

## LETTER ALONE

by  
Edward Stasheff

The two lords looked after Old François sulking off, sharing a mixed expression of exasperation and amusement. Eventually they followed after him—but let the elderly peasant keep his generous lead.

"We have learned much, Sir Matthew," Montmartre said.

"I'd say so," Matt agreed. "We found problems with the official story.

Apparently, the eyewitness accounts aren't quite as cut and dried as we thought. All that was *really* seen of the crime was at a great distance and in the dark. Don't get me wrong, I'm sure villagers saw *something*... but they may not have *understood* what they were seeing. And then there's all the things that don't make sense, or at the very least raise questions. Why Father DuVois didn't run, for example, or why the sorcerers were fighting in the first place. "

"What may be more important yet," Montmartre added, "is what we have *not* learned. We have yet to find anything that contradicts Ortho's story. Indeed, we've even found things that do support it. The sickle, perhaps."

Matt grimaced slightly. "It's good, I'll admit, but not good enough."

Montmartre frowned. "What mean you?"

Matt sighed. "Finding a sickle near a barn full of hay is not exactly unusual. It could even just be a lucky guess on Ortho's part."

"But a sickle that hath been used to pierce a man? And in the very place Ortho did say 'twould be found?"

"As coincidences go, it's a stretch, I'll agree... but not completely impossible."

Matt sighed. "The problem is that only three people *really* know what happened in the barn that night—and two of them are dead, while the third..."

"Is not considered an honest witness," Montmartre finished for him.

"So we have to find a way to either boost Ortho's credibility, or create doubts about Father DuVois's motives and behavior."

The two men walked on in silence, each working over the riddle in his mind.

"Well, then," Montmartre said, "we know Ortho was a Bloodhound sorcerer—indeed, he admitted as much. We know also he was the Frank—"

"*Might be* the Frank," Matt qualified.

"—and that the Frank secretly worked to save priests from the Bloodhounds," Montmartre continued. "Yet Father DuVois was *not* saved—indeed, Ortho caught and killed him! These facts do contradict each other—but wherefore? For what reason? If Ortho was the Frank, then why did he not warn this priest? Or did the Father not heed his warning?"

"Either is possible," Matt admitted. "I guess we've been assuming Ortho had the chance to warn him—but, now that I think about it, that's not necessarily a given. Maybe he never got the chance. What if his sorcerer partner was growing suspicious? What if he was watching Ortho too closely to allow him a chance to run off and warn Father DuVois in time?" Matt frowned as a new thought occurred to him. "And that's all assuming Ortho *knew* who the priest was, and where to find him—but what if he didn't? After all, underground priests during Malingo's regime made themselves as hard to find as possible."

"Nay, that I doubt." Montmartre shook his head firmly. "Bloodhound sorcerers *find* hidden priests, Sir Matthew—'tis their greatest skill. And if these sorcerers did blend in with the crowd gathering for the Mass, then they must needs have known *beforehand* when and where the Mass was to be held."

"Oh yeah, good point," Matt admitted. "But that doesn't mean they knew who the *priest* was before the Mass, or where to find him."

"That's... possible—but doubtful," the old duke said. "To know where and when a secret Mass was to be held, they most likely learned it from a parishioner. From Montville, or a neighboring parish."

Matt glanced sideways at the old man. "You think the village had a traitor in it?"

Montmartre shrugged. "Or they found a parishioner, and did bribe him."

"Or beat it out of him," Matt added.

"Aye, or did magic it from his mind," Montmartre agreed. "But if they learned from such a one where and when the Mass would be celebrated, it only makes sense they learned who the priest was as well. Mayhap even where to find him."

"Not a bad theory," Matt said, nodding slowly. "Not exactly ironclad, but still solid. Okay, let's say, just for the moment, that Ortho *is* the Frank, that he knew who and what Father DuVois was, where to find him, and was able to contact him before the Mass. But Father DuVois didn't run—he stayed and got himself killed. Why?"

"Either he believed not the warning—"

"Which is doubtful," Matt added.

