

Everyone's a Loser in the Manchester Book Row

WAT-11/1/67 BY RAYMOND MOLEY

A newspaper headline last week said of Mrs. John F. Kennedy, "With Victory in Her Bag, Jackie Will Take a Trip." This prompts me to repeat an old gag about the man in the Louvre who was looking at the battered statue of the Winged Victory. He said, "If that is victory, I would like to see defeat."

Aside from the compassion one feels for Mrs. Kennedy, who has suffered deeply, a sober appraisal of her behavior in her relations with the author, William Manchester, and her lawsuit against the publication of his book is that Mrs. Kennedy lost her composure and precipitated exactly what she sought to prevent. All the other participants in the imbroglio lost stature, even respect, by their actions.

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The "settlement" of the lawsuit about his book shows that Manchester made an agreement with Robert Kennedy so vague that its terms could never be adequately interpreted by a court. And Mrs. Kennedy's charges against him must permanently injure his reputation as a writer.

The publishers, by agreeing to the deletions, show that before suit was brought against them they were willing to publish material which was not relevant to the story they intended to print. Only the peril of great monetary loss forced them to agree to the deletions. And they will suffer the reproach that they have published not the whole story, but a doctored version of history.

Robert Kennedy by his participation in the affair revealed himself as a man who would—and did, as it has proved—rewrite history according to his own specifications, just as when he sat in a seat of power he had attempted to direct the flow of news. He stands revealed as a man who though possessed of an overpowering ambition fortunately lacks the judgment necessary to attain his ends.

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For the agreement which seems at this writing to end the suit to prevent the publication of Manchester's story creates more interest in the 1,600 words omitted than in the many

thousands that Look and Harper & Row will sell to the public. So many have seen the whole text and so many copies of the unexpurgated edition are in existence that ultimately everyone will know the whole story.

At this time in the proceedings there appears on the stage a character designated by Shakespeare as

"Rumor, painted full of tongues." There appeared in the press all sorts of guesses about what was in the original version, and there will be versions of the story printed abroad that will have a profitable bootlegged sale.

The public curiosity about the Kennedy family still remains, three years after the tragedy. As Walter Bagehot wrote 90 years ago about British interest in the monarchy:

"A family on the throne is an interesting idea . . . It brings down the pride of sovereignty to the level of petty life . . . It introduces irrelevant facts into the business of government . . ."

But a family so exalted must not only do interesting things. It must keep the respect of the beholders. When it fails in that and makes mistakes, it can lose respect overnight. The spell is broken. And ribaldry follows reverence.

In the weeks while this controversy went on, public excitement ran high and each day added something to the alleged mystery. But, as al-

ways when the subject is based upon irrelevancies, the reaction will be quite sudden.

There will now follow what has been called "the terrible sanity" of an awakening. The public will awake with a hangover of resentment against all concerned. Common sense will suggest that the great fuss was a mixture of emotion, misunderstanding and speculation. And the publications that follow may be looking for purchasers.

President Johnson, the bystander, will be the only one to escape unscathed. E.M.P.