

SECRETS OF THE HEART

Charles L. Grant

When Poul Anderson was president of SFWA, the job nearly killed him; and when his term was over, there were few suckers willing to take the position. Eventually I was talked into it; I accepted on the condition that we radically transform the organization. A committee of ex-presidents and other interested people was created, and thorough reforms proposed.

One needed reform was to hire an executive secretary, someone to do much of the routine work that was killing off presidents. Unfortunately, SFWA had almost no money.

“That’s all right,” one of the ex-presidents said. “We’ll find some starving young writer and pay him enough to let him live in a garret.”

And lo, the search began. We wanted someone articulate, willing to work

for beans, and living in New York; and oddly enough there were quite a few candidates for the post. Unfortunately, although all were articulate and eager and willing to work for slave wages, none lived in New York City; and we really did need someone able to get to Publishers' Row and pound on desks once in a while.

Then Charles L. Grant applied. He lived in New Jersey, only an hour by bus from Manhattan. He'd been writing for several years, but his career was interrupted by military service, and he was starting over. He wanted to learn more about the writing business, and Lord knows, the SFWA post would teach him that.

So I hired him. I admit I had reservations. Charlie seemed so mild-mannered and polite that I wondered if he would be tough enough to survive in a post that a lot of young writers thought they could fill better than he could. I needn't have worried. Charles L. Grant turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to SFWA, and the organization probably wouldn't still exist if he hadn't put in his years of service.

Since that time, Charles Grant has become well known. He edits Shadows, a series of horror-story anthologies, and has almost singlehandedly revived the quiet, understated horror story.

"Secrets of the Heart" is typical Grant, and it's no surprise that it was nominated for a Nebula.

I'm all alone in the house now, a terrible thing to be when you're used to so many people being around all the time. But the others are gone. A few of them, of course, were able to leave when

I changed my mind. A few. And some of them died. A lot of them. It wasn't my fault, though. All I did was show them. Once they understood, they all asked me and I showed them. That's when some of them started to leave, and that's when they started to die. It wasn't my fault. I didn't kill them and I didn't make them leave. They asked me. They really did. They... asked me.

The last time there were five of them. They came to the house late at night in the rain. The biggest man, with water all dripping down his big funny hat, smiled at me when I answered the door and he said: "Excuse me, little girl, but would you mind if I used your mother's telephone? We had a slight accident back there around the bend a ways, and I have to get us a tow truck."

My mother always told me never to let strangers into the house, and my father did too, but these people were trying so hard to smile in the rain and shivering and wet and cold. So I let them all in and they stood around in the foyer like little wet puppies while I took the big man back into the kitchen and showed him the telephone on the wall.

"My name is Miriam," I said then. "Your friends aren't very happy."

"George Braddock," the man said, holding out his hand after he took off his glove. We shook hands just like big people do, and he took off his hat to show me his hair, all white and thick, just like a big cat's. "I'm afraid they're rather shaken, Miriam," he said then. "Our car slid off the road into a ditch. We've been driving a long way, I got us lost, and I wasn't really paying much attention to my driving. Let that be a lesson to you." He reached for the phone, then looked over at the stove. "Say, would your mother mind if we brewed up some coffee or tea or something? We sure don't want to catch our death at this late date."

I didn't mind at all. I put on the kettle and took a jar out of the pantry, and while he was talking to someone at a gas station—and he was very, very unhappy at what he was hearing, I

could tell—put cups out on the table and went to the front again.

“George says you should come into the kitchen and have coffee or tea or something else that’s warm,” I said. They didn’t seem to want to move right away until a lady yanked off her bright blue kerchief—so much hair, and so bright and yellow!—and said, “Well, I’m not going to wait around for pneumonia, folks. Come on. This is dumb standing around here.”

The others, another lady and two men, followed her slowly, smiling at me as they passed and being very careful indeed not to drip too much water on the hall carpet. When they got to the kitchen, they took off their coats and hats and sat down and waited for the water to boil.

“Of all the damn luck,” George said, coming away from the phone and sitting with his friends. “The man says there must be a hundred accidents out there today. He can’t possibly get out here for a couple of hours, at the earliest. Looks like we’re stuck for a while.”