"—or he did not fear it," Montmartre finished.

"And that's the question," Matt said. "Why was a priest not afraid of priest-killers?"

"To know that, methinks we must needs learn more about this victim of ours."

"Yeah, but how?" Matt asked. "He's dead, and there are not a lot of written records lying around Montville. How can we learn *anything* about him now?"

"Why, from those who knew him best, wizard—his flock." Montmartre smiled slowly. "I think we must needs hold a village feast in honor of the late Father, Sir Matthew. If all gather together for talk and laughter...with enough wine, and a little gossip..."

"Brilliant!" Matt grinned, then frowned. "Think we have time to organize one? We're on a tight schedule..."

"Leave that to me," Montmartre said with a firm nod. "Young Father Heureau can guide me, and I am no stranger to peasant festivals."

*Like I am*, Matt thought—and suspected Montmartre knew that too, but was too polite to say so. Matt was, after all, still a foreigner to these lands.

"Okay, digging up dirt on the priest is good," Matt said, "but that only helps us if we can prove that Ortho *did* try to warn Father DuVois, and yet he *still* didn't run. Otherwise, Father DuVois's actions are easily explained: Ortho simply didn't warn him in time—if he warned him at all."

"And how shall we prove that?" Montmartre asked.

"That's the problem," Matt said, wincing. "Ortho is the most anal-retentive obsessive-compulsive perfectionist I've ever met."

"Anal... *what?*"

Matt sighed, forgetting that Freud hadn't been born yet in this universe. "He's very organized and thorough," Matt translated for the medieval Montmartre. "Ortho told us that to keep from being caught by the Bloodhounds himself, he made sure to destroy any and all evidence linking him with the Frank. And knowing Ortho, I believe it—and I'm sure he did a very thorough job. Our only chance is to find something he missed... somehow..."

They both lapsed into silence, mulling over the puzzle as they walked.

Montmartre stopped abruptly with a gasp. "Aye, but there are *two* involved here!"

Matt turned back, frowning. "Two what?"

"Men!" Montmartre exclaimed. "Ortho did destroy any proof that he warned the priest, aye—but did Father DuVois do the same?"

"But we don't know that he had any evidence *to* destroy," Matt objected.

"Think, wizard!" Montmartre said, excited. "He is called 'the Frank' because only one man ever did see him! For all others, he sent—"

"A letter!" Matt exclaimed. "Dear Lord, you've got it! If Father DuVois kept that letter... and we can find it... and match the handwriting..."

"Then we prove not only that Ortho *is* the Frank, but that he warned Father DuVois—and yet the Father did not run!"

Matt's head was spinning. "That letter alone might save Ortho from the gallows! But where would it be? If it was in the barn, then we're out of luck. It burned to the ground."

"If it survives still, 'twould be in the church, or his cottage," Montmartre said with certainty.

"Which is now Father Heureau's cottage," Matt said. "We'll need to search both. I'll take the church if you'll take the cottage?"

"Forgive me, Sir Matthew," Montmartre smiled, "but I do have a feast to arrange."

"Oh. Right." Matt's brow furrowed. "All right, then. I'll start with the cottage. Join me when you can."

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An hour later, old Duke Montmartre and young Father Heureau returned from arranging an impromptu town picnic with the ladies of the village. They found Matt in the village church, sitting cross-legged on the floor, with several large dusty books spread out around him, sifting through a sheaf of parchments.

"Hath you found what we seek, wizard?" Montmartre asked.

Matt looked up—tired, frustrated, and empty-handed. "Nope. And not for lack of trying, believe me."

Father Heureau raised an eyebrow. "Father DuVois's things were not in the rectory, then?"

"Not that I can find, at least, even with magical assistance," Matt sighed.

"I thought as much." Heureau nodded. "'Twas empty as a beggar's purse when I did arrive in Montville."

"Well, I figured anything Father DuVois owned must have been moved to the church—I can't think of where else the townspeople would have put them—so I've been searching it," Matt said. He gestured at the handwritten ledgers spread out before him.

