

A CANTICLE for a NIGHT OWL

By RICARDO I. PATALINJUG

THE ENORMOUS ROOM was lighted with a candle. Books, magazines, newspapers and dirty manuscripts were scattered all around. On the table were empty bottles of wine, unwashed glasses, cigarette butts and a battered typewriter. On one side of the room, between the door and the window, an easel stood mutely, holding patiently an unfinished surrealistic painting. Near the door a palette was hung, making a free motion to and fro, looking, doubtless, like a tired pendulum. Above it was a brooding old wall clock, killing the seconds away with monotonous ticking. The room, too, had a bed with a soiled mattress of many colors. It was painted black. Beside the bed was a rocking chair. Like the bed it was also painted black. On the other side of the room, facing the rocking chair, squat a dresser painted white. It had a long mirror. Sitting on the rocking chair or on the bed, one could see himself in the mirror.

I

There were three men in the room. One was a young man, probably 16 or 18 years old. He was sitting on a rocking chair facing the mirror. His unpledged face evoked a sombre dreamy-like expression or something to that effect. The other one was a middle-aged man with blue dreamy eyes. He was pacing up and down the room, crossing between the boy and the looming mirror. He was smoking furiously and every now and then he would drop cigarette butts into the ash-tray. The third one was an old man squatting pensively near a waste basket, muttering hush-hush to the murky night as if he were in delirium. And perhaps he was.

I hear voices walking around me, hovering above me, like the ghosts of ancient years. They are voices without faces, and my madness goes on. Moon of the centuries, I am here moaning, taming the night with my senile orisons. I am no longer a flower. I am the doom of young men, the curse of matured men, the wound of hope.

"There must be thrill in your life. Without it, life would be absurd and meaningless and you are nothing but a scarecrow. Do you know what a scarecrow is? You're a damn fool if you don't! I don't

care, though, if you don't. But I can't see any reason why you don't.

"You must understand this: Life is a search for meaning. But you can never find it — the meaning I mean — unless you know your complex self. And this goddam business of knowing oneself is not an easy thing. Oftentimes it ends with a bang or something like that. Do you get me?"

"Yes."
"No, you don't get me. But someday you will. Not now."

"I can wait."
"Of course you can! The young can wait. Only the old cannot. And you are still very young, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not young anymore."
"Yes, you are still very young."
"Are you crazy?"
"Yes."

Moonshape of a dream. Eyes of the night. Goddam eyes of the night — innumerable as the pearls of the Ionian Sea, if you must know. Blood flame. Conscience not so clear. A warm bed. But I have insomnia, you know. Poor ambitious soul, wide awake in the cool of a mad night, imposing self-torture. And to think that you are still very young! O! This is a world away from tomorrow.

"Are you mad?"
"Yes."

II

THE MIDDLE-AGED man fumbled his way to the window and peered into the night. He lifted his face as if to challenge the darkness, as if to curse the sleeping world. The night was cold; the wind angry. He swept back his uncombed hair with his long fingers and sighed. Suddenly he turned around and looked at his own reflection in the mirror. Then very softly, like the whisper of the night, he said:

"I'm here to whimper the lament of my blues!"

Then he turned around again, his sad dreamy eyes upon the young man who was now observing him with meticulous perplexed eyes. He stared at the boy for a long time. It was a sad and ghoulish look, potent with grief, probing, challenging.

"I have lived. I might as well die."

Then he paced up and down the room again and smoke furiously again and puffed blue smoke into the night again.

Awe-struck, the young man trembled like a flower.

And the middle-aged man mused.

This is the gift of maniacal ambition, the heritage of madness, eveningful of Prometheus affliction. Briar shadows—more hideous than cigarette smoke. Yeah, my blood is red. The melody is too brief. My flower has withered into trash. The aftermath of opus estoteric is not wada. It is a wound. Ill-fated dust with an ill-fated soul has grown into an angry beat generationist reaching for the stars in a pool of mud, sometimes in a pool of blood. I have haunted the sun with dreams undreamable, the moon with the rhapsody of a curse cructed from eternity. Man, moonbeams magnificent pigeonholed my flower, sick, if you must know. No more bold strides, no more oozing of flames. Pictures magnifique, things divine Divine? Adios. Yeah! My blood is red. No more!

