

Short Story 9: The Largest Luger

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Marc Aramini — 31 Mar 2012, 19:08

The Largest Luger

This Wolfe story was not published until 1992 in *Young Wolfe* as a previously unpublished story Wolfe had sitting around, but its style and theme really do make it clear that it is very close to “Volsweapon”.

SUMMARY: Pitney Philips is a no-nonsense gun expert who neither keeps guns in his offices nor actively buys them, but is regarded as an expert consultant for the purchase of rare or unusual firearms. Harlan Morris wants Philips to verify that the pistol he is thinking of purchasing from a man named Reuben, an oversized Luger the army tested in 1907 when they wanted a new large caliber hand gun.

Only 8 of these oversized guns were created for that test, and only 2 survived, the rest believed to have been stolen by the officers involved in testing.

The gun appears in mint condition, and Philips says that he must make several phone calls overseas before he can verify its authenticity. There is a lot of gun detail related about the testing procedure used by the army. When they leave, Philips smells his hands. He muses on the appreciation of Lugers in recent years.

The next day the police come to get Philips, for they need his input on the murder or suicide of Mr. Morris, and Philips surmises right away who has perished after they ask him if he is familiar with Orville Rueben. They want him to verify the gun during the investigation so that Orville does not claim they switch it or give him back a different one. Philips requests to see Reuben and shakes his hand roughly, at which point Rueben winces.

Later Philips assures the policeman that Reuben is in fact the murderer, and that the scent of the gun’s wooden base plug, newly manufactured and smelling of fresh turpeens, must have given it away to Morris, who was then killed. Philips advises the cops to take a picture of Reuben big soft hands, which are sore from firing the powerful gun with its sharply patterned grip? something that would not have occurred with the small target pistol that Morris and Reuben were shooting with after their appointment with Philips the previous day.

COMMENTARY: Once again, Wolfe’s mysteries are extremely mechanically oriented, especially when it comes to details. There is no indication that the detail oriented Pitney Philips is incorrect, and I liken the utility of these stories more to Wolfe’s mechanical approach to mysteries. These are not in any way postmodern — the plot is engineered in such a way that close attention to the details make both motive and crime clear.

The gun is a forgery, but if it is impounded for long, the new scent of the gun will fade and be perfectly indistinguishable from an original — thus it would be an undetectable forgery, and if Reuben had convinced the police of Morris’ suicide, he could have sold the gun at a later date. This theme of undetectable forgery will follow in later Wolfe, when an eidolon replaces an original, or when Severian wrestles with Apu-Punchau, or when a double replaces an original undetected, possibly as early as “The Fifth Head of Cerberus”.

The forgery in the right circumstances will be just as good. Once again we get the idea that the gun is worth “what someone will pay for it”, as was asserted about the art in “Screen Test”. Pitney’s detail oriented mind clues us in to the engineering background of Gene Wolfe — even the property of new wood and the basic construction of the gun are important in this tale and the following one as key factors in being able to resolve the mystery for the protagonist.

ALLUSIONS: The standard detective sources, but in this case war and the history of the army and its mechanical resources during the war are given equal attention, as in the following tale "The Last Casualty of Cambrai". All these mechanical details become the basis for drawing the correct conclusion, so everything from Sherlock Holmes to Fr. Brown and even later mysteries must be mentioned in passing.

FUTURE ECHOES: The devil is in the details. Just about every Wolfe story is built upon this, but it is clear in stories like this one that it is not a postmodern bottomless pit Wolfe constructs but an ordered teleological scheme. It is this designed, detail oriented nature that I think lies at the heart of almost all of Gene's plots and what separates him from magic realists that accept that there is no underlying mechanistic cause and effect.