"I've found records of every birth, marriage, and death in Montville for the last six generations. There's even a rudimentary chronicle of Montville's history." Matt held up the sheaf of parchments. "Found some letters, too, but not the one we're looking for. They're mostly just routine correspondence between the village clergy, the local lords, and the church."

"It may well be that what we seek no longer exists, Matthew," Montmartre cautioned gently. "For if Father DuVois had it upon his person, 'twas burnt with him and the barn. Or mayhap Ortho was clever enough to destroy that letter as well."

"I don't see how he could—as far as I can tell, he never had the opportunity." Matt rubbed tired eyes. "But if the letter *does* still exist, it could help exonerate him—so we've got to keep searching. If you guys could give me a hand with this, we'll be done faster." He held out a volume to young Father Heureau. "Just turn the pages of the books, make sure nothing's tucked between them."

The duke and the priest joined in the search, but it was fruitless. When they finished much later, they had nothing to show for their efforts but ink-smudged fingers and paper cuts. It was well past noon by then, and their stomachs reminded them of the need for food.

Montmartre and Heureau walked to the village square for the communal meal, but Matt went to check on Stegoman first. To his surprise and amusement, he found the dragon surrounded by children. They had overcome their fear of the monster with the speed that only children can, and now sat in spellbound attention listening to Stegoman spinning the tale of the great Giant War.

A few gleaming scattered bones told Matt the dragon has already eaten. Stegoman was clearly enjoying himself (although he'd never admit to it), so Matt decided not to interrupt his dramatic narrative. He caught the dragon's eye instead and nodded toward the village square. The dragon winked at him without missing a beat of his yarn, understanding; he would send the children to their midday meal when his tale was done. Besides, he was already up to the part where Saint Moncaire froze the giant Ballspear in stone, so it was almost over anyway. Matt left to seek his own food.

In medieval Merovence, as in many agricultural societies, the midday meal was the largest, so Matt was looking forward to a hot meal. He was slightly surprised to discover the village women had apparently pulled out all the stops for this spontaneous picnic. Tables and benches had been dragged from cottages and spread with food that smelled heavenly. Matt had expected a pot-luck supper thrown together from whatever soups and stews the ladies happened to have in their kettles at the moment. He was wrong. In an impressive display of last-minute coordination, the women of Montville had organized a small feast. Matt sat down to enjoy a long, leisurely meal that in his universe would have been served in a five-star French restaurant.

The effort made sense, when Matt paused to think about it. Not much happened in a village this small, Matt guessed, and two noble visitors—not to mention a dragon—was cause for excitement and even celebration. Everyone in the village had turned out for the event. It was mostly women and girls of all ages (the men of the village having traveled to Bordestang to witness the sorcerer's execution), but there were also a few elderly men present, including Old François.

Matt was also mildly surprised to find Montmartre talking with the villagers about nothing more consequential than their plans for the autumn harvest. Matt waited for the first opening in the conversation, then jumped into the interrogation.

"So, on the night of the fire, how many of you sa—"

"Oh, let us not talk so grim so soon, Sir Matthew!" Montmartre cut him off with a wave of his hand. "We have plenty of time yet—let us rest and enjoy the meal first!" He turned to the matron next to him. "I understand Gascony did have a problem with grasshoppers this summer, but you need not fear them coming this far east." He turned back to Matt. "But I shall let the Lord Wizard tell that story. 'Twas his apprentice ended that danger, in truth."

"Apprentice?" the villagers chorused, interested in the news.

"Uh... okay." Matt was still reeling with confusion over just what Montmartre was up to, but he obediently told the story of the Great Gascony Grasshopper menace, being sure to speak highly of Ortho. He understood Montmartre's motives a few minutes later when the village children came running up to the table—sorcery and murder really weren't fit topics for young ears. Matt finished his story, turned control of the conversation back over to the Duke, and turned his own attention back to the dandelion salad. It was surprisingly tasty once he got past the idea of eating what was, to him, a weed.

