

Part I—The Crime

By Budd Schulberg

WHEN BOB KENNEDY decided to make the run for the White House I was in Italy working on a novel by the shore of the legendary Lake of Como with snow-capped Alps standing sentinel around me. I felt safe, secluded, productive. The London Times and the Paris Herald-Tribune and the Rome Messaggero brought the daily news to my reading room every day, so I knew about the crisis in gold, the British refusal to admit Indians to their island, and I was increasingly aware of the political quicksand L. B. J. had stumbled into in Viet Nam. But, on a two-month sabbatical from the pressure of civic problems that had demanded great hours of my time for a number of years, it was a relief to be able to read about world issues without feeling a moral obligation to do something about them. If I may be excused a conceit, I thought that

after years of involvement I had earned a rest, a "working vacation," the luxury of getting up in the morning, kissing my wife, breathing the air, taking a walk, clearing the mind and then, "ah, sweet mystery of work."

That was my selfish state of mind when a cable from Bob Kennedy found me on the shore of that picture-postcard-blue Italian lake and called me back to reality. American reality. The cable said he "found himself in a struggle" and expressed the hope that I would be back in the States in time to enlist in his campaign. He expressed his appreciation for any help I might be able to render in getting his message across to "your people." My wife, Gerelaine, and I smiled at that one, for Bob meant not Hollywood people or literary people or Jewish people but black people, the friends we had

made in Watts and other neglected communities in the course of establishing the Writers Workshop after the holocaust four years ago.

That evening I answered that I would be coming back shortly, ready to enlist in his army of volunteers. And I fired off this opening salvo to the director of the Watts Writers Workshop:

"You know, at the end of my dialog with Jimmy Baldwin I said I thought the whites had almost had it, that unless they could rip the racism out of their culture, out of their hearts, our country was on the road to violent division. However, I feel we have a last chance in Bobby Kennedy. I know that he honestly wants to get out of this damnable war that is bleeding us to death. I believe him when he says he wants to take those billions we are pouring down the Saigon drain and put them to work in our

ghettos, rebuilding them . . . If we can get Bobby in we have a last chance of doing something on a federal scale about the galling neglect we see in Watts. Yes, Bob seems to understand what we need for our cities, not just those billions, but ideas, imagination, and love. What Bob saw when he came to our workshop to meet the writers could be enlarged a thousandfold in every single community. If we blunder on, if we cut back the services we should be expanding, if we just remain liberal! Then you are right, then comes Armageddon.

So, a long-winded nomination speech for Bobby Kennedy, our last best hope of making it together? Lyndon's stunning abdication speech made me even more eager to work for what seemed to me that last, best hope. But Italy is seductive and we lingered, some days in Venice and more in Rome. We were enjoying the sculpture and the markets and the restaurants and the people when the sky fell down. Another Dallas! This time in Memphis. This time not the President or Medgar Evers the black messiah of Mississippi but our Nobel prize winner for peace, apostle of black freedom that he was, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Not again! No another public murder! How long, O, nights and days of

bigots, can we bear your slings and arrows, his scathing riffs and stonings? In that moment the sidewalk cafes of the Via Veneto lost their savor and the graceful Spanish steps were despoiled in grief and rage. It was time to either move. Move than ever I believed what I had written, my friends in Watts. Now angry young havers would be hearing

unreasonable. "O. K.," he agreed, "I personally think it's all a waste of time because any good black man or any real friend of the black man is going to be cut down sooner or later—like Jack Kennedy and Medgar Evers and Brother Malcolm. But I can dig it. You go ahead with your meeting. We'll pass out the literature in the parking lot."

The rally ended lamely if peacefully. Charles Evers said that President Kennedy and his brother and Martin Luther King, along with too many others murdered in the south in recent years, all shared a belief in the dignity of man and the eventual triumph of genuine democracy. And he prayed that Bob Kennedy, who stood up for Medgar and for Martin and for all the oppressed, would be able to bring this about thru the democratic process.

