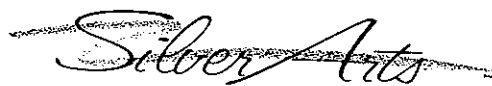


RESCUE
By
Joan L. Cannon

Short Story – Literary Arts

The logo for Silver Arts, featuring the words "Silver Arts" in a stylized, cursive script font. The "S" is large and loops around the "ilver", and "Arts" is written in a similar cursive style. The logo is underlined with a thin, slightly wavy line.

Artist: **Joan Cannon**

Title: **Rescue**

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RESCUE

“Are you having company for the weekend?” Georges sucked hard at his Gaulois, then ground out the stub in his saucer. The two friends had finished lunch at a table outside the bistro in the shade of the horse-chestnut trees.

Raoul looked at his old friend, and sighed. “Why would you ask me that?”

Georges shrugged, got up from the table, and reached for his jacket, which hung over the back of his chair. “Just stubborn, I guess. You know you spend too much time alone, *mon cher*, and that you ought to have more—shall we say—companionship.”

Raoul replied with a smile, “It’s too late to teach an old dog new tricks. My two big parties every year discharge my social obligations, and for the rest...” he shrugged, “I’m used to it.” He got up, reached into his hip pocket for his wallet, and left some bills on the table. “You know you’re welcome any time.”

“Of course, and that’s not what I meant.” Georges put a hand on Raoul’s shoulder. “You still brood, I think. It was a bad war, especially for you, but long ago. The camp, the terrible things—all in the past. It isn’t healthy.”

Lifting his own jacket off the back of his chair, Raoul moved away from his friend. The two men paced along the pavement, their jackets hung over their shoulders on hooked fingers. The leaves of the chestnuts hung in listless bunches, covered with dust, their shade hardly cooler than the ambient temperature in the middle of the street.

“Well? You know I’m right, no?” Georges pressed.

Raoul made a damp sound with his pursed lips. “It’s not the war. Not any more. It’s just what I said—habit.” He looked at Georges with a lop-sided smile. “Why don’t you and Véronique come out the first weekend in

August, before you go away, and we'll have a little dinner with Henri and Adrienne from the village. You like them, and then you can stop worrying. Okay?"

Georges shook his head, shrugged again, and touched his fingers to his forehead. "Fine. We'd like that." He crossed the street in the middle of the block, running the last dozen steps to escape a taxi. Raoul waved, and walked on to his office.

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Once off the motorway, Raoul downshifted with a clash of gears, and the Citroën's rear wheels slithered to the left. He corrected the skid with two yanks on the steering wheel, then up-shifted again, the resulting jolt snapping his head against the head restraint. It crossed his mind how Georges would have remarked on his dismal driving skills. *Well, he thought, I haven't had an accident yet.* Dust boiled up behind him, obscuring his view in the mirror above the windshield. Scurfy walls made of flints and mortar and topped with broken tiles slipped past the windows so that the car seemed to be rushing between them like a sled in a chute. Once he passed out of the village, the broad fields of wheat and soybeans shimmered in the heat; dark hedgerows of trees like huddled animals marked their boundaries and the horizon. Raoul squinted in the glare, gripping the wheel tightly, and over-steering as usual.

What a relief to be out of the chaos of Paris traffic! He savored in his mind the delicate bitterness of a cool beer from the cellar, imagined the shade of the big walnut tree cooling his damp skin while his shirt dried across his shoulders. An omelet for supper, with salad picked fresh from the garden, a slice of *rillettes*, some cheese, and a bottle of Vouvray. It would take only a minute to pick up a couple of things in Evreux, then straight home. He ran an impatient hand through his grizzled curls, and allowed his lips to bend in a smile.

He swerved a bit as a car approached and passed him, momentarily blinding him with a surging yellow curtain of dust. As it began to settle beyond his right fender, he glimpsed something shaggy camouflaged by the dingy dust cloud and a clump of tawny, dried-up weeds at the side of the road. A dog? Without so much as a glance at his rear-view mirror, Raoul trod hard on brake and clutch pedals, and brought the car to a swerving, jolting halt, nearly stalling the motor. When he got out, he noticed the crushed grass and wildflowers gave off a sharp green odor as refreshing as water. He ran back to where he had seen the brownish mound at the roadside.

