

## **A Death at the Ames Plantation (Fiction)**

**By Tom Word**

Ben Reach was depressed, had been since February 20, 2010, when his old friend Cid Cole was shot dead in the Trapp Memorial Kennel at the Ames Plantation. The shooter was Fred Eanes, like Cid a professional handler of bird dogs on the all-age field-trial circuit.

The shooting happened at 3 a.m., with Cid and Fred the only humans present. Fred had punched 911, and in minutes a sheriff's deputy arrived, siren screaming, blue lights blinking. Cid lay before the kennel door of Fred's National Championship contender Alabama Al. Beneath Cid lay a ziplock bag containing a wiener. (Lab tests proved the wiener contained an injection of antifreeze. Another wiener, also injected, lay nearby.)

Fred Eanes admitted shooting Cid Cole. Said he did it to stop Cid from feeding the hotdogs to Alabama Al, which he said Cid was about to do when he shot him. The county prosecutor declined to indict Fred, even though Tennessee law did not authorize lethal force to prevent a dog poisoning. Up for reelection in the fall, the prosecutor judged local political sentiment to favor the dog and its protector, the shooter Fred Eanes.

Ben, long a practicing lawyer in Albany, Georgia, Cid's hometown, brooded about the shooting. Since February it had been the subject of constant chatter among bird-dog folk on the Internet and face-to-face. The longer Ben brooded the more he doubted the truth of Fred Eanes' account.

Ben knew Cid Cole was no saint. Knew it from observation and from Cid's own mouth, for Cid had often confided in Ben under the protection of attorney-client privilege. What Cid had done wrong over the years filled a thick file in Ben's office. Ben had defended Cid for poaching, shooting over baited duck blinds and baited dove fields, falsifying dog and horse genealogy and birth dates, even once receiving stolen property (a Derby from Texas). Ben had as a field-trial judge seen Cid and his famous scout Booty Blevins pull dirty tricks, including riding rival dogs off course, tying a rival dog to a sapling with a grass string (Kentucky-speak for bailing twine) and riding up a rival dog's pointed birds. But Cid and Booty had a code of honor. Neither would harm a hair on a dog or a horse (except of course for training corrections administered for the animal's own good, which could be severe).

More than once Ben had seen Cid reduce his own chance to win by offering his horse to a handler whose mount was exhausted. Done it, Ben knew, for the sake of the horse, not the handler. Seen Booty on the prairie leave his own dog to save a rival's headed for a highway and do it on motion of Cid. Yes, poisoning a dog was a crime beneath the dignity of Cid Cole.

Cid Cole and Fred Eanes had a long history of conflict, born of the nature of their work and of geography. Fred trained in Alabama, Cid in Georgia; from the birth of field trials in 1874, the Chattahoochie had marked the battle line between enemy field-trial camps.

Ben often pondered the moral dilemmas of field trials. The rules of the game, mostly unwritten, were engraved in tradition, unchanged over decades. The rules relied largely on self-policing. Paradoxically, some of the rules were made to be broken. Take the rule that a scout should not ride ahead of the most forward judge. In universal practice, the rule meant that the scout should not be seen judicially riding ahead of the judge. Every scout worth the name rode forward when he might advance his dog's chances and when terrain or trees could hide him.

Other situations involved clearer moral hazard, as when a scout found his bracemate's dog pointing—must he call the point and wait politely for the judge as sportsmanship suggested, or ride up the birds, or ride on in silence, or ride a hundred yards away and call point to deceive his fellow scout who would otherwise likely find his own dog? The answer was often, "It depends." Depends on whether the team has a dog in contention. Acts of field-trial chivalry were most often practiced when they didn't matter. Acts of skullduggery happen when bucks were on the line and the dirty trick unlikely to be detected.

By mid-June Ben Reach was exhausted with his depression over the death of Cid Cole. To find out what had really happened at the Ames Plantation, he decided to talk to Booty Blevins, who had taken a job as assistant dog trainer at Mossy Swamp Plantation near Thomasville. He found Booty mowing grass at the Big House, a chore unfamiliar to the famous field-trail scout.

Like his employer, Cid Cole, Booty had often been Ben Reach's client on both the civil and criminal sides of his practice. The civil cases were seemingly trivial, but not to Booty or Ben. Like the time an Albany car dealer sold Booty a lemon used pickup with a run-back odometer, and Ben made the dealer regret it. The criminal ones were all misdemeanors, often involving fistfights outside juke joints on Saturday nights.

On his visit to Mossy Swamp, Ben brought with him a couple of barbecue sandwiches and Pepsi Colas, which he and Booty enjoyed in the luxury of Ben's air-conditioned pickup.