“Beautiful,” the yellow lady said. “That’s just beautiful.”

“Oh, come on, Helen, it isn’t all that bad. We could be still sitting in the car, you know.” He smiled at me standing by the stove. “And at least Miriam here is a gracious hostess. We certainly won’t freeze to death.”

I wanted to say something then, but I didn’t. Instead I just smiled and brushed my hair away from my face. The woman called Helen shrugged and looked like she’d decided it wasn’t so bad in here after all, and the other woman, who was a lot older, like George, took a pack of cigarettes from her purse and lit one. When she saw that there weren’t any ash trays, she dropped her match on the saucer I gave her.

“Where’s your mother, Miriam?” one of the other men said. “Don’t tell me you’re all alone in this big old house.”

“Bill, for Pete’s sake, don’t start,” said Helen, taking a cigarette from the older lady’s pack and tapping it on the back of her hand.

“Why don’t you leave him alone,” the white-haired lady said. Then she turned around in her chair and looked at me. She didn’t like children. “I’m Mrs. Braddock. Are you alone, dear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. Always be polite: that’s the first rule.

“She must work,” said Bill, and the other man nodded. Bill was Helen’s husband. The other man was a friend. Nobody liked anybody very much. I knew that.

The kettle started to whistle then, and I picked it up and poured the water into the cups. Mrs. George said that she wanted to help me, but I said that I could do it all right; and, besides, it wouldn’t be good for her arm to hold the kettle because it was heavy.

“Whatever are you talking about, child?” Mrs. George said, though her smile really wasn’t very nice.

“It’s the way you hold it,” Bill said, pointing. “Anyone can tell your shoulder’s bothering you again.”

“Nonsense,” she said, but she put her hand in her lap and gave me a funny look.

They talked a lot after that, and I kind of walked around the kitchen listening and not listening, and then I went out to the front where I looked through the windows at the road, waiting for the tow truck that was supposed to be coming in a couple of hours. They were very polite people, I guess, but they weren’t very nice. I knew that. And I don’t like people who aren’t very nice.

Then I touched a finger to the windowpane—it was cold and slippery, like ice—and knew that someone was standing behind me. I turned around and it was Bill. He had a funny look on his face and he bent down to push my hair back behind my ear. It felt

funny. I shook my head, and it fell back where it belonged. “You should have a barrette,” he said, real soft. I stepped away from him and he followed me, grinning now and rubbing one hand over his stomach. “You’re afraid of me, huh? I don’t see why. I guess it’s because we’re strangers, right? You don’t know me and I don’t know you.”

“I know you,” I said.

He kind of blinked at me then and looked around as if there was someone standing in the corner. Then he straightened, smiled funny at me, and went back to the kitchen. Then I saw Helen standing in the doorway to the hall, just looking at me. I smiled and she turned away. Their friend, whose name was Calvin, was looking in all the cupboards for something to eat. George told him it wasn’t right he should do that, but Calvin only told him to keep quiet for a change, there’s only a kid around and who’s going to know the difference anyway for one lousy box of crackers. A moment later he found some cookies, and I guess they weren’t really that mad at him because they all drank and ate, and then George got up and came out to where I was standing and said, “Miriam, I’ve looked over my options here, if you know what I mean, and I think I’d better take a quick walk down the road and see if I can spot the tow truck coming. I certainly don’t want to have to impose on you any longer than I have to.”

I shook my head.

He frowned at me a little and went to the front door. It wouldn’t open. He looked over his shoulder at me. “Why did you lock it?”

I walked away from him into the kitchen. The others weren’t looking at me, though, they were looking at George, who walked past them without saying anything and tried the back door that led into the yard where I used to play. He couldn’t open it.

“Well, for heaven’s sake,” Mrs. George said. She made a

funny little laugh. “It’s just like in the movies.”

I didn’t think so, but I didn’t say a word. I just stood by the stove and watched them getting more and more nervous, though they were trying not to show it, while Mr. George went around trying to open doors and windows. Helen was getting madder and madder finally, and she was glaring at me; Calvin had finished the box of cookies and he was asleep, his head resting on his arms on the table, his mouth open and snoring. Bill wouldn’t look at me.