The animal was stretched on its side, head extended along the ground, tongue showing between partly opened jaws, sides heaving. Its eyes were open, but as Raoul approached, they failed to focus on him. Heat clung to Raoul's face like the breath from a stove. He licked his lips, gritty with the dust still hanging in the air. He

approached the dog slowly, cautiously. He could see from its moving rib-cage that it was alive. For a moment he stood still, his toes only inches away from its extended feet, and looked down at it. Still it did not appear to see him. The tongue pulsed gently as it panted with its mouth only half open. He couldn't see signs of injury.

"Hello, old fellow," he said in a quiet voice. The dog blinked once, but was otherwise motionless. Raoul squatted down, and slowly reached out a hand toward the dog's head. When he touched the clotted hair, the animal's neck contracted, and it raised its head a fraction of an inch, only to let it fall once more onto the ground.

Raoul stood up again, looked along the road in both directions. To his left stood his car, the engine emitting little pops and coughs as it idled roughly; to the right the empty track disappeared where it curved around a stand of trees. A lark trilled out of sight above the silent fields.

"So—just you and me then," Raoul said, and stooped down again. He slid his hands under the dog's shoulders and haunches, scratching them on the coarse dry herbage, and with not much effort, picked the animal up in his arms. It made a feeble effort with its legs, then lay limp, tongue lolling, as he carried it to the car. By bracing one knee against the fender, he was able to open the back door to lay the dog on the seat. He brushed his hands on the back of his pants, climbed into the driver's seat, and started up again.

Now the spire of the cathedral rose above trees ahead. With a glance at the back seat, Raoul decided not to stop after all, and raced a traffic light to get through town quickly. Better to get to the house, and shade, and above all, water. Errands could be done in the village after taking care of his passenger.

Raoul parked in the shade of the ancient wisteria that covered the gateway. He left the door open while he went into the house to find a dish-towel. He ran water until it was cold, then soaked the towel in it. He wrung it just enough to save flooding the floor, then ran back to the car with the dripping towel, to hold against the dog's tongue. When the animal began slowly to lick the wet cloth, Raoul's creased face smoothed into a wide smile. He turned and folded the material to keep a cold place toward the slow tongue. A slight breeze stirred the leaves of the wisteria, and after ten minutes or so, the dog raised its head from the seat for an instant, and its eyes met Raoul's.

"Hello, *gitan*, he said.

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After supper, the dog lay on a folded blanket in front of the hearth. Raoul smoked a pipe, watching the curling bluish ribbon rise from the bowl against the murmurous dusk outside the open French window. The dog's

eyes were closed, and now so was its mouth. A bowl of water stood near its head. The hiss of its panting was stilled in the cooling night air. Raoul sighed deeply and looked down at the sleeping animal.

That staring coat—so like Hervé's head when he still had his hair—ribs protruding through it the way Antoine Moreau's shoulders had poked out his jacket. He thought, *That's what we were like in the camp, just like that—gaunt, sticky with filth, weak, panting, vacant-eyed.*

He remembered how the door had imploded, so great was the force of the two soldiers who hurled themselves at it. *We were such fools, to think that they might miss where we were hidden!* They'd shot Maurice in the small of the back as he tried to make it to the window, and he had lain on the floor, his hands clutching spasmodically at the boards while a pool of blood spread from under his hips. They had smashed Raoul in the temple with a rifle-butt, and when he came to, he found himself jolting on the floor of a truck, trussed like a turkey ready for the oven.

Though there had been a trial, he remembered very little of it. They beat him so regularly in an effort to force him to tell the names of others in the cadre that it had knocked most of his senses out of kilter for months. Since they had sent him to the camp instead of shooting him, he had always assumed they must have decided he knew nothing. Well, at nineteen, he was very young. In spite of everything, he was still fairly strong when he got there.