Ben knew that on the circuit Cid and Booty shared a motel room to save money. For twenty years, they had been inseparable nine months a year. The other three (April through June) Booty fished the bass ponds around Albany, and Cid fished off Panama City on the powerboats of his dog owners. Then in July they reunited for the trip to their training camp on the prairies, to be followed in September with seven months on the road at field trials, save for a short spell at home for Christmas.

Through two decades Cid and Fred and their scouts had battled on the circuit with all-age dogs, both winning multiple Dog of the Year and Handler of the Year titles. But before 2010 neither had managed to win the National Championship. Alabama AI for Fred and Georgia Jim for Cid were among the favorites in 2010, each the kind of dog that can win the National--biddable, stylish, tireless, a good bird finder. At age seven, they were in their primes. When the shooting occurred, Alabama AI had already run a seven-find race and was top dog. In two weeks at the end, he was declared winner.

"Booty, tell me about that night," Ben said after the pork sandwiches were eaten.

Booty Blevins trusted few humans. Two he did trust were Cid Cole and Ben Reach. So he poured out his heart to Ben, as he thought Cid would want. (He had told the prosecutor in Tennessee, "I don't know nothin'.")

"'Bout two o'clock Mr. Cid's cell phone rang. I don't know what the caller said, but Mr. Cid jumped up and pulled his pants and boots on and stomped out the door. I heard the truck start, and then he was gone. I was half-asleep, but in a few minutes, I called Mr. Cid's cell number. He didn't answer. I knowed something was wrong, but I didn't know what to do. Then about four o'clock a deputy sheriff knocks on the door and tells me Mr. Cid is dead." Tears flowed down Booty's cheeks, and Ben Reach felt tears fill his own eyes.

Ben knew that the call to Cid's cell phone at 2:00 a.m. had come from a pre-paid untraceable cell phone purchased from a Memphis convenience store. Booty's unanswered call to Cid was the next and last call registered on Cid's cell phone, found in the pocket of his jeans.

"Did Cid have any hotdogs stored in y'all's room or in his truck?" Ben asked Booty.

"No, Sir. Mr. Cid didn't like hotdogs. I never saw him buy one in his life," Booty answered.

"Not even to give pills to his dogs with?" Ben asked.

"No, Suh. We would wrap a pill in a slice of American cheese, but we never used hotdogs."

Ben didn't ask Booty if Cid had a plan to poison Alabama AI—he didn't have to. He knew Cid would never poison a dog, nor would Booty.

Shortly after Cid's killing, Ben had called the Tennessee prosecutor to discuss the case. They knew one another slightly through field trials, and the conversation had initially been cordial. But as Ben's questions of the prosecutor took on the nature of

cross-examination on the thoroughness of his investigation, the prosecutor turned testy and said he had to hang up for another call. After that he refused to take Ben's calls.

Now Ben was determined to get to the bottom of Cid Cole's death. Through his connections in field trials, he arranged an introduction to Corey Pace, an investigator with the Tennessee State Police. He flew to Memphis where Corey met him at the airport. Corey was not a field trialer, but he was a bird hunter and understood something of the culture of the competitive birddog world. (Ben had tried to get Booty to fly with him to Memphis, but Booty was not about to get on an airplane. "If the Lord had wanted us to fly, he'd of give us wings," Booty said.)

Corey explained he had no official way to get involved in the case of Cid Cole's homicide. But he had a friend in the county sheriff's department, and he promised to call him and see what he could do to reopen the investigation.

Ben thought, and Corey agreed, that there might be a digital trail to be followed. Someone bought the wieners found at the scene. They might have been bought with cash, but they might have been bought with a credit or debit card. And if that were the case, the card might lead to evidence of who bought the wieners.

Booty did not have a bank card of either kind, but Cid Cole had had two—one for business, on which he charged everything he could pass on to customers or deduct on his taxes, and another for personal charges, seldom used. Ben, serving as Cid's executor, had access to the records of both, and had run down every purchase and deposit or withdrawal made on Cid's cards in the year leading to his death. The search had yielded nothing of interest.

Corey convinced his friend in the sheriff's department to ask for the card numbers of cards held by Fred Eanes and his wife and to seek their permission for tracking their use. To Ben's surprise, Fred acquiesced, but the tracking proved fruitless. There was no record of Fred Eanes buying wieners or a prepaid cell phone.

When Booty was about to leave the comfort of Ben's truck to resume his grass cutting, he had asked, "Mr. Ben, has they still got them wieners?"

"I don't know, Booty. I've just seen the lab reports that say they were injected with antifreeze," Ben answered.

"Everybody knows antifreeze is poison to dogs. Most everyone in the dog business has lost a dog that lapped leaked antifreeze," Booty said.