The villagers were understandably intimidated by the presence of a Duke, not to mention Her Majesty's Wizard, but Montmartre had a natural knack for setting people at ease. The longer Matt watched, the more impressed he became with the old man's

social deftness. As a lord, he was a courtier, negotiator and diplomat. He worked with people, and he worked them well.

Montmartre led the conversation, putting them at ease with small talk, and listening with polite interest to ladies talk about comfortable topics, such as whose well had run dry and whose cow was sick. When he tossed out occasional tidbits of information about the Queen, the kingdom, or the royal court, the peasants soaked it up, fascinated.

The main course was lamb and onions roasted with fresh thyme and rosemary, a sweetly spiced vegetable stew, crispy baguettes and soft bleu cheese—and, of course, cup after cup of fine Burgundy wine. Montmartre heaped well-deserved praises on the ladies' culinary skills, and they flushed with pleasure. The children wolfed down their suppers and raced back to the dragon, who had apparently promised to breathe fire and blow smoke rings for them.

Once the children were gone, Montmartre steered the discussion toward courtly gossip as his audience finished their meal with fresh grapes and a wheel of Brie. The table roared with laughter at Montmartre's impersonation of the Earl of Norville's drunken, rambling, nonsensical toast at the war victory feast, up to and including him passing out in a serving bowl of peas. He then moved on to more sinister scandals, including a nun who had been caught practicing an ingenious but taboo use for a carrot, followed by the whispered rumors that the Bishop of Lorraine had been embezzling from the tithe baskets. Tales of ecclesiastical vice led naturally to the topic of Father DuVois.

"So in what vices did your parish priest indulge?" Montmartre asked in a hushed, conspiratorial, just-us-girls sort of tone. It was an excellent question, Matt thought. Not *if* the priest had vices—that was a given—but *what* they were.

Matt was further impressed by the villagers' response. He'd been wondering how to get the villagers to spill the dirt about their beloved priest to complete strangers—people generally don't speak ill of the dead, especially dead clergy. But by now Montmartre had whipped up his audience's appetite for scandal, and far from insisting the dead priest was pure as driven snow, the women jumped whole-heartedly into the gossip garden. The ladies quickly filled them in on the rumors and whispered secrets about Father DuVois, each woman racking her brains for a new story that could top the previous one.

Matt was disappointed at the list of vices that gradually emerged. They were numerous, but tiny—the occasional over-indulgence in wine on a holiday, fits of anger, his eye lingering too long on a pretty young lass, and so on. For the average man, such behavior would scarcely be noticed, but... well, priests were understandably held to a higher moral standard.

Montmartre then steered the conversation toward other disreputable figures in the village, and asked how Father DuVois had dealt with their sinning. It was another brilliant move, Matt thought—expanding the scope of his subtle questioning while keeping the late priest always close to mind.

There was a sudden flurry of people each telling their own tales (purely as an example of how the good Father dealt with it, of course) about various people they disliked throughout the village—cheaters and beaters, drunkards and layabouts,

gossips (Matt thought that was ironic) and sinners of all kinds. The men of the village were easy targets—few of them were there to defend themselves. Old François recited yet another blacklist—he'd been storing it up for decades, but now simply didn't care who he offended anymore.

One name that was brought up early and often was Charlotte, who was apparently the town hussy. Everyone at the table seemed unanimous in their condemnation of her.

"Strutting into town like she does, pretending she doesn't know that *everyone* is staring at her!" said the plump matron next to Montmartre. "Like we don't all *know*..."

"Did you hear," a young maiden said, leaning forward to share her delightful gossip, "young Jean's lad—ye know, the one with the big ears—said he'd been out to Charlotte's cottage in the woods himself, he did, and 'twas just last season!"

"Ye dare say!" the matron said, scandalized. "I swear, I don't think she has any shame! And not a day goes by that *some* man in the village doesn't mention her name, for whatever reason!"

