

THE COUNT

A Dramatic Reading

by
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From the story, "The Count," published in the Fundamentalist Journal, April, 1989. Permission granted by the author to WETMORE DECLAMATION BUREAU to publish as a dramatic reading.

David Leene bent over the books once again. "I can't believe it," he murmured. "Our profits are up 300 percent in less than a year."

He had already checked them through twice. When his accountant first rushed in to inform him, he was skeptical. But now he was convinced. "There's no question what I'll do now," he said to himself. "It'll be four more franchises in P-A, and one each in N-J, M-D, and D-C." He reflected on his unique way of referring to the states of his homeland, one of the little trademarks he was known for in the business.

He had a multitude of such idiosyncrasies. The cigar trick was his best. After concluding a big deal, he'd take the corporate brass out to a restaurant, throw a rich repast, and finally pass out thick Cuban stogies wrapped in twenty-dollar bills. Then he'd stand and say, "You can keep the twenty if you want, gentlemen, but my preference is that you use it to light this delicate little instrument of pleasure. The reason is that once you install my equipment in your factories, you'll soon be lighting up hundred-dollar bills."

The resultant effect became the byword of the business. "If Leene's machines don't get you in the black, nothing will."

David Leene laid back in his chair and laughed. "I ought to retire," he mused. "That would be the greatest heist of all. I can see the headlines. 'Leene retires after a 300-percent year.' I'd keep my hand in it by holding the stock. But no more running. I have to take my ease sometime. I've had my nose to the stone for so long it doesn't even itch anymore."

As Leene mused, he became drowsy. His eyelids sagged. In moments he was snoring in the burgundy-dyed leather chair, as unassuming and relaxed as a sparrow on a guy line.

Suddenly a sharp sound penetrated his sleep and he jolted awake. A strange shadow appeared from behind the curtains and Leene's heart jumped. "Who's there?" he shouted. "I haven't invited anyone in here."

To his alarm a voice answered. "I'm sorry, I wanted to get you while you were still asleep."

Leene jumped up and pulled open a drawer, grasping a pistol he kept there for security. He pointed the barrel at the shadow, which was moving toward him.

"Who are you?" Leene cried, now frightened and white.

"Death," said the voice. (Quavery and crackly)

Leene laughed. "Death! This has got to be a dream. Wake up, you fool."

The shadow moved closer. "I'm sorry, but you are awake, though I had planned to get you while still asleep. I really hate these arguments."

--- END OF FREE PREVIEW ---