With that, Booty went back to his mowing and Ben drove back to Albany.

That afternoon, Ben called Corey Pace in Memphis, and asked if the hotdogs found at the shooting scene had been preserved.

"They should be in a freezer in an evidence room; I'll check," Corey said.

That night he called Ben to say the hotdogs were in a freezer in the county evidence room. Ben asked Corey if he could put him in touch with the technician who had analyzed the hotdogs and identified the antifreeze in them.

The next day Ben got a call from a woman who identified herself as Ann Poole, a technician in the criminal evidence lab of the Tennessee State Police in Knoxville. Cory Pace had asked her to call, she said.

"Miss Poole, what identified the liquid in those wieners as antifreeze?" Ben asked. She responded with chemical terms, which Ben had also read in the written report on the wieners.

"I notice the report does not say what brand of antifreeze. Is there any way to tell that?"

"Not likely. Almost all antifreeze has the same chemical ingredients," Ann Poole said.

"But if you had a batch of antifreeze, say still in its original container, could you say if it was the same batch as in the wiener?"

"I'm not sure. Let me do a little research on that, Ann Poole said.

Ben decided to pay another visit to Booty Blevins, whom he found cleaning tack in the plantation's mule barn.

"This here is the only air-conditioned tack room in Georgia, I believe," Booty said with a grin as he motioned Ben to have a seat in a canvas director's chair. Booty continued to sponge a harness with saddle soap.

Ben brought Booty up to date on what he had learned with the help of Corey Pace and Ann Poole. Booty took it in, then sponged on in silence for a few minutes.

"Mr. Ben, I bet Mr. Fred didn't buy no antifreeze to put in those wieners he planted on Mr. Cid. I bet he took it out of his radiator."

Ben Reach used his cell phone to call Ann Poole.

"Miss Poole, if the antifreeze had been in a truck radiator before it was injected in the wieners could you tell?" After a short silence, Ann Poole responded,

"Maybe."

"I'll be back to you. Thank you," Ben concluded.

Booty and Ben looked at one another. Neither had to say anything. Booty had Saturday and Sunday off, so they planned to leave at 6 a.m. Saturday for Hurtsboro, Alabama, where Fred Eanes had his home kennel.

They made it to Hurtsboro in time for lunch at City Diner. The walls were filled with photos of bird dog and horse people, natives and Yankee snowbirds who wintered in the area. Ben asked the waitress if Fred Eanes had been in, and she said,

“He was here for breakfast, said he was going bream fishing.”

When they finished their soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Ben and Booty walked next door to the hardware store where the owner dispensed crickets and other live bait and kept on a blackboard the latest top catch in the annual Biggest Bream Contest. Luke Weaver was leading with a 1.65 pound shellcracker.

“Has Fred Eanes been in today?” Ben asked.

“He was by early this mornin’ for crickets. Said he was going to fish Simpkins Mill Pond.”

On the pretext of buying ice and Colas at the convenience store on the next block, Booty got directions to Simpkins Mill Pond from a pretty young black woman behind the counter. It was only three miles away at the end of a dirt county road.

Ben and Booty hid behind trees in a pecan grove to watch Fred Eanes and his wife fish the pond in their Jon boat, propelled by an electric trolling motor. Fred fished with a fly rod and Mrs. Eanes with a long cane pole. A large woman, she sat on a high pivot seat at the front. She was out-fishing him about three to one, Booty observed with a grin.

When the Eanes were at the dam, a quarter mile from Fred’s truck, Booty crawled from the grove. Luck was with Ben and Booty—the truck was unlocked. Booty pulled the lever that unlatched the hood, and in a minute had it up enough to unscrew the radiator cap and insert the bulb for a sample of the cooling system’s contents. At 1 p.m. Ben and Booty were bound for Albany, their mission accomplished.

Ben Reach asked the help of Albany’s prosecutor in shipping the radiator fluid to Knoxville—it went by UPS with an affidavit from Ben and Booty and the Albany deputy who arranged the shipment. Before the sample could be analyzed, however, the field-trial Internet Twitter passed an awful message. Fred Eanes had drowned while pond fishing in Alabama.

Ann Poole ran the chemical analysis of the frozen hotdogs and the contents of Fred Eanes radiator and reported to Ben Reach that the injected liquid had definitely come from the radiator.

Further Internet messages gave the details of Fred Eanes drowning. It seems Mrs. Fred hooked a lunker bass near dark on the day Booty and Ben Reach took the antifreeze sample. In her excitement she capsized the Jon boat. Fred Eanes could not swim and had not worn a life jacket. The ghost of Sid Cole took revenge, both Booty and Ben Reach believed.