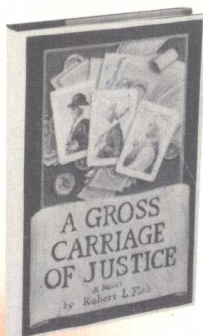


A Gross Carriage of Justice

BY ROBERT L. FISH

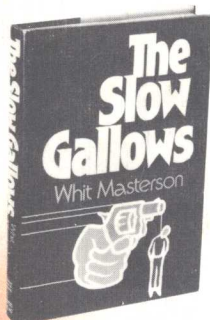


In at the Kill

BY E. X. FERRARS

The Slow Gallows

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Published for the

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ROBERT L. FISH

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CHAPTER 1

When Clarence Wellington Alexander was a youngster in grade school back in his native village of Wapakeneta, Ohio, his home-room teacher told Mr. and Mrs. Alexander that their son would go far. What the teacher failed to add, out of consideration for the hard-working parents, was that she only wished Clarence would do it as soon as possible. For Clarence had been endowed, among other attributes, with a streak of larceny that would have done justice to a much older person—Caligua, possibly. In his formative years he had spent only as much time on his books as had been required; the rest of his efforts went toward developing what he himself recognized early could be cultivated into quite a lucrative talent.

It was not that Clarence did not have other talents. His ability at mimicry might have eventually led him into a career in show-business, except that by the time Clarence had reached the eighth grade, he knew that not only was show-business too slow a road to success, it was also honest, and there was something about honesty that rubbed Clarence the wrong way. He much preferred to use his ability to imitate voices to gather dirt from unsuspecting school-mates on the telephone, and then use the information for blackmail. This, together with a few other dishonest ploys enabled Clarence to live in a style not normally enjoyed by a twelve-year-old given ten cents a week allowance.

Nor did growing maturity dim his wit, nor age wither his skill; nor for that matter, did it improve his morals. By the time he had reached the eleventh grade his ability to imitate the voices of several teachers (male) in clandestine conversations with other teachers (female) added to his gross, so that when at last Clarence took his departure

from Wapakeneta just prior to graduation, he left at night and driving a car which even his aging parents in their naiveté would scarcely have imagined had been gained from a newspaper route.

Of medium height and slender build, with heart-warming brown eyes and hair the color of burnt umber, and with a smile of innocence that would steal your heart or anything else lying about loose, Clarence marched through life. There were no absolutes in the philosophy of C. W. Alexander. In the manner of his namesake, in Clarence's grasp for the world anything was fair game, from the raffle-fund for new high-school band uniforms which he had promoted just prior to his departure from his birthplace, to the gilt-edged securities which later were to provide many a widow with guaranteed pauperhood. To Clarence, if it moved it was game. William Shakespeare, stuck for a sharp bit of dialogue toward the end of *Julius Caesar*, has Brutus remark to Cassius, "There comes a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune." Clarence W. Alexander would have put it more succinctly: "When Opportunity knocks, open your ears!" One is forced to wonder just how far William Shakespeare might have gone had he possessed Clarence's command of the language.

All in all, Clarence had small reason to distrust his philosophy. By keeping his ears open to Opportunity's knock—and even at times leading Opportunity to his door with a twisted arm and helping it raise the knocker—Clarence had managed to reach the ripe age of thirty-seven without ever having suffered either hunger or the stigma of honest labor. True, there had been an occasional hiatus in his march upward and onward when some fractious judge had removed him from circulation for a time, but those occasions were rare. It was also true at times that Clarence had been forced to abandon his native strand for safer shores until certain memories weakened, and the time of which we speak was one of those. At the moment Clarence was residing in the old Avery farm house on the outskirts of the small village of Crumley-under-Chum in the shire of Sussex, in England.

The cause of this unfortunate exile still struck Clarence as being eminently unfair. It struck him that if some foreigner could sell a United States citizen the London Bridge with impunity—and in pieces, yet—that it was extremely inequitable to frown upon his sim-

ple reciprocity with the Golden Gate bridge, especially since the Golden Gate was not only intact, but earning money.

But frowned upon it had been, and so we find Clarence in England. He had chosen the small village of Crumley-under-Chum because he preferred small towns rather than large cities with large police forces. He also knew from his experience growing up in Wapakeneta, that the vaunted curiosity of the rural villager was grossly exaggerated. In general he knew the normal rural villager was far too busy trying to maintain his own privacy, to spend much time worrying about violating the privacy of others.