“All right, Miriam, this has gone far enough,” Mr. George said. He was standing in the doorway, his hat still in one hand. “What does your father have here, some kind of electronic lock on everything? Well, it doesn’t matter. I think you ought to let us go now.” He reached for the telephone.

“It doesn’t work,” I said.

He tried it anyway, because hardly anyone ever believes me when I tell them things. Like the time a long time back when I told my father and my mother that they were always thinking bad things about me because I was their only child and they had me while they were very young and now they were wishing they didn’t have me at all. *Prancing around here like you own the goddamned place, like you were some kind of princess, like you own your mother and I lock, stock, and barrel! Well, I’m sick of it, Miriam! And by God, I’m sick as hell of you, damnit!* That’s what he said; and though my mother told him to stop saying things like that in front of the child, I knew she was thinking the same thing. I knew that. So I told them that if that’s the way they wanted it, then they didn’t have to stay in my country anymore. That’s when my father spanked me. It was the last thing he did before I decided that being a princess was fun.

That’s the second rule.

When Mrs. George, who was smoking again and blowing the smoke up at the ceiling, told her husband to sit down, he did. And I could see that he was trying very hard not to yell at me the way he

wanted to. “Now, Miriam,” he said, very softly, with a little serious frown that made tracks across his forehead. “Miriam, I—”

“You’re in my country now,” I told him. “You have to do what I tell you.”

That’s the last rule.

“Oh, it’s a game!” Helen said with a clap of her hands. It was like glass breaking.

“Great,” said Bill. “So how do you keep score?”

They all laughed at that except me. I didn’t like them making fun of my country, or of me. As a princess, like it says in the books in my father’s study, I had to show them that I was the ruler. So I decided that Calvin should stop snoring. Nobody noticed it right away, but they did after a while, and then they pushed me out of the way like I didn’t belong there and began making lots of silly noises about finding a doctor and why is his face so horrid looking, and George was yelling that the damned telephone doesn’t work, and Helen was crying quietly, and Bill just stood away from them and looked at me.

I didn’t like him watching me.

They put Calvin down on the floor, and George tried giving him mouth-to-mouth something, but that didn’t work and he was breathing real hard when he finally sat up. Then they carried him into the living room and put him on the couch, and George put his coat over his face. Then he saw me standing in the foyer looking at them, and he said, “Do you mind, young lady? This man is dead.”

I knew that.

Then George decided he wasn’t going to be nice anymore. He looked out at the storm for a while—shivering once when lightning came down and lit up his face—and then told the others that it looked like they were stuck for the night, if all the options were considered. He looked around a bit and, without even asking me,

said they should go upstairs and see if there were any bedrooms they could use.

“But... but what about the child’s parents?” Mrs. George said, though I knew she wasn’t as calm as she looked. “Good Lord, George, they could walk in at any moment. What would they think?” She looked at Helen, who was pale and trembling. “Don’t you see, Helen? They could walk right in on us.”

“No,” I said, and I could see George believing me. He put his arm around his wife’s shoulders and led her to the stairs. Helen followed him, and Bill came last. They went up and I waited for a while, listening to them walking around and turning on all the lights and talking in loud whispers. Pretty soon they were laughing. And pretty soon I could hear Helen making funny high noises and slapping Bill, who was laughing so hard he was nearly choking. It wasn’t right, though, that they should be so silly when their friend was dead on my couch. And it wasn’t right that they weren’t playing the game the way they were supposed to. I guess I should have expected it because none of the others did either, but I always hope that this time is going to be the different time. So I waited until it got real quiet—except for the rain scratching at the house—and then I went to my room, which is next to the kitchen beyond the pantry, and I sat on my bed and thought for a very long time; and when I was done with all my thinking, I decided that I knew all about George and Mrs. George and Bill and Helen.

And once I decided what I knew, I decided not to change my mind.

And the next day it was still raining, though the lightning and the thunder had gone away for a while. Everybody came downstairs and went into the kitchen. I could hear George cursing a lot, but the others were very quiet. They were scared. Bill tried to get out a window in the night, but the glass wouldn’t break. They were very scared. And they all almost jumped up to the ceiling when I came

out of my room to watch them and see if they'd learned to play the game right.

