



Series 2

Episode 27

A Good Man's Man is Hard to Find

Mahatma Kane Jeeves, in his tan duster, driving goggles, and peaked cap, looked vaguely like Kato from the old Green Hornet comics. The impression was strengthened by his servile posture, standing beside the Bentley, holding the door open as Halefoil Cumcut came down the front stairs of Manhattan Lodestone.

“Mahatma,” Cumcut said to him as he neared the car. “What are you doing here?”

“The drive to the Pups, sir.”

“I’m not driving to the Pups in the Bentley. I’m taking the bus with the students.”

Cumcut’s valet looked over at the yellow school bus burning diesel fuel as it waited to load. What could be seen of his face registered only disdain.

Cumcut smiled. “It’s not that bad, Mahatma. And I’ll be with the kids, to help them work on their cases.”

“It’s a two and a half hour ride, sir.”

“I know that.”

“Your legs will be squeezed as if in a vise, and you’ll be lucky if you’re ever able to walk again.” He paused. “I’ve set up Gershwin for the trip in the Bentley. The concerto.”

Cumcut gulped. The Concerto in F was, indeed, among his favorite pieces of music. No doubt someone on the bus would have one of those iPod boom boxes and would be playing headbanger punky electronic whatever

music—for someone only a few years older than his charges, Cumcut was a lifetime removed from their universe. Halefoil Cumcut was a Renaissance Man, but only up to about 1954. After that, it was all the Apocalypse as far as he was concerned.

“I’ll have to gird my loins and suffer,” he said with more than a hint of sadness.

Something close to a sigh came from Mahatma’s lips. “Very good, sir. I shall see you up there.”

“You could take the bus with us,” Cumcut suggested.

“Thank you, sir, but it’s probably best if we have a personal vehicle on hand for emergencies.”

Cumcut nodded. He knew that what Mahatma really meant was that, faithful servant or no, he wouldn’t get on that bus for love or money.

Mahatma closed the passenger door. “I shall see you there, sir.”

“Very good, Mahatma. I will see you there.”

Giving a slight tip of his hat, Mahatma went around to the driver’s side of the car and settled himself in. He would follow the bus for the trip.

Halefoil Cumcut shook his head good-naturedly as he walked to the bus. Mahatma traveled with him as often as possible, securing the best rooms at their hotels, making sure that everything was in perfect order, selecting his suits, drawing his bath, standing by as necessary. He was much more of a stickler for details than Cumcut himself, but that was the nature of valets, as often as not. They were ten times the snobs that their masters were. In this day and age, they had to be.

The bus door opened as Cumcut approached. The driver was smoking a cigar that he quickly attempted to hide by sticking it outside the open window. The attempt was futile, however, as the rank odor flowed out the bus door in a visible cloud of blue mist.

“Ready to go, Ralph?” Cumcut asked, pretending that he wasn’t about to pass out from the fumes.

“Ready to go, Coach,” Ralph the bus driver responded.

And as if they were waiting for their cue, at that moment the school door opened again, and the Manhattan Lodestone (a Magnet School) team came pouring out, ready to take on the Pups.

The parade, in other words, continued.

Where Old Coaches Go to Die, or Not, as the Case May Be

Botch and Wednesday sat in the Crown Vic and looked up at the towering building.

“Some place,” Wednesday said.

“Some place,” Botch echoed.

The Stephen A. Douglas Debate Coach Sanatorium and Retirement Home was four stories tall, a neo-gothic monstrosity of spires and pointed arches within sight of the Cyclone roller coaster on Coney Island. It was so close that they could occasionally hear the screams of riders plunging down the ride’s steep hills.

“So this is where old debate coaches come to die,” Wednesday said.

“The ones that don’t get killed first,” Botch replied.

They exited the car and walked up to the building. Inside, a receptionist pointed them to a solarium down the first floor hallway. “Miss Devans is expecting you,” they were told.

The hallway was painted the usual institutional pea soup green, lined with portraits of various politicians going back to pre-Revolutionary times.

“I haven’t seen this many dead presidents since the last time I shot craps up in the South Bronx,” Wednesday commented as they passed.

In the solarium, there were a dozen or so people in various stages of extreme old age, some in wheelchairs, some hooked up to IVs, some both on wheels *and* on IVs. Most of them looked as if they had cast their first vote for president back during the Madison administration.

“You must be the detectives,” a voice boomed out at them.

They turned. The voice came from a woman neither in a wheelchair nor on an internal drip, unless you counted her colostomy bag, which really was more of an external drip. She was, despite her advanced age, a woman of prodigious mien. She was standing next to the television, on which there was video of CSPAN, but no sound.

“Ms. Devans?” Botch asked.

“Who else? And you are?”

Botch showed her his badge. “Geronimo Botch, homicide. And this is my partner, Joe Wednesday.” Wednesday was also holding out his wallet with his ID.

“Sit down, then,” Devans said. She pointed to a couch next to her. The two men sat. She remained standing. “You wanted to talk about Mr. Lo Pat, I gather.”