This poisonous gossip rubbed Matt the wrong way. He'd been on the receiving end of it too many times before, and knew all too well how gossip tends to get exaggerated over time, and is notoriously difficult to verify. "Is that all she's done?" Matt asked, unable to stay quiet any longer. "Just walk through town and have men talk about her?"

"Why, I can't count the number of men who said they'd had her!" the young girl answered.

Matt noticed the crucial word, '*said*.' "Well, yes," Matt agreed, "but people lie, especially young boys bragging about their experience in bed. How do you know she's *really* been with him? Or anyone, for that matter?"

"Why, she had a child out of wedlock, she did," said an old woman off to Matt's left. "And while barely more than a child herself!"

"Now, no man would own to getting her with child, mind you," the matron said with an arched eyebrow and a knowing nod. "And she never *did* say his name!"

"Aye, we *still* don't know who 'twas!" the old woman said, "Even after all these years. But!" She glared around the table, her eagle eye piercing each woman at the table. "We all have our suspicions, don't we?"

There was brief but uncomfortable silence. Matt got the sudden impression that every woman at the table was wondering if it was her husband, brother, or son... calculating dates, checking alibis...

"Belike she knows not the father herself!" the maiden finally spat.

"Too many candidates, I dare say!" the matron declared.

"Such a shame," the old woman croaked,, shaking her head sadly. "And after all that good Father DuVois did, for her to turn to sin with such open arms!"

"And open legs!"

"Oh really?" Matt perked up, interested. "What did Father DuVois do?"

"Why, raised her from a child, he did!" the woman said. The low hum of conversation died to silence, and all eyes turned toward the crone. She had the longest memory, after all, and the story was hers to tell. "Her father ran off, he did, when she was just a babe. And her mother hanged herself not five years later, leaving the poor

child an orphan! She had no living family—not in these parts. Well, none that were known to us, at least. So Good Father DuVois took her in, he did, and raised her like his own, God bless his name!" The old woman crossed herself.

That struck Matt as odd, but Montmartre beat him to the obvious question. "I thought priests were forbidden to have families," the duke frowned.

"Well, what else 'twere the priest supposed to do with a village orphan?" Old François demanded, rapping his knuckles on the table for emphasis. "Tell me, wizard, which be worse? To bend the catechism? Or let a child starve?"

Matt and Montmartre glanced at each other, thinking the same thing. DuVois had broken church law, and managed to convince his congregation that it was the right thing to do. And... well... he might even have been correct. It was hardly a damning revelation... but still, interesting, very interesting.

"He supported little Charlotte with the alms from the community," the old woman explained. "The bishop himself said he could use the church tithe for that."

"But when that little girl grew... good heavens, what a wild child she became!" the matron exclaimed. "She drove Father DuVois near to madness, she did, forever fighting with him, hiding from him, running away..."

"Run away she did, in the end," the old woman pointed out. "Left his cottage for good when she was barely more than a girl!"

"She had no where to go, of course, so she took up with the men of the village—a few days food and shelter, here and there, over and over," the young woman said.

"Why, she was hopping from bed to bed like a frog!"

"'Twas then that she got with child, it was!" the matron said. "And she wasted no time with that—'twas as fast as could be, I daresay!"

Matt found this all extremely interesting, although he couldn't say exactly why. He had heard of the "Preacher's Daughter Syndrome," where a teenage daughter rebels against her strictly moral father by deliberately engaging in immoral behavior. Was this all that was going on in the case of Charlotte and Father DuVois? Or was there some deeper anger and hatred there that might be a motive for murder? Or, at the very least, betraying the priest to the Bloodhounds?

"After a few seasons," the old woman said, "she found herself a hut in the woods, and hath been there ever since!"

"Oh, but she does come into town regular like," the young girl piped up, "to buy her goods and sell her wares, ye know."

"Sell her wares?" Montmartre repeated, aghast. "Is she then so openly a—"

"What...? Oh, nay!" the young woman gasped. "Not a doxy, if that's what ye mean! Well, not so plainly, at least..."