"Miriam..." George started to say something else, but he looked awfully old all of a sudden and only shook his head. Mrs. George's eyes were very red. Helen hadn't combed her yellow hair. Bill, who was standing by the stove, folded his arms across his chest and said, "I've read about people like you, you know. Telepaths, telekinetics—you do all those things with your mind, right?"

I knew what he was talking about. And he was wrong. Some things not even a book can tell you about.

"Bill—"

"For heaven's sake, Eleanor, don't say 'nonsense' again. We tried everything. It may be crazy, but it's the kid."

"I'm a *princess*," I told him. I was getting very mad.

"Her folks probably ditched her," Helen said, suddenly being very brave when her husband didn't fall down after I'd glared at him.

"No," I said. "They just wouldn't play by the rules."

"Wonderful," Bill said. "So what did you do, banish them from your creepy little kingdom here?"

"No," I said. "I just looked up in one of my books about princesses and queens. Sometimes I'm a fairy princess, you know, and sometimes I'm the Queen of the May. I was the Red Queen that day," and I made a slow chopping move with my left hand.

"Oh, my God," said Mrs. George, and suddenly they were all running out of the room, and George was hammering on the door while Helen was throwing things at the windows to break them. Only Bill stayed behind, still standing there, still looking at me.

"Why?" he said. I guess he was very brave.

“Because you’re not nice people,” I said, walking over so that the table would be between him and me. “You do bad things to little girls like me, your wife gets into accidents all the time because she drinks, Mrs. George takes things from stores when nobody’s looking, and—”

“All right, all right,” he said. He was pale. His hands kept pushing into his hair. “So what are you going to do, kill us all?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I said, really mad that he would think that of his princess. “When you’re nice again, you can go.”

There was the sound of breaking vases and chair legs snapping and Mrs. George crying loud and high.

“And what about you,” Bill said then. “Are you little miss perfect all the time?”

“I’m the princess.”

Someone was kicking at the door.

“Does that make killing people nice?” He looked like he was going to kneel down then, but he changed his mind. “Listen, Miriam, we all have secrets of the heart, you know. Some of them are bad, some of them aren’t so bad. But like I said, nobody’s perfect. Not me. And, Miriam, you aren’t either, princess or not.”

I frowned, trying not to listen to him, but he said it again and walked out of the room like I wasn’t even there. I thought about it as fast as I could. I hurried around the table and saw him look back at me, then reach out for the door. When it opened they all ran out like they were really and truly afraid of me. I didn’t mind, though. They would find their car and it would be all right, but a minute later I decided that there would be this really big truck...

I shrugged and went back to my room.

I knew all those words Bill was saying about me, but there was more to it and he didn’t know that. He didn’t know everything I could do when I thought about it and decided it would be so.

And after a while I decided that I wasn't really a princess. I never had been a princess. This house wasn't my country, and the people who came here and weren't nice and didn't leave... I wasn't their ruler. I had broken one of my own rules.

That's not nice.

That's my secret of the heart.

So I looked in the mirror and tried to decide how old I was. But I looked the same as I did when my mother and father didn't do what I told them. That was a long time ago. I think there weren't any cars or planes then, but I don't remember. And I'm still the same. My hair never grew and my face never got skinny and I never got tall and... and... so I went into the living room and, like George always said, I tried to review my options, which I think means choices.

I could follow my own rules, of course, and punish myself—but if I did that then I wouldn't *be* any longer, and I didn't want to be dead.

Or I could be very nice all the time and everyone who came to my house would like me after that and no one would have bad things in their heads or hearts about anyone else. That would make things very easy for me.

Or I could go outside and make the whole world my country and be nice and no one would have to worry about anything ever again because I would be...

I don't know if I have any more choices. But I *do* know what I can do—Bill said it was telesomethings, and the books on the shelves say it's magic. He knows he's wrong, of course... now. He knows that a telesomebody can't make something out of the summer air, the autumn wind. I can. So I guess it's magic.

That's nice.

And since the house is empty, I decided it was time to go

outside for a change. But when I opened the door and took a good look at my world... well, magic may be a nice word and it may be nice to have it, but all of a sudden I was very sure of one thing—that being nice all the time can be very, very boring.

I *know* that... now.