

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the first of two articles dealing with the assassination of Sen. Robert Kennedy and the trial of Sirhan Sirhan. This article is concerned primarily with the crime, with political observations by the author.

By Budd Schulberg

**W**HEN Bob Kennedy decided to 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 us. We felt safe, secluded, productive. The London Times and the Paris Herald-Tribune and the Rome Messaggero brought the daily news so I knew about the crisis in gold, the British refusal to admit Indians to their island, and the political quicksand LBJ had stumbled into in Vietnam. But, it was a relief to be able to read about world issues without feeling a moral obligation to do something about them. After years of involvement I felt I had earned a "working vacation."

Then a cable from Bob Kennedy arrived. The cable said he "found himself in a struggle," and expressed the hope that we would return to the states in time to enlist in his campaign. He expressed his appreciation for any help we might be able to render in getting his message across to "your people." Geraldine 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 while establishing the Writers Workshop after the holocaust four years ago.

**T**HAT evening I answered that we would be coming back shortly, ready to enlist in his army of volunteers.

Lyndon's abdication speech made me even more eager to work for what seemed to us that last, best hope. But Italy is seductive and we lingered. 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 our Nobel Prize winner for peace, apostle of black freedom through non-violence, Martin Luther King. In that moment the sidewalk cafes of the Via Veneto lost their music and the graceful Spanish Steps were shadowed in grief and rage. It was time to go home.

Two months later, Sunday afternoon, the second of June I was 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 brother.

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 through the democratic process.

In the audience was my employee of many years, Mrs. Louise Career. While I was scheduled to speak at other gatherings that evening, Louise went on to the Ambassador Hotel to attend a reception for Kennedy. Next morning she said she had seen him, in fact had shaken hands with him twice, in the Coconut Grove. But, she said, she had also encountered a slight dark-complexioned young man who worried her because he had been wandering around the stage and looking behind the curtains.

**L**OUISE had once worked at the Ambassador and she knew extra chairs were stacked in a passageway behind the stage to the rear of the ballroom. The young man accompanied her. He seemed to know his way to the side corridor and

A smattering of Democratic pros. Everybody was friendly, very up, smelling victory but, more than victory, tasting hope.

The ballroom was filling up now and returns were beginning to come in, so I decided to go upstairs, to the Kennedy suite. An impromptu party was in progress, one of those "Only in America" things, or maybe only in a Kennedy America. Sharing a couch with Astronaut John Glenn, a Catholic priest, a Democratic officeholder, a local black leader and a Hollywood glamour girl was Ethel Kennedy.

We watched Ethel watching TV as her husband slowly began to pull ahead of his rival. "And I'll bet our chicano vote isn't counted yet!" said a Mexican-American covered with Kennedy and "Huelga" buttons. "My people, they vote a hundred percent." This turned out to be the most accurate prediction in a night no one could have predicted except a nondescript young man who was downstairs near the campaign reception rooms, having himself a drink or two before going back to his car to get a lethal little gun with which he had been practicing for days.

Kennedy wandered quietly between his bedroom and the suite across the corridor where colleagues and well-wishers were gathered. "How we doing?" As he stood in the doorway with a wan smile, his face reflected the tough campaign.

Shortly after 11 o'clock CBS-TV an-

nounced that Bob had won a close but clean-cut decision. Escaping for a few minutes from the mounting festivities, I was standing on a balcony when Warren Rogers came out, saying that Bob wanted to talk to me alone for a couple of minutes. My wife, Geraldine, asked if she might come along; it was a moment she would like to remember.

**I**N A modest bedroom with twin beds Bob was sitting on the floor in a corner, with his knees drawn up, a favorite position. He was smoking a small, slender cigar, the first time we had ever seen him do so. He seemed markedly less jubilant than the rest of us. More tired, undoubtedly. Geraldine and I offered our congratulations on winning 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 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 Chicano..."

Speaker Jesse Unruh, "Big Daddy" of California Democrats, suggested that it was time to go down. Ever-practical Jesse was probably thinking that it was nearing midnight and that Bob should be seen on TV in his winning posture by as many as possible across the country. Bob rose to his feet slowly. There was no elation in him, certainly none of the cockiness attributed to him by detractors. He seemed thoughtful, concerned, perhaps a trifle subdued. He said, "Stick around, let's talk later."