"Aye, doxies get paid!" sneered the matron, then laughed at her own crude joke.

"Nay, her wares are charcoal," the old woman explained. "She's made herself a hearth out by her cottage in the woods, and burns logs into coal to sell in town, for what few pennies it will bring her. She makes some small coin that way, but 'tis barely enough to keep body and soul together, for both her and her daughter."

"But ever and anon," the young woman sighed, exasperated, "some young lad does brag he's been out to her cottage in the woods!"

"Well, *that* explains how she feeds her babe!" the matron snickered.

"And despite all that, all that she did put him through," the old woman continued, "good Father DuVois *still* did help her!"

"Really?" Matt said, sensing a new development in the story. "And how did he help her, exactly?"

"Why, he did give her alms from the village!" the old woman rasped out. "For she is poor, and the church does collect alms for the poor, ye see."

"Butt Charlotte never doth go to the Mass!" the young maiden said indignantly. "She'll take the church's alms, aye, but she'll never be seen at the chapel!"

"Didn't even go to the Mass when the good Father DuVois lived under her roof!" the matron exclaimed.

"You'd think living with him once again—and this time a grown woman, with a child of her own, no less—that some of his piety would have taken seed in her," the young woman said. "But nay! Not Charlotte! Devil woman..."

"Wait... *again*?" Matt echoed. "They lived together again?"

"Well... more like he moved in with her," the old woman clarified.

"Why was *he* living with *her*?" Matt asked, puzzled. "And why did she ever agree to it?"

"For that he was hiding from the sorcerers, ye ninny!" Old François snapped, rapping his cane on the table for emphasis. "We couldn't very well hide our priest in our own village, now could we? 'Twould be the fist place Malingo's men would be looking fer him!"

"But Charlotte now, she did have her hut in the woods," the maiden explained. "And only us 'round these parts even know where 'tis!"

"We thought he'd be safest with her," the matron explained to Matt with a firm nod, "and we did convince her to let him abide in her cottage until the danger did pass."

Matt wondered what form that 'convincing' took, but decided not to ask... well, not yet, at least. "Wait... so was he at her place the night before the barn fire?"

"Oh, aye, he was there right up to his dying day, he was!" the young woman said.

"So that means," Matt shot a glance at the duke and the priest, "that his things would be there? Clothes and tools and... letters and stuff?"

"Oh, aye, I believe so," the matron said, nodding.

"Then... this Charlotte may have what we're looking for!" Montmartre said, the realization dawning on him.

"Where does this girl live? Can anyone take us there?" Matt asked, looking around the table.

"Why, Lord Wizard!" the plump matron breathed, scandalized. "Even *you* would go to her?"

"Well, yeah, of course. Wait. What?" It took Matt a moment to realize what she was asking. "Oh! No! No, nothing like that! We're just examining Father DuVois's murder, and we need to talk to everyone, nothing more!" Matt suddenly realized his explanation sounded weak, even in his own ears. He glanced around the table. The women of the village were looking at each other quietly, even knowingly, slowly coming to an unspoken consensus to reject Matt's excuse. Matt could almost hear the new rumors and gossip being born. He looked around, searching for some way to salvage his endangered reputation. His eyes fell on the young clergyman.

"Father Heureau!" Matt said, turning to him with relief. "Can *you* take us there?" Hopefully, the presence of a priest would allay any and all suspicions of misconduct.

"I... think so, aye," the young clergyman nodded, although he looked somewhat less than sure. "I believe I did deliver alms to her, once or twice."

Matt chanced a quick look at the village women. They seemed... disappointed. Good! "So it's settled, then!" Matt said, chugging the last of his wine as he stood up (and stumbled a bit). "Let's go!"

"Uh... now?" the young priest asked, surprised.

"We're running out of time, Father," Matt said, peering at the sun in the sky. It was well towards late afternoon. "And a man's life depends on what we find."

"Aye, aye." Father Heureau nodded, and stood with a sigh. "Then let us go now, while 'tis still light enough for us to find our way back."