His companion in exile was one Harold Nishbagel, a massive character in his early forties who was built along the lines of an earth-mover, with hands the size of football helmets, with spiky black hair, eyes like jaw-breakers, and a brow so low he looked as if he were perpetually peering under a picket fence. The two had met in prison, where Harold had managed to convince the most recalcitrant that there was nothing comical about the name "Harold," while the name "Nishbagel" had a positively royal ring to it. Since Clarence W. Alexander avoided violence as something he knew he was ill-equipped to cope with, and since Harold Nishbagel avoided thinking for much the same reason, the partnership seemed a natural one.

At the moment Clarence and Harold were seated on a bench running the length of the interior of the Deer's Head Pub on the main street of Crumley-under-Chum. Harold was carefully reading the Sunday Supplement—in color—of a London journal he had found abandoned on the bench, his mug of ale forgotten beside him, his lips moving laboriously as his thick forefinger led him from word to word, much as a seeing-eye dog might lead a hesitant master over unfamiliar terrain. The newspaper was not current, but that was of small moment to Harold; on those rare occasions when he read, he did so strictly for entertainment.

At his side, Clarence stared balefully at the stuffed deer's head on one wall which had undoubtedly led some inspired publican in the past to the brilliant selection of the pub's name. The deer, in Clarence's considered opinion, had not died from shaft or shell, but most probably from drinking the premise's beer. There was a murmur from Harold as the gist of the story he was perusing finally

worked its way through the intervening bone and reached the grey cells. He shook his head in sympathetic admiration.

"Chee!" he said in his gravel voice. "Ain't that nice!"

He nodded his Cro-magnon-type head a few times in confirmation of his conclusion, and went back to deciphering the rest of the story. It would have been easier, he felt, if the British knew how to spell, but even with this added handicap he was proud to know he had overcome the worst of the communication problem and had the general sense of the article pretty well pinned to the mat.

Clarence looked over at Harold, a frown on his face. It was not that his consideration of the stuffed deer's head—which seemed to be considering him in return with equal or superior distaste—had led to any conclusions that were very profound, or even potentially profitable. It was simply that Clarence disliked having his thoughts disrupted, particularly not by a flannel-brain like Harold. He glared at his companion.

"What?"

"It's these three old guys, see?" Harold said, his normally rough voice softening as memory of what he had just struggled through came back to him. "They got their picture here in the paper, see? In color."

He pointed; Clarence yawned. Harold went back to his story, his sausage-like finger keeping pace obediently.

"They was old friends, see, real old friends from way back, like. Then one of them gets in this jam, see, and the other two guys—they ain't got much money, you understand, in fact they're broke, see—but anyways, they hock their shirt, see, and go out and hire this big-shot mouthpiece—he costs a fortune, but the old guys they don't care, and the mouthpiece, he springs the guy, see, but it leaves the three old guys broker than a '28 Edsel, and then what do you think happens?"

"They all go play potsie," Clarence said, and yawned again.

"Naw," Harold said a trifle disdainfully. It was not often that he held the advantage over Clarence where facts were concerned. "Naw. Instead they get a wad of dough from some funny-named bunch, some foundation, whatever that is. For bein' so self-sacrificin', see?" He looked up his eyes shining, glistening with emotion. "Tell the truth, Clare, ain't that nice?"

Clarence was about to snort in derision when he suddenly felt that old familiar tingle. Was Opportunity attempting to rap on his door again, and was he trying to stuff his ears with cotton-wool? He put down his mug of beer—not with regret—and held out his hand demanding.

“Let me see the paper.”

There was a note of finality in the smaller man’s voice that Harold recognized. He sighed in defeat and held the newspaper out, clutching it for one last instant to extract a condition.

“Read it out loud to me, huh, Clare? Huh?”

“Okay, okay.” Clarence took the paper, folded it lengthwise in subway fashion to eliminate the possible intrusion of any truss ads, studied the pictures of the three old men a moment, shuddering a bit at the color of the fat one’s garment—for Clarence was a bit of a Beau Brummel himself—and then began.

“Gibraltah, Septembah 12:

“The winnaahs of lest yeah’s Jahvis—”

Harold giggled. “No, do it straight, Clare.”

“It’s a British newspaper, so I thought you wanted it authentic,” Clarence said. He was feeling better. Even the slight possibility of old man Opportunity being in the neighborhood had that affect on him, and he had a strong hunch that at most old Opportunity wasn’t any further away than a few doors down the street. “Well, all right, if you insist. You’re from Chicago, originally, aren’t you? Well, get ready—here it is in pure Cicero.”