“That is correct, ma’am. You knew the deceased?”

“Worked the business with him over forty years,” she replied. “Hated his guts and the horse they rode in on.”

“Why was that?” Botch asked.

“He was the enemy, detective. I ran the Brooklyn Behemoth program, and he ran the Manhattan Lodestone program. These are the Hatfields and the McCoys of the forensic universe, at least in New York.”

There were nods and murmurs from the assembled retired coaches in the room, who were blithely following the conversation, despite their appearance as little more than animated corpses.

“How do you mean, enemy?”

“I mean it the way it is defined in the dictionary, young man. Didn’t you go to school? Don’t you know what words mean?”

“I did go to school, ma’am. In fact, I graduated from Manhattan Lodestone, a magnet school.”

She sniffed at him. “It figures.” She walked over to a chair facing the couch and sat down. She adjusted her colostomy bag. “If you had gotten into Behemoth, you’d know exactly what I mean. You must have been a student when Mr. Lo Pat was teaching there.”

Botch nodded. “I didn’t know the man personally,” he said.

“You didn’t miss much.”

Botch reached into his pocket and retrieved his notebook. “Did you hold any personal animosity toward Mr. Pat?”

“It’s Mr. *Lo* Pat, young man. Mr. Pat sounds like a bad name for a smug poker player.”

“Sorry, ma’am. Mr. Lo Pat.”

“That’s better. And of course I had personal animosity for him. He was a sneak, a snake and a shark. There was nothing to like about him, and I didn’t try to invent any reasons to do so.”

“He beat your teams badly, then?”

“He did not beat my teams badly,” Alida Devans said forcefully. There was another low wave of murmuring from the assembled animated corpses. “Over the years I would imagine that we were about even in wins and losses.”

“You didn’t kill him then?” Joe Wednesday asked.

She turned to him. “No, detective, I didn’t kill him. Your records should show that I had an irrefutable alibi.”

“Do you have any idea who would have killed him?”

“I know plenty of people who wouldn’t have minded maiming him just a little bit. But a full kill? Not really. We debate coaches are an ethical bunch, as a general rule.”

“As a general rule, perhaps,” Botch said, “but not categorically. Someone did kill the man, and someone in the debate universe is the most likely candidate.”

“Only because the police at the time were too myopic to look elsewhere, young man. Instead of blaming themselves for not finding the killer who was nowhere near where they were looking, they simply gave up instead of trying to look where the killer actually was. Typical bureaucratic behavior.”

“You don’t think it was anyone in the debate community?”

“No, I don’t. Why would any of us bother? He was an old fool who would be gone from the activity soon enough. Not unlike me, for that matter. The old, that is, not the fool.”

“But his job was seen as something of a prize. Debate coach at a big prestigious school. Wouldn’t someone perhaps want him out of the way to take over?”

“There was no one like that. There were successors, but only short-term. There was no one who actually wanted the job until Halefoil Cumcut came along, and that was years after Mr. Lo Pat was dead. It’s a tough job that wouldn’t pay half what it’s worth. Can you imagine what it’s like be surrounded by high school students every day, including weekends, detective? Can you imagine that horror?”

Botch shook his head. “No, ma’am, I can’t.”

“I didn’t think so, your having graduated from Manhattan Lodestone.”

“Halefoil Cumcut could have wanted the job, you’re saying?”

“No, I’m not saying. Cumcut was still high school age when Mr. Lo Pat was murdered. The only connection he might have had with the old man is maybe being judged by him somewhere, if that. I’m telling you, as I told people then, that there is a serial killer out there who dispatches his victims with a samurai sword. Find someone who kills with that pattern, and you’ll find your killer.”

Botch closed his notebooks. “There have been no other recorded cases of samurai sword murders on the street since Mr. Lo Pat’s death, and none before. The method of his murder remains unique. It is not part of the pattern of a serial murderer.”

She shook her head. “That’s where you are wrong, detective. Whoever killed Mr. Lo Pat is just waiting for his opportunity to kill again. He just happens to be very patient. And you’re here interviewing innocent old debate coaches instead of getting out there and finding him.”

This brought another series of murmurs from the onlookers. Botch gave Wednesday a sideways glance, and the two men stood up.

“I appreciate your time, Ms. Devans.”

“You should, young man.” And with that, she turned away, facing the television screen where something CSPANish was going on, but without the sound, no one could tell what.

The two detectives left the solarium.

Will Mahatma Kane Jeeves listen to the Concerto in F if Halefoil Cumcut isn't in the Bentley?

Will Halefoil Cumcut go all emo when he hears the latest electronica on some kid's iPod boom box?

Are the other residents at the Stephen A. Douglas Debate Coach Sanatorium and Retirement Home alive, or are they the walking dead?

How can you tell the difference?

Shouldn't there be a Bronx award ceremony in the middle of this episode somewhere?

If you want to know the answers, look further than our next episode: “I want to have Glenn Beck's baby, or, Curse you, Woodrow Wilson!”