I asked him where. He said after the talk in the main room he would come to

assassin sequestered himself in that pantry so that he could gun down his unsuspecting target, as he had promised in his notebook: "Kennedy must fall... Kennedy must die... Kennedy must not live beyond the fifth of June."

We all watched Bob's neat, brief "Thank you—and on to Chicago" speech and then, anticipating his arrival through that back passageway, moved closer to the pantry doors. We heard a couple of those "firecracker pops" and the sound of screaming. We ran into the pantry. Amidst the screaming and the pushing and the Oh-my-Gods! Bob had taken a few steps forward and then had fallen back on the cold stone floor. Pete Hamill was di-

rectly in front of me and partly blocking my view so his description is clearer than mine, although my impression confirms what he saw:

"The sonofabitch was standing there with one foot forward and his arm extended like he was on a target range." The narrow pantry became a screaming bedlam of pain, terror, rage: "Look out! Sonofabitch! He's got a gun! He's shooting!" Shot went pop-pop-pop and now that we knew they were not firecrackers or popping balloons they sounded louder.

People were responding in conflicting ways—some moving back to escape the explosive possibilities, others moving in on the author of the crime; an obscene human traffic jam. The Gun was an undersized man dressed in slacks and sports shirt.

Bob was lying on his back looking very sad, as if he knew, he already knew. One eye was opened, which seemed strange and foreboding, and his lips were moving but Pete Booker and I were not close enough to hear. I was vaguely aware of Geraldine and Warren Rogers near my right shoulder. The

of gin in four Tom Collinses over a period of 16 minutes and that Sirhan "went berserk." Such are the wonders of modern law, all dolled up with forensic psychiatrists and their alcohol-induced medical tests.

But to pick up the thread of our narrative on the night of June 4, the surest hands that grabbed the assailant belonged to Rosey Grier, the giant ex-lineman for the Rams, and Rafer Johnson, our decathlon champion, aided by George Plimpton, the celebrated mock-athlete who now found himself part of an impromptu but effective amateur police. As for the actual police, sometimes too much in evidence, now they were something less than Johnnies-on-the-spot. It seemed a nerve-wracking eternity that Rosey, Rafer, George and others held their slight, wiry prisoner on the metal serving table while Bob lay on the floor holding beads a young Irishman had offered him—not a priest, as reported next day. There was a priest and finally a doctor, but they came later, after Steve Smith and young Justice Department lawyer David Steiner made repeated appeals from the platform in the now hysterical atmosphere of the ballroom.

To the credit of "Big Daddy" Unruh, he urged us to resist the temptation to strangle or stomp the assassin. "We don't want another Dallas." And the black



super stars also displayed supreme cool in pinning the pint-sized gunman without seriously injuring him. So a group of reporters, this one included, could observe Sirhan for nearly half an hour. We did not think he was drunk. Neither did he seem to be in a trance.

WHEN the police finally took over from the volunteer law-enforcers and Bobby was rolled and bounced to the waiting ambulance, a group of us followed him out and then gravitated upstairs to the Kennedy suite where we had been toasting the candidate's health less than an hour before. "It was my

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LOUISE had once worked at the Ambassador and she knew extra chairs were stacked in a passageway behind the stage to the rear of the ballroom. The young man accompanied her. He seemed to know his way to the side corridor and cautioned her, "Be careful, you could hurt yourself. It's pretty dark in there." He was very polite and offered to bring an extra chair back for Louise's friend, Caroline. The passageway where they found the chairs has an entrance into the main lobby and also connects with the Embassy Room and the pantry where Kennedy was to be killed 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 added, "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. Both young men kept wandering up on the stage and looking behind the curtains.

As she described her misgivings to me, Louise Carter said, "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 doesn't look safe to me."

On primary election day I passed the

time trying to relax and rest up for the long and eventful evening. I turned on the radio. The television news. Called some friends who were on the fence. Called 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 then we drove to the Ambassador.

The Embassy Ballroom was coming to life. Pretty girls in miniskirts 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.

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I asked him where. He said after the talk in the main room he would come to a smaller room, the Colonial Room, off the pantry. He said he wasn't going to hold any formal press conference but would like to see some of his particular press friends there. Later, work done for the night, a private party would celebrate at The Factory.