“Aw, no,” Harold said, serious now. “Just read it straight, please, huh, Clare?”

Clarence sighed. “You certainly make it difficult,” he said, “but all right. Here it is:

“Gibraltar, September 12:

The winners of last year’s Jarvis Greater-Love-Hath-No-Man Foundation award for selfless consideration of one’s fellow-man, named for Harley P. Jarvis, whose life was saved when a native bearer sprang between him and a charging rogue elephant just moments after Jarvis had been forced to whip the fellow, are at

present enjoying the warm sunshine of Gibraltar after a pleasant cruise on the luxurious steamer S.S. Sunderland, and are planning upon returning to England on Friday next by way of Air Gibraltar."

Clarence paused, frowning.

"Friday next," he said half to himself, and checked the date-line of the story again. He glanced at his wrist-watch for the current date. "Hey! That's tomorrow."

He thought for several more moments, and then continued.

"Readers of this journal are undoubtedly familiar with the piteous but heart-warming story of the three old men, devoted friends and the founders of the prestigious Mystery Authors Club of Great Britain, but for those who purchase the *Times* or other lesser journals, we are pleased to repeat the touching history.

"Last year, one of the steadfast trio, Clifford Simpson (at the left in the accompanying photograph) was false accused of murder and might well have been unjustly—but just as thoroughly—hanged had it not been for his two friends William Carruthers and Timothy Briggs (center and right respectively in the accompanying photograph). Not once did their faith in their friend's innocence waver! Not once did they allow the overwhelming circumstantial evidence or their own extreme poverty distract them from the vital task of seeing to their friend's release from his gyves.

"(He wasn't actually gyved, of course—Ed.)

"Although poor as church mice, the two old men sold their meager possessions, and by means which, out of pride, they refuse to reveal to this day, they managed to employ the famous barrister, Sir Percival Pugh. Sir Percival, although known to be adamant in demanding and receiving extremely high fees, somehow was paid—at what sacrifice by the three friends we may never know. But having extracted his pound of flesh, Sir Percival, with his admitted genius, proved to one and all that Mr. Simpson had been the innocent victim of circumstance, and de-

served praise rather than censure for his role in the unfortunate affair.

"As a result of the self-sacrifice of the friends, each for the other, they were jointly awarded last year's laurels from the Jarvis Greater-Love-Hath-No-Man Foundation and with the huge sum which accompanies this prestigious award, the three old friends—old both in years as well as in the uplifting experience nurtured over more than five decades—are spending a few days in Gibraltar after (if you missed this in the lead) enjoying a pleasant cruise on the S.S. Sunderland.

"We can only raise our editorial hats and say: Gentlemen, welcome back! Friday next we shall be pleased to have you once again on British soil! England is proud of you!"

Clarence put the newspaper down and frowned off into space for several moments, after which his frown turned into a pleasant though thoughtful smile. His mind, accustomed to producing intricate plans at short notice, was already busily working on the present problem, and he had no doubt it would come up with something appropriate at the proper time, if not before. Harold, watching his friend for comment, misinterpreted the smile.

"Nice, huh, Clare? Them old guys stickin' together like that?"

"Yes," Clarence said, and went on planning.

"Like that time in Quentin, we had these two guys, always fightin', and then one day—"

Clarence looked at him.

"I said, yes," he said in a tone that ended the discussion. At the moment there was no time for thoughts to be disrupted. It was, though, as Harold had said, very nice, indeed. Three old men with more money than they needed for their obviously limited years . . . It was not that Clarence lacked sufficient funds at the moment; actually, his Arab customer had paid the first two installments on the sale of the Golden Gate Bridge before he became suspicious when he saw that police cars were not required to pay at the toll booth; he was sure that was not what free enterprise was all about. No, it was not that Clarence lacked money. It was simply that he felt there was no sense in giving old man Opportunity a free ride, in letting old O sit

around with his hands in his pockets when there was money to be made. One never knew when a little extra cash might come in handily. Besides, there were just so many bridges in the world, and there was no guarantee that oil would come out of the ground forever.