III

THE OLD MAN propped himself up, stared at the boy, and walked towards the bed. In the mirror the boy could see the old man's ugly face, torn and tattered by monstrous years. He rose. His reflection in the mirror looked very miserable. At first he did not recognize it. But when it moved as he moved, he realized it was he. He could hardly believe it.

"Let me be a flower. A rose, and unfading rose, to be exact," he chanted.

"Shut up!" the old man shouted.

"Let me be a flower. A rose, an unfading rose, to be exact," the boy chanted again. "I am a poet, old man, and a short story writer too. I can write poems about a flower, a rose, an unfading rose, to be exact. I can also write stories about old bastards like you!"

The old man tried to smile. But it was all a pose. The young man knew it. He was dead sure about it.

"Boy, you look very lonely and sad and pensive too."

"I'm not. I know I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell — from your eyes."

"Perhaps it's because my eyes have seen more than what they ought to see."

"I see."

"No. You don't see."

He laughed. It was a hollow laughter, dry and painful. It was like the soft tolling of a mournful bell.

"Let me be a —" suddenly, in an hour that was only an instant, the room whirled and before him he saw a hooded phantom. He was laughing and his laughter was like the soft tolling of a mournful bell. The boy stood for a long frightened moment.

I was once a flower, a rose to be exact, in a garden by the sea. Man, my freshness was entombed in a graveyard by the sea.

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The boy looked around, swept up the rocking chair by his back and walked towards the window, pushing the middle-aged man away. He looked out into the night. There was nothing there but the darkness. He couldn't see anything there but the black hood of the monstrous night. The outside world was a vast and terrifying expanse of black blood.

Suddenly the old man swung out of bed, stood before the mirror and cried. "No! No! No!" He lurched forward, swept the boy with his trembling arms, and closed the window furiously.

The middle-aged man opened a book. The boy stood before the mirror smiling a sinister smile.

"I don't want to die in the night!" a savage cry tore loose from the old man's throat.

The boy echoed a barbaric laughter. "I don't want to die in the night! I want to die under the burning sun!"

"You can afford to die in the night," the boy said tauntingly. "You're a brave man."

"No! Dying in the night is a tragedy. It is always a tragedy. Besides, I am no longer brave. I am all broken. I am just like a —"

"You're just like a useless old goat, that's all!"

I feel you stirring inside me, my boy, I know I'm just being nostalgic. I fashion you out of memory, out of a mind drunk with memory. Memory is an enemy more loathsome than death. Perhaps, it is because it stirs in me the desire of the impossible. There is no escape from memory just as there is no escape from death. You laugh at me because you are a fool. I know you know that you are

just laughing at yourself. You are a fool. You are young and you are armed with vision. I am old and I am tortured with memory. Lost and ancient days! They are the claws clawing at my very soul! But everything will be over soon. I am speaking in a language few would understand and fewer still would find sufficient. We are all fools!

IV

"WHY ARE you so useless? O why are you so useless?" the middle-aged said to the old man almost angrily. "I hate you only because I hate myself. Your weakness has triumphed over my strength. Yes, you have successfully planted the seed of fear in my still arable world. Your eyes! I should have plucked them out and get the hell out of them! They are haunting my nerves. You! You, old bastard, you! You are the antithesis of meaning."

The old man retreated to the bed, muttering: "Fool! Fool! Fool!"

The boy grabbed him by the arm and with the same sinister look in his face, he asked: "Do you want me to throw you out of the window, huh?"

"And kill yourself?" the old man said without looking at the boy. He freed himself from the boy's tightening grip, proceeded to the bed, and dropped wearily on the soiled mattress of many colors.

Ruefully, the boy sat on the rocking chair again. The middle-aged man was pacing up and down the room again, crossing between the boy and the mirror.