Then Bob asked me if I would like to accompany him and Jesse Unruh to the platform. I said I didn't want to look as if I were taking bows with the winner and pushing myself into the picture. Geraldine and I would wait in the Colonial Room and see him later with Warren Rogers and our other mutual friends. "The brothers and Chicanos," I said. He nodded and smiled. Then Warren

joined us and we followed Bob into the corridor where he was immediately swallowed up in a crowd of well-wishers and television cameras, waiting to accompany the victor on his way down to the Ballroom.

In the Colonial Room about 20 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 through the serving pantry that divided our small room from the ballroom. For some reason this fact went unreported in national magazines, nor was it revealed in the Sirhan trial, which I attended.

TO this layman's mind it seems as if it may have had some bearing on the crucial subject of premeditation. Did Sirhan simply stumble blindly into the serving pantry in search of coffee to cure his "intoxication," as his team of gifted defense counsel would have had the jury believe? Or, aware that the senator had taken a similar route through the pantry when both tracker and tracked had been in the hotel two night before, had the as-

"I thank you—and on to 'mezzo' speech and then, anticipating his arrival through that back passageway, moved closer to the pantry doors. We heard a couple of those "firecracker pops" and the sound of screaming. We ran into the pantry. Amidst the screaming and the pushing and the Oh-my-Gods! Bob had taken a few steps forward and then had fallen back on the cold stone floor. Pete Hamill was directly in front of me and partly blocking my view so his description is clearer than mine, although my impression confirms what he saw:

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Rogers near my right shoulder. The small assassin was charging forward in our direction, and people were grabbing for him, "Get 'im! Get 'im! Stop the sonofabitch!" With others around me I made a lunge for him. He was being pulled, tugged, cuffed. Everybody screaming, cursing. A short, brown employee ran to us hysterically, talking rapidly in a Latin accent. "I can't believe it, 30 second ago I was shaking hands with him, leaning over that counter and shaking hands, 30 second ago, and that little bastard, he's been hanging around in here for almost an hour, asking us if we thought the senator was coming through." He rattled on, repeating himself as all of us were doing.

But here is the difference between the actual event and the tamed and ordered replaying of it at the trial half a year later. The same busboy who ran over to me in that first minute is on the stand, composed and naturally in awe of the proceedings. Yes, he says, he had seen the defendant in the pantry for some time before the shooting. Yes, the defendant had asked several times if Kennedy would be coming through. You see, this is one reason a Sirhan trial is profoundly flawed. The busboy is telling the truth, but it no longer has the impact and the passion of the truth he had blurted out to us.

Still, it was interesting that this witness did not say to us in that first, impressionable outburst, "I wondered who that little drunk was, in here drinking coffee and trying to sober up." Yet that was to be the story we would hear from Sirhan: so drunk was he from two or three Tom Collinses that he was in an alcoholic stupor, unaware of where he was or even that he had squeezed the trigger when he emptied his revolver, firing into Bob Kennedy at point-blank range.

To buttress the "alcoholic wild beast" theory a psychologist was to testify later that he had served the defendant, in his cell, 6 ounces

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We tried to console him: "How d you defend against a man with a hidden revolver? If you're in front, he moves to the side. If you're at his side, he slips in behind—" But Rosey was too far gone in grief. It is hard to see a man that big, 300 pounds not fat but big, crying. And not like a baby, like a man who knows what he has lost.

WE stayed there until dawn, talking with fellow eyewitnesses, fellow mourners, too numb and dispirited to go home. And here another unanswered question is provoked. Maybe we have seen too many crime movies where the case-hardened detective is on the spot. You remember the line: "Nobody leave this room." In this case everybody left the room. Upstairs were a dozen eye-witnesses, many of them reporters, who had seen the gunning and the gunman at close range. Would it not have seemed S.O.P. for investigators to return to the Kennedy suite and question all the people there? There were a number who had been close enough to Sirhan to have been able to hear what he might have said during those critical 27 minutes before the police arrived. He said very little, but he did speak a few sentences. Apparently he did say, "I did it for my country." Would it not have been better—nay, essential!—to get the fresh and immediate observations of these eye-witnesses, instead of getting around to many of them months later when memories have to be reconstructed? A good deal of telling evidence, some of which might have affected the very nature of the case, was never to have its day in court.

**NEXT MONDAY:** Budd Schulberg recounts some vivid impressions of the Sirhan trial and makes a proposal for dealing with the politics of assassination.