Admittedly, time was short if the three old men were returning on the morrow, but this of itself did not bother Clarence. He was sure he would come up with some scheme in the required time. Of course, the scenario would have to be adaptable to the cast of characters. One had to recognize, for example, that the promise of exorbitant profits sometime in the distant future for some non-existent oil well soon to be drilled would scarcely hold much lure for men of an advanced age. And asking them to invest in a pornographic movie studio in order to meet nubile young actresses was probably equally pointless. Not even getting them in some crap game in an alley using his educated dice; at their age they undoubtedly had trouble sitting, let alone squatting or kneeling.

Clarence studied the benign and fleshy features of the corpulent man in the bilious mustard-colored suit, and smiled to himself. It would be a bit like clubbing carp in a rain-barrel, he admitted to himself, but if he couldn't sell a fake-genuine diamond stickpin, or a gold-brick, to anyone with that taste in clothes, he would retire and take up needle-point. No, he decided, the best way was the easiest way. Just take the money away from them as quickly and painlessly as possible, send them about their business, and go on about life.

His mind made up and the little wheels in his head now purring along beautifully, meshing with lovely synchronization as he perfected the final details of his basically simple plan, Clarence came to his feet and tilted his head toward the bar.

"Order something while I check on Gibraltar Air schedules, will you, Hal?" he asked. "Something," he added, thinking about it, "other than beer."

"Air schedules?" Harold asked, confused. "Hey, Clare, why do you want air schedules? We can't go home yet, can we? We goin' someplace different, Clare? Huh? Huh, Clare? Huh?"

But Harold was addressing a vacant bench, for Clarence was already at the telephone booth, leafing through the proper volume for the number of Air Gibraltar. It was a pity that Clarence did not have

the prescience to pay a visit to Sir Percival Pugh, or even to chat with Captain Manley-Norville of the S.S. Sunderland, asking for all available information regarding the three old men. In that case there is no doubt that Clarence would have dropped the telephone book like a hot offer of respectable employment and would have returned, with gratitude to his beer, shaking his head at his narrow escape. . . .

CHAPTER 2

Due to one of those very odd coincidences which are the despair of statisticians but the delight of authors needing them for their plots, the very same edition of the very same Sunday Supplement in color which had intrigued Clarence Alexander with its financial possibilities—and which had so warmed the cockles of Harold Nishbagel's heart—on the very next morning was having quite an opposite effect upon one of the three subjects of the article. Timothy Briggs, seated with Clifford Simpson at a small metal table on the veranda of their modest hotel in Gibraltar, put aside his brandy, took no notice of the champagne nestling in a bucket at his side, and gripped his copy of the Sunday Supplement crushingly as he read the article for a second time. He shook his head and sneered openly. “. . . after *enjoying* a *pleasant* cruise on the *luxurious* S.S. Sunderland!” he quoted with blistering sarcasm. “That miserable tub!”

Timothy Briggs was a tiny mite of a man with a temper that easily made up for his lack of size. His iron-grey hair seemed to stand on end, as if from the electricity generated by his own jerky but constant movements, or by his explosive temperament; it made him look like an upright bath-brush suffering from static. His small face, seamed with a network of wrinkles, was dominated by his small but exceedingly sharp snapping black eyes. Timothy Briggs, it often seemed to

his two friends, went through life demanding to be taken advantage of, just so he could properly respond. Nor—at least to his own mind—was he often disappointed.

“It makes one wonder,” he went on bitterly, “just what the British Merchant Marine is coming to, when they license some overhauled ferryboat like the *Sunderland*, and call it a cruise ship. And put a clown like that Manley-Norville on as captain! Couldn’t properly run a collier on the Tyne, in my opinion! And did you notice?” he added querulously. “They had the utter gall to fly the Union Jack, instead of the skull-and-crossbones! With those prices!”

Clifford Simpson merely puffed on his cigar and smiled gently. Simpson, after knowing Briggs—as the newspaper article had noted in one of its extremely few correct statements—for over five decades, had become accustomed to the other’s tendency to exaggerate. Simpson was a very tall man, roughly twice the height of his companion, and almost painfully thin, who went through life with a constant expression of wonder on his slightly horse-like face, as if silently marveling at the foibles of this earth of ours. He looked, in general, like a perpetually pondering pipe-cleaner, usually dressed in fuzzy tweed.

“Come now, Tim,” he said in a rather amused, quite reasonable tone of voice, waving his *Corona-Corona* gently as he spoke, “the *S.S. Sunderland* is considered the finest British cruise ship afloat. Its captain is considered England’s finest mariner. The fact that we got ourselves kicked off the ship by getting ourselves into trouble—”

“You mean because I was getting into trouble, don’t you?” Briggs demanded belligerently.