In the audience for that rally was my employe of many years, Mrs. Louise Carter. While I was scheduled to speak at several other gatherings that evening, Louise went on to the Ambassador hotel to attend a large reception for Kennedy. Next morning she said she had seen Bob Kennedy, in fact had shaken hands with him twice in the famous Coconut Grove. But she also had encountered a slight, dark-complected young man who worried her because he had been wandering around the hotel and standing behind the curtains. Louise had once worked at the Ambassador and she knew where such places were checked in a suspiciously distant the days of the war of the hallways. The young man accompanied her, he wanted to know his way to the side corridor and cautioned her: "Be care-

Kennedy workers to try and find out how it was going. Around 6 p. m., Pete Hamill the writer came by with his younger brother and we drove to the Ambassador. The Embassy ballroom had an air of tentative gaiety. Not too many had arrived yet but those who came early were optimistic. In a small roped-off section press officers Pierre Salinger and Frank Manlewicz were working their desks, taking quick phone calls and jotting down meaningful hieroglyphics. Both thought it looked good for Bob, mentioning percentages that turned out to be slightly optimistic. "South Dakota is in and bigger than expected," Frank told us. His father, the gifted writer of "Citizen Kane," had worked for my old man and I remembered Frank as a child-editor putting out a surprisingly professional mimeographed newspaper with his brother Don. If Bob could make it to the White House it was believed that Frank would become his Pierre. For me that was a comforting thought, Bob knew where he was going and Frank was an ideal companion for that journey, cool but concerned, and gallantly informed.

Now the Embassy ballroom was coming to life. Pretty girls in mini-skirts and Kennedy skimmers. Earnest young men from the New Left. Middle-aged doctors and lawyers and their socially minded wives. The liberals. A lot of black people. A smattering of Democratic pros. Everybody very friendly, very up, smiling rickety but more than victory, tasting hope. I talked with Pete Hamill about it as we waited for the night to begin. Pete was a Ramparts man, a

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our cities apart. It would be black against white, father against son . . . a time of shame and sorrow . . . this mindless message of violence in America which again stains our land and every one of our lives." The quotes are from Bob Kennedy's address on the assassination of Doctor King on the day after that calamity.

Two months later, Sunday afternoon the 21 of June found us on Central avenue, the Main Street of black and deprived South Los Angeles, speaking at a Kennedy rally with Charles Evers, who had picked up the standard fallen from the hands of his martyred brother in Mississippi. While Evers was on the platform explaining his reasons for supporting Kennedy, saying he believed the senator had a rare and possibly unique capacity to break the chains of racism that were holding his people back, a black militant leader came into the hall with his "troops." We were concerned that he might try to break up the meeting. He had a stack of leaflets attacking Kennedy along with Humphrey, McCarthy, Nixon—blue-eyed devils all. Our Kennedy-Evers team had strong black support in this community and with a critical primary less than 48 hours away, it seemed as if more violence might erupt.

I went over to the militant leader. I said Charles Evers risked death from full-time racists every day of his life and had come a long way to plead Bobby's cause. "Even if you don't agree, he deserves a respectful audience." The local black leader nodded. He could be difficult but sometimes not

ful, you could hurt yourself? It's pretty hard in there." He was very polite and offered to bring us extra chair seats for Louise's friend, Charles.

The passageway where they found the chairs was so narrow, had the main lobby and the restaurant with the Embassy's room and the party room Kennedy was to meet his death two nights later. The young man's knowledge of the area and the way he was dressed prompted her to ask him if he was an employee of the hotel rather than a guest. He said no, he was just a spectator who had come like all the rest of the crowd to see Kennedy. And he asked: "Shouldn't he be here by now? Isn't he late? I wonder why he hasn't shown up yet?" With him, according to Louise and her friend, was another young man, also slender and swarthy, carrying a violin case. And he also asked if they knew why Kennedy was late and if anything could be keeping him from the hotel. Both young men kept wandering up on the stage and looking behind the curtains. Said Louise Carter as she described her misgivings to me on the morning of June 3, "Later when I saw all those crowds around the senator and trying to touch him, he seemed so unprotected—and with so many angry people walking the streets these days, it just didn't look safe to me."

On primary election day I passed the time trying to relax and rest up for what I thought would be a long and eventful evening. It rained like out of the way boxes spend their days awaiting important contests. I turned on the radio. The television news. Called some friends who were in the house. Called

Village Voice, a crowd of Norman Mailer's, a North Beach and a crowd of as heavy weight champion Joe Frazier. There was an Italian and sometimes things. He was often wrong like we, like the best of the group and indeed that. He was bitter about the way and the state of the Union and the campaign began that we like to call "inner cities," but this night he was happy and hopeful, and it may sound crazy but we raised paper cups to a better world.