On that day, he saw for the first time that all the rumors circulating among the *Maquis* were true. He hadn't been able to tell the ages of those racks of bone, many without hair, their eyes dark caverns in their skulls. He had resolved at once that he would share his rations with the two men already in the hovel he was assigned to. Hervé slept on his right, Antoine on his left. At least he could give them a chance to have the strength to attempt escape, to have the energy to hope, to endure to the end of the war, just by giving them some of what he could afford to do without.

He'd discovered he'd been a fool about that too. When the day's rations were passed out, he saw that there would never be enough to share with two. For three days, he spent as much time as he could stay awake trying to decide what to do, whom to favor with the tiny bit he might spare. He had clenched his jaw until it ached, nearly groaned with the pain of deciding, before he made up his mind. Since Hervé was younger, Raoul thought he had a better chance to survive than Antoine. *Merde!* It went to show how big a fool he'd been, trying to play God.

Raoul put a hand over his eyes, and rubbed them hard. When he removed it, he saw that his pipe had gone out. He reached over to the ash-tray, and knocked the dottle out. The sound woke the dog. It raised its head from the rug.

“All right, boy. Everything’s all right, old fellow.”

The tip of the tail moved, the dog laid its head down again, sighed, and slept again.

Raoul remembered Antoine—how he had sighed in that same resigned way. It had been March by then—damp and cold in the leaky barracks. They never had enough blankets. By the end, Antoine hadn’t even the energy to shiver any more. Raoul had lain on his own plank bed, staring at the stained boards of the ceiling, ignoring the rain that found its way in to fall tapping beside him. He had listened to the sound of Antoine’s shallow, rasping breaths. He had heard the doomed sigh. Some time in the night, he had fallen asleep, though he had tried not to. In the morning, they had taken Antoine’s blanket for Hervé. It was Raoul who laid Antoine’s cap over his face before they went outside to the daily roll-call.

Down the road, he heard Blanchard’s farm dog give two sharp barks. Raoul’s guest lifted his head, and for the first time, looked alert. “Aha,” Raoul said to him, “you hear a comrade, perhaps?” The dog moved his tail from side to side twice, eyes on Raoul’s face.

“Time for another little snack, eh?” Raoul looked at the clock on the mantel. “And almost time for bed, so how about another bite to tide you over till morning?” He got up from his chair, the dog’s eyes following him, and went to the kitchen. He took the remains of the omelet from the pan, and carried a plate back to the dog. When he set it down, the dog got stiffly to its feet, tossed the food into its throat with two vigorous jerks of its head, and looked up at Raoul again while it licked its muzzle carefully and thoroughly.

“Want to go out? Just a short trip—in case.” Raoul walked to the French window and turned to look back at the dog. “Come on—you can do it.”

The dog, whose eyes had followed him, walked stiffly out to the nearest shrub, where it lifted a leg. “Good boy—that’s the idea,” said Raoul. He bent down to stroke the rough head as his companion returned inside. His touch caused the dog to pause until he removed his hand, and then it went to the bowl, lapped half a dozen times, and lay down again on the blanket with a soft groan.

Raoul went around the room, turning off the lamps. “Sleep well, old fellow. See you in the morning,” he said, and went to his room and to bed.

To bed—to dreams, to ghosts. *How long*, he thought, *how long before they rest—and I sleep?* He wrenched his mind from the images stirred by the stray dog. *Concentrate on something else, something useful*, he said to himself.

Work helped more than anything else. Learning languages, disciplining himself to concentrate by reading an hour a day in English and in Greek; pushing his body, long since recovered as much as it ever would, by regular calisthenics, weight-lifting, swimming, martial arts, even to the point of welcome exhaustion. But still, after everything—financial security earned by his work, physical exhaustion achieved by his efforts—still the echoes of those years reverberated to torture him. The hardest thing of all had been to admit that alcohol couldn't bring oblivion except at a price he refused to pay. He'd learned to limit its use to small amounts that left him in full control—of everything but memory.