“As you say,” Simpson said, agreeing. Clifford Simpson was one of those men with the unfortunate habit of honesty. He shrugged elaborately and brushed ash into an ashtray on the table. “After all, dousing yourself with perfume and painting yourself with lip-rouge and pretending you were having a blazing affair with that poor girl aboard ship—and expecting to be believed, at your age! If it hadn’t been for the services of Sir Percival Pugh—”

“Pugh!” Briggs made it sound like a homophone. It was the one name above all others guaranteed to raise the small man’s hackles. “That twister! That thief! That penny-pinching miser! If he were a pot I’d bet he’d call the kettle collect! Not that he isn’t a pot, mind

you," Briggs added, thinking about it. "If it hadn't been for Pugh we'd never have been on the bloody boat in the first place!"

Clifford Simpson stared at his companion through the smoke of his cigar. Even for Tim Briggs, this was a bit much.

"Come, now, Tim!" he said in a tone that attempted to bring some degree of reason into the conversation. "Do you mean to say that if it hadn't been for Pugh's intervention when I was charged—quite accurately, as we both know—with murder, we might never have won the Jarvis award? And thereby been able to afford the cruise?" Simpson shook his head reprovingly. "Really, Tim! How convoluted can a person's thinking get? Even yours?"

"What I meant was—" Briggs began, and then stopped. He actually had no idea of what he meant. It was merely that to mention Sir Percival Pugh to Tim Briggs was like waving a copy of *The Worker* at a Tory. But he was saved the necessity of explaining himself, because at that moment the third member of the triumverate that had won the Jarvis G-L-H-N-M Foundation award the previous year—as well as comprising the now-defunct Murder League—arrived. He was puffing a bit from his climb up the hill.

William Carruthers—Billy-Boy to his friends—was a rotund, cherubic-looking man with exceedingly bright china-blue eyes set in a round face beneath a halo of pure white hair. Billy-Boy Carruthers looked like a Cupie-Doll that had been allowed to weather over too long a period of time; he looked the sort of perfect stranger that dotting mothers would entrust their little babies to before ducking into a pub for a quick one. He might easily have played the part of an American Senator on stage or screen, if an American Senator could be pictured as benign, or as wearing a suit of a particularly nauseating shade of mustard yellow.

He seated himself with the other two, tapped the table significantly to draw the attention of a rather languorous waiter more interested in snapping a napkin at flies, waited until, at last, he had been furnished with a pony of brandy and a glass for the champagne, and then drank first the one after which he chased it with the other. These essentials to civilized conversation attended to, he burped gently, raised his eyes in the required apology, dabbed at his full lips with his handkerchief,

tucked it back into his jacket sleeve, and beamed in genial fashion at his two companions.

"I have been to the airport," he announced. "In fact, I had the pleasure of seeing our good friend, Sir Percival, getting his ticket as well. He will be on our flight, but he will travel first class, of course." He disregarded the *Grrraaagh* that came from Briggs at the hated name. "He sends his best, by the way."

"You know what he can do with his best—!" Briggs began ominously.

Carruthers disregarded this. Instead he tapped his breast pocket.

"I also picked up our tickets. Our flight is at one this afternoon. It will give us ample time to complete our packing and have a leisurely drink at the airport before departure. Luncheon will be served aboard the aircraft, I have been reasonably assured."

"At what price?" Briggs asked sourly.

"At no charge, I was reliably informed. You will also be both surprised as well as gratified, to learn that tipping is not only discouraged, but is actually prohibited aboard aircraft."

"A pity the bloody Sunderland didn't have wings," Briggs said darkly, thinking back on the nicking their pocketbooks had taken in that regard aboard the vessel. He forced his mind from the unhappy memory of the voyage, in favor of more important business. He cleared his throat, trying to sound insouciant and almost succeeding. "Why don't I meet you two at the airport?"

Simpson looked up at him surprised. "Aren't we all going down together?"

"I think I'll go ahead," Briggs said lightly, and came to his feet. "I'm all packed, you know. I'll just take my little airplane bag with me. I'd appreciate it if you could sling my other bag into the taxi with yours when you go down there." He saw the questioning look that remained on Simpson's face, and added a bit lamely, "I just want to do a little last minute sight-seeing, you know. And possibly a little personal business." He raised a hand. "Ta, then. See you at the airport around one-ish. No need to get there too early, I suppose—"

Billy-Boy smiled at him gently.

"Sit down, Tim," he said quietly.

"But I've got this—"