainty that it was their dog. To make matters worse there was the undeniable fact that Reynolds, Anderson and Hopper were all engineers and at this point they could no longer consider it a coincidence.

"It just doesn't add up," Burt Wyatt, the local police chief whose common sense was well known, declared. "I can believe that a cat and dog get rabid, but not that they can tell the difference between an engineer and a newsboy. Someone's mixed up in this and they're trying to pull the wool over our eyes."

Strangely, even though it was obvious, nobody thought of Madame Atomos! The sinister woman had evaporated a little over four months before in Mexico, in Sonora to be exact, and she had given no sign of life since then. The optimists lost no time in imagining her dead. Chief Wyatt had no opinion on the matter. Anyway, Casper was far from Mexico and why would Madame Atomos decide to attack this small city in Wyoming?

In short Chief Wyatt missed the truth in spite of his common sense, or maybe because of it, and concentrated on determining the relationship that existed between Hopper, Anderson and Reynolds.

The investigation quickly proved that the three men, even though they had the same profession, did not know each other and had never met and the wives and children were not acquainted, even superficially. Moreover, Royal did not belong to the Reynolds but to the widow Doubrough. And the Andersons did not have a pet before the Siamese showed up (who was maybe not the cat they thought he was) and the Hoppers, even though slain by a dog and having lost one, had certainly not been killed by the same one.

It was all so twisted and complicated!

But exactly Madame Atomos' style...

"Get me the names of all the engineers in Casper," Chief Wyatt ordered, trying above all to stay level-headed, "and see if they have pets."

Without realizing it he had just hit the bull's eye.

That Friday, around 6 pm, Wyatt's men came back to headquarters with a complete list of the engineers working and living in Casper. There were 22, all married with children. Besides this family status and their profession they also had one remarkable point in common: all of them without exception had lost a pet in the last month! Dogs, cats, monkeys, birds, muskrats. 22 animals lost under mysterious circumstances, searched for but never found!

Chief Wyatt suddenly felt that the situation was getting too big for him.

Chronologically speaking Royal had disappeared first so Wyatt assigned him number one. Gib was given number two because the Hoppers had lost him a week later. After that things sped up to the point that an animal disappeared every day. Number three was a monkey belonging to Arthur Chapin. Number four the parrot of Jim Freemont, etc.

"Logically," Chief Wyatt's deputy said, "the Chapin family is going to be the next family to die."

"Not necessarily," Wyatt grumbled. "The process hasn't been proven."

“You mean the Andersons, chief?”

“Yes.”

“They’re the exception that proves the rule,” the deputy assured. “They didn’t have kids or a pet so they sent Royal to them.”

Chief Wyatt looked at him blankly and asked, “Are you feeling okay, Walter? You said ‘They sent Royal to them’ as if there were someone behind this. Did you know that the cat is the only animal that can’t be taught tricks?”

“On T.V. I saw...”

“Yeah, on T.V., right?” Wyatt exploded, getting irritated by the whole matter. “You saw a cat walk across a plank of wood on *Mission Impossible*. You saw a cat in a Disney film! But have you ever seen or heard of a cat slaughtering eight people practically on command? Come on, Walter, be realistic!”

“Okay! Let’s be realistic,” the deputy replied, “and let’s say that the Chapins’ monkey comes back home tonight, that it goes bananas and strangles or mangles the whole family...”

Wyatt shrugged. “Ridiculous! I don’t believe that the widow Doubrough, the Reynolds, Andersons and Hoppers were really victims of a cat or dog. It’s obvious what they’re trying to make us believe that and you’re biting. You’re the kind of guy who swallows everything. Look, Walter, if you want my opinion, I’ll tell you that we’re obviously dealing with a madman here. He’s lashing out at engineers, but only by chance. It could just as easily be you or me. Maybe it’s a maniac who hates animals and people who take care of them... Maybe...”

Wyatt could imagine anything but he would never get near the truth unless Madame Atomos had him tied and gagged to convince him.