

Where Have You Gone, Humphrey Bogart?

By RUSSELL BAKER

OBSERVER

I was seated in my swivel chair peeling the paint off my old \$15 hand-me-down but honest flat-top desk with my finger nails. It didn't improve the appearance of the desk, but it helped take my mind off the beating I'd just taken from three gorillas in the pay of the Democratic National Committee.

They had caught me sitting in my heap outside the Watergate and given me a pretty good going-over, using McGovern Shriver bumper stickers because they don't leave any bruises. "Next time we catch you nosing around here, Shamus," they said when they finished, "we're going to send you back to the White House with 'Four More Years' tattooed on your pistol barrel!"

The neon sign across the street that said "Hot Oil Massage" had been turned on. He would be arriving soon. When he did, I would be waiting for him in the dark, thinking of all the blondes I'd said "No" to over the years because of my integrity.

Integrity was what they always wanted to take off you in my business. If you let them take it you were through and there'd be nothing left except those \$25-a-day fees plus expenses, which is still nothing if you're the type that has to eat.

While I was thinking about eating, he was suddenly there in the shadows. I felt my liver tighten in a momentary spasm of fear.

"You wanted to see me here," he said in that cold, flat, hangman's voice. "I'm here. I assume you've found out who the traitor was who leaked the sabotage story to The Washington Post."

"Sure, I've found out, Mitchell," I said. "I've found out plenty."

"My name's not Mitchell," he said. "It's Kleindienst."

I didn't care what his name was, I never read the papers. I'm too busy being beaten up. I can't tell one politician from the other.

"You were pretty clever," I told him. "That story you wanted me to investigate was a nice piece of hokum. The Post says it has secret inside information that you Nixon people have been running a political sabotage operation that would have made Stalin pink with envy—that it was so good, this operation of yours, that it knocked Muskie out of the race in the primaries, that it planned a thousand dirty tricks to destroy the Democratic party. A cute story, Kleindienst, but it won't wash."

"My name's not Kleindienst," he said. "It's Mardian."

"That particular sabotage operation, the one The Post was supposed to have caught on to—it never existed, Mardian."

"I'm