"Years ago I also had a room like this," he said. "I loved that room. It was in that room that I talked with God."

"Did he answer?"

Silence.

"Every man has his own god."

"And his own hell too," the boy said.

"There are as many gods as there are individuals."

And we are all disillusioned somnambulists, the boy thought. Yeah, disillusioned somnambulists. He rose. The middle-aged man stood transfixed. Now, more than half of the candle had melted. The light was dim, dying. The room looked very gloomy, dismal, and almost dream-like. Suddenly the mad rain came pattering everywhere with tremendous intensity. The wind moaning outside was rising slowly to a crescendo and violent gusts blew against the window panes. The darkness deepened; the rain wilder.

The boy lurched up and down the room, lit a cigarette, opened the window, and thrust his head out as if to throw his thoughts away into the night. The wind and rain lashed at his face but he kept on standing there, transfixed, like a statue carved of antiquity. The middle-aged man grabbed him by the arm and

(Continued on page 49)



The Canticle for a Night Owl

(Continued from page 38)

shoved him away from where he stood. But his hand was too cold, like a ghost's, so that the young man screamed at the top of his voice: "Ghost, begone!"

"Are you mad?"

"Yes!"

He ran towards the mirror, stood before it and shouted at the reflections he saw there: "Leave me alone! Leave me alone! Demons of the night, leave me alone!"

He turned away from the mirror and looked around the room. The old man and the middle-aged man were nowhere to be found. But when he looked at the mirror again, he saw their reflections there, ghastly, ugly, sneering at him tauntingly. With a bottle of wine, he smashed the mirror into pieces. "I want now! I want the present! And the present only!" He shrieked.

He fell down in a swoon.

But angry voices sprung like vultures

from out the darkness and into the room:

"Fool! Fool! Fool!"

Then there was the jingling laughter of a happy child — innocent and care-free like the verdant grass of May. But it did not last long. It was followed suddenly by a cry of disillusionment of a young man, then by the fiery words of a matured man, defying the laws of the gods and the laws of man. His cogent voice, full of implacable anguish and heavy with wrath rent the stillness of the room and made the night tremble with fear. But again it did not last long. It was followed later by the whimper of defeat and the painful groan of a dying old man.

V

THE YOUNG man thought he was dreaming and perhaps he was. He didn't know.

THE END

EDITORIAL

in reply to mr. mil

(Continued from page 1)

The best proof is the mere fact that we are publishing Mr. Mil's article. Articles have been rejected, not in pursuance of censorship policies, to which we do not adhere, but in pursuance of maintaining the standards of a college magazine and keeping our sacred obligation to our readers.

(c) The same observation in the next preceding paragraph applies to Mr. Mil's proof of limited academic freedom at the university, namely, that there has not been a single organization yet formed strong enough to stand on its commitments, favorable or unfavorable to the administration. He commits for the third time the fallacy of *non-sequitur*. We would like, however, to ask a question, and this is with reference to the Supreme Student Council, regarding which Mr. Mil advocates for total non-interference of the USC Administration: Has there been any instance that the administration unreasonably or arbitrarily interfered with the activities of the Supreme Student Council? The policy seems to be that of harmonious co-operation between the two, not dominion nor interference.

It would have served the cause of clarity better, if Mr. Mil had given us his definition of academic freedom. For the benefit of Mr. Mil and our readers, we are quoting hereunder Morrison's definition (and we hope that any further discussion, oral or written, as to whether we enjoy academic freedom at the university should be taken in the light of this definition:

"1) The right of a teacher or researcher in a university of other institution of higher learning to search for the truth in his chosen field, and interpret his findings and communicate his conclusions to students and public, without being penalized or molested by authorities within or without the university.

"2) The right of a student in an institution of higher learning not only to be taught by unfettered instructors but to have access to all data pertinent to the subject of his study, and to be reasonably free from compulsive rules and regulations of a secondary-school nature.

"3) The right of a teacher or researcher to exercise the freedom of speech, writing and association that all other citizens enjoy, without being molested or discharged from his academic position."

M. L. L. APARTE, JR.