He listened to the muffled sound of a far-away truck, to the insects singing their midsummer songs, to an owl's contralto query outside in the walnut tree. He counted the various small noises that livened the night. Work and the country—they were what had kept him sane. If Georges was correct about his needing to forget, it was too bad. There was simply no way to do it. All these years later, after all the ways he had tried, it was not possible. He rolled over onto his side and pulled the sheet over his shoulder. Perhaps if he had managed to save even one of them... He closed his eyes and concentrated on finding new night voices to add to the list of those he could name. It was the best sleeping-aid for that time of the year.

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A blackbird warbled out on the lawn. Late in the summer they were quiet except early in the morning. Raoul opened his eyes to slits, then stiffened with terror. *My God—Hervé!* The rough terra-cotta-colored locks of hair were all he could see of him. Months later he had dwindled and weakened too—despite Raoul's extra rations and careful tending after he got sick. Dysentery had sapped him till he collapsed like a leaky balloon. Raoul was overwhelmed by draining fury and powerless frustration. He had begun to shake as if he had malaria, his ears seemed stuffed with cotton so he had trouble hearing, and tears streamed down his cheeks. When they took him to the camp, he had been so sure he could do some good for someone there; not much, of course, he understood that, but something! His youth and health had to be good for something, but all his pangs of hunger, his self-denial, his determination not to be utterly brutalized, the awful choice he had accepted and made—all had come to this—Hervé was gone too! The sight of Antoine's glazed, half-open grey eyes and Hervé's pathetic ragged pelt sticking out

above the thin blankets wouldn't leave him. Raoul clenched his eyelids as one might clench a fist. With an enormous effort, he willed empty blackness behind them.

Something very cold and wet grazed the edge of the hand that lay beside his face on the pillow. Raoul jerked himself upright so abruptly he made himself giddy. The dog stood beside the bed, its long tail waving from side to side, its topknot of stiff brown locks falling over eyes which gazed intently into Raoul's. With a grunt, Raoul rubbed his own eyes, then looked back at the dog, which continued to wait patiently, only its tail in motion, gazing at him with a mournful expression.

"*Bonjour*," said Raoul hoarsely. The dog rested its chin on the edge of the mattress. Again Raoul rubbed his eyes. Then he reached out and pressed his fingers into the tufts of fur on the top of the dog's head. It wagged its tail more vigorously. The texture of the fur was rough, dry, faintly sticky...but it was just that: fur—not hair.

"Well, *mon vieux*, if we're going to get along, you'll need two things, I think." The dog's eyes were fixed immovably on Raoul. "A name—how about *Gitan* for a wanderer like you? And a bath." Raoul brought his legs out from under the sheet, and over the side of the bed. The dog shifted his muzzle from the mattress to rest it on Raoul's thigh while he groped for his slippers. Raoul continued to scratch and comb the top of the dog's head with his fingers.

"But after breakfast, yes?" Raoul padded off to the kitchen in his pajamas and slippers with *Gitan*'s rough head still under his hand.

He made coffee, boiled milk, cooked some eggs, and broke up the end of an old loaf of bread into pieces, mixed them with scrambled eggs and some of the scalded milk. He carried a tray with their breakfasts on it out onto the grass beyond the French windows, and sat on a canvas chair with the dog beside him.

"I promise you'll get some proper stuff for your dinner. We'll go to the market and get some food to keep us going as soon as we've washed up." Raoul watched a linnet flash across his lawn to the thicket of lilac and weigelia that formed its boundary. How fresh and green and lovely everything looked in the morning light! *Gitan* sat beside his empty plate, licking his chops and watching Raoul, tail drifting from side to side in a lazy rhythm. Raoul reached out to pat the dog again, his hand lingering on the vibrant body.

"You look pretty good today, like you'll make it all right." *Gitan* stood up and shook himself. Raoul drank his *café au lait*. Then he went inside and sat down at his desk, where he began to write out his shopping list.

“Dog food, eggs, milk, butter, potatoes, soap powder, bread....” He got up to look in his refrigerator, then went back to the desk. The list covered half the sheet of paper before he looked up again. Gitan was lying beside the chair with his nose on his paws. Raoul regarded him for a minute or two, rubbing his bristly jaw. He extended his chin and stretched his neck, cleared his throat, and wrote, “Collar and leash.” Then he got up and went to shave.

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