



The Martyr

PETE HAMILL

London.
Nothing fails like success.—Budd Schulberg, "The Disenchanted."

The eyes were watery and hurt in the dazzle of the TV cameras. There was a twitch around the mouth, the gray suit was swiftly wrinkling, and as he stepped onto the platform before a thicket of microphones, William Manchester looked as if he wished none of it had ever happened. Before him in this cellar room of the Savoy Hotel were the assembled troops of the press, sipping iceless whisky, courteous and grave, like men talking to the father of a small boy run over by a truck. Manchester seemed to be looking for the exit.

He started this press conference in Presidential style, reading a prepared set of remarks, seated at a table draped in red, like martyrdom. He was a writer, he said, a vocation he assumed because "I wanted to express myself . . . to express myself behind closed doors . . . Now I am here in the guise of a dumb beast soliciting compassion."

Yes, he had read the British reviews of "The Death of a President." "I had thought Cyril Connolly would do his duty and he did . . ." (Connolly's review in the Sunday Times was warm). He had read some of the others, "including the amusing if occasionally irresponsible Mr. Muggerridge." (In the Observer, Malcolm Muggerridge called the book "intrinsically tedious" and "a classic example of the pornography of power." Otherwise, he was pleased. Then he asked for questions, pointing out that only certain areas were closed to discussion, as a result of the court battle with the Kennedys.

"Whatever you might have heard," he said, the pink forehead beading with sweat, "I am a man of my word."

* * *

One of the eight waiters moved through the crowd, removing empty glasses and someone rose to ask whether the book was anti-Johnson.

"The almost unanimous reaction of the critics in the States," Manchester said, "was that Johnson came off well. I don't know President Johnson: I've only met him once: but I do think he behaved himself . . . well . . . during that period."

He stopped to think before every answer, the lips moving nervously, as once again he went over the whole stale story of The Controversy. He had said it all so many times now, that the mouth moved like a puppet's as the story of cuts, revisions, changes came out again, of meeting Jacqueline Kennedy in Hyannisport that August, of Robert Kennedy's "readers," of Mrs. Kennedy's representatives.

"I saw Sen. Kennedy at the Gridiron Club last month," he said, "and we had a cordial conversation." And then someone asked about Jim Garrison's investigation and he was saved from the details about his talk with Bobby. "This sideshow has been going on for two months," he said of Garrison, "and there has been much smoke, but no sparks." It sounded like a book review.

No, he felt no rancor towards Mrs. Kennedy. "She doesn't like publicity. She gets more of it than any other woman in the world, but she doesn't like it. She's a very private person."

The reporters pressed on about financial details; Manchester, of course, has pulled down the biggest score any reporter ever dreamed of.

He once more ran through the details and the sum of it was that he would receive between \$300,000 and \$400,000, after legal fees and expenses, and the Kennedy Library could expect between

\$5,000,000 and \$10,000,000.

* * *

The room was silent for a moment, and then someone asked whether Manchester could support Robert Kennedy for the Presidency.

"This may sound evasive," he said, sounding evasive. "But I think it would be improper for me to exploit my special position of trust and confidence to endorse any political figure. Robert Kennedy is a very dedicated, intelligent, and courageous public figure.

Yes, he thought the controversy had hurt the Kennedys but he was certain that the book, in the long run, would not. He believed the book would be around for a long time.

"If you read the book, you will see that I use the American people as a kind of Greek chorus. Every American is in that book, on those days he always knows where he was. I hope, I had hoped, I still hope it will have a redeeming effect, that it will be a catharsis."

* * *

It did not at all seem to occur to Manchester that the death of John Kennedy was not redeeming, that the spate of riots, mass murders, arbitrary violence and, in a strange way, the big war in Vietnam were triggered by the assassination, that the most terrible thing about it was that America learned nothing from it all. Manchester was then asked if he would write the book at all if he had it to do over again.

"I don't know," he said. "The book had to be written . . . I knew it would be agony, I knew that then. Remember, the man who died in Dallas was my friend."

There was more: small talk, and detail, and repetition. But that line said it all. He had written a book about a murdered friend, and his own life would never again be the same.