We were joined by Warren Rogers of Look magazine who had been on the campaign trail with Bob and who shared my feeling that he was the most misunderstood man in American life. I had never found him ruthless, cold, and calculating; on the contrary I knew him to be warm, humorous, and intensely human. "I know he attracts some of those people around him because of who he is," Warren had said. "But the truth is, he's fun to be with. I feel . . . good . . . around him." That was the way his friends felt about him. And he had as many of those as he had enemies.

The ballroom was filling up now and returns were beginning to come in so we decided to go upstairs to the Kennedy suite. There we found a kind of impromptu party in progress, one of those "Only in America" things, or maybe only in a Kennedy America: astronaut John Glenn, Olympic champion Fatter Johnson, the Milton Berles, film director John Frankenhofner, Charles Evers, and John Lewis, one of the original leaders of S. N. C. C., Mexican organizers of the huelga against the grape growers. Sharing a couch with Glenn, a Catholic priest, a Democratic office holder, a local black

When Robert Kennedy was shot down in a crowded hotel corridor a year ago, novelist Budd Schulberg was a few steps behind him. In this article, the first of two on the "politics of assassination," Schulberg recreates that fateful night in Los Angeles.

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"A few steps behind us we heard 'firecracker pops' and screaming."

leader, said a Hollywood glamour girl was Ethel Kennedy, Saru athletes, national hero, liberal politicians, movie stars, writers, strike leaders, black militants; from the mansion of Beverly Hills, the playing fields, the vineyards, the ghetto—"This gathering is not to be believed," said Pete Harwell as he bobbed and weaved thru the group hunched at the one small bar.

I watched Ethel watching the television as her husband slowly began to yell about it his rival. "And I'll bet our citizens vote isn't cracked yet!" said a Mexican-American covered with Kennedy and "Hunkys" buttons. "My people, they vote 99 per cent." This turned out to be the most accurate prediction in a night no one could have predicted except a man'script young man who was down stairs in the area of the campaign reception room, having himself a drink or two before going back to his car to get a locked little gun with which he had been practicing for days.

Five hours above that reception room something in the crowd, our candidate watched, gradually between the darkness and the white screen the other above us, and with a gasp there gasped. "There you taking?" shouting in the doorway with a new smile. He then reported the, though campaign—from New England to Southern California, that country of night and acrobatics where the political podiums swing easily from Socialist

so much more to do. Garretts and I offered our congratulations on winning the crazy-quilt state of California. He said he was going down to the ballroom in a little while and asked what I would say if I were in his place. I realized he had talked to Stevenson and Schlegel, and others better qualified than I, but, as I had done with him on some other occasions, I plunged in anyway: "Well if the margin is four or five points, you know who they are, the . . ."

He stopped me with a slow grin. "I know, you're going to give me the thing about the black vote and the citizens. . . ."

"The citizens is like 90.9 and I hear South Los Angeles is 85 per cent."

"A lot of black friends will be on the platform with me. I think Walter [Sherman, a long-time aid all the way back to Senate race, sometime days] is asking Oscar Chavez. They did a terrific job, terrific."

pany the victor on his way down to the ballroom.

In the Colonial room about 70 of us were waiting for the senator. We watched the preliminaries on television as he was getting ready to come to the microphone. It was a festive moment and Warren thought we should all have drinks in our hands to toast the occasion. He was gone a few minutes and when he returned with the highballs it was also with the information that Bob would shortcut thru the serving pantry that divided our smaller room from the ballroom. [For some reason the fact went unreported in national magazines, nor has it been revealed in the Sirhan trial which I attended in mental fascination and, at times, dismay. To this layman mind, it seems as if it may have some bearing on the crucial subject of premeditation. Did Sirhan simply stumble blindly into the serving pantry in search of coffee to cure his "substitution," as the team of gifted defense counsel would have the jury believe? Or, aware that the senator had taken a similar route thru the pantry when both tracker and tracker had been in the hotel two nights before, had the assassin suggested himself in that pantry so that he could get down his unsuspecting target, as he had promised in his autobiography: "Kennedy must fall. . . Kennedy must die. . . Kennedy must not live beyond the 31st of June."]

