

THE PRESS

REPORTING

The Price of James Earl Ray

William Bradford Huie boasts of "one distinction. I guess I've paid more money to more murderers than any reporter in history." Freelancer Huie has other distinctions as well, but it is true that he uses money, lavishly if necessary, to get his story. Nobody was ever convicted for the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955, but Huie paid enough to get a complete account of the crime for *Look* magazine. Three years ago, Huie disclosed the facts in the case of the murder of the three civil rights workers in Neshoba County, Miss. After a few midnight meetings with greedy Ku Klux Klan informers, he reconstructed the event for the New York Herald Tribune.

Once again, Huie has shown that money in the right hands pays off. Under the cautious eye of Attorney Arthur Hanes, James Earl Ray, the accused killer of Martin Luther King Jr., is telling his life story to Huie. In exchange, Huie is financing Ray's defense. So far, Huie has not been permitted to see Ray, but he has received some 20,000 handwritten words, which he is exhaustively checking out. Ray may or may not be involved, but Huie has become convinced that a conspiracy led to the murder. Huie plans to publish one article before Ray's trial next November, then follow up with a book. "People don't like this way of operating," says Huie. "I don't like it much either. But I don't know any other way to get the truth."

Capricious Execution. Besides money, Huie makes use of a fierce persistence and an equally intense passion for the underdog. He is an aggressive, blunt-spoken reporter who makes it clear that no one is going to put anything over on him. When he does business with the sordid characters who sell him stories, he tells them: "One damn lie and the whole deal is off." And few facts in Huie's exposés have ever been disproved.

It took five years of digging, but he finally unearthed the details in the case of the only U.S. serviceman executed for desertion in World War II. His book, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, was a fascinating account of how the military capriciously singled out this private, among thousands of deserters, to serve as an example. Then they thought better of it and hushed up the whole affair. Equally compelling was *The Hiroshima Pilot*, in which Huie demolished the myth that B-29 Commander Claude Eatherly remorsefully turned to

a life of crime after dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima. Eatherly, Huie showed, had not even flown in the mission over Hiroshima, and his guilt feelings developed years later under the encouragement of ban-the-bomb propagandists.

In recent years, Huie has been preoccupied with civil rights. As an eighth-generation Southerner, he feels an obligation toward Negroes, and he wants to be proud of his home region. After many years of traveling, he now lives where he was born, in Hartselle, a town of 8,000 in north central Alabama. "There is a decency about people here," he says. He was happy with the racial progress that was being made in Alabama until George Wallace be-



HUIE (RIGHT) & RAY'S ATTORNEY
Passion, persistence and self-defense.

came Governor. "I suppose the reason I keep involved is that I resent Wallace's effort to turn back the clock."

To flaunt that attitude in Alabama is asking for trouble, so Huie takes precautions. He and his wife Ruth live in a house that is designed for self-defense. Every room has an outside exit. Spotlights have been placed on the roof, on the patio, on the lawn. Many of them can be turned on at Huie's bedside. "There are no shadows around this house at night," he says. The house is also equipped with three Remington riot guns, one for the use of guests. Huie, a crack shot, also has a riot gun fastened to the front seat of his car. "I try to be prudent, remembering how Medgar Evers was murdered," he says, referring to the Mississippi civil rights leader who was shot in the back while returning home one night.

After Huie denounced Wallace on a lecture tour in 1964, the Governor went on television to tongue-lash the writer. Getting the message, racists made abusive phone calls. For four nights, a pro-

cession of cars drove slowly around his block while Huie stood by the window with his riot gun. In July, when a cross was burned on his lawn, he wired Governor Albert Brewer, pointing out that since Wallace is given state protection, his enemies should have it too. Brewer agreed to give him what he wanted, and now the local police provide frequent patrolling.

Huie knows that the Ray assignment is a possibly dangerous one. He hopes it will be his last. He would prefer to write novels now that at 57, he feels time is growing short. He has already written five, most recently, *The Klansman*, a powerful portrait of a Southern sheriff who is pulled one way by the Klan, the other way by his better instincts; the Klan wins. Huie also hopes that movies will be made of some of his civil rights books. "One of the great tragedies is that we've never had realistic films about race hatred in the U.S.," he says. At the moment, a small studio is making preparations to film Huie's book about the Neshoba murders, *Three Lives for Mississippi*. Before the film could be made, however, Huie once again had to go through the distasteful experience of shelling out money to scruffy Klansmen, who then signed releases for portrayal rights. He is confident that the result will be worth it. "If films like this are done with the imagination of *Bonnie and Clyde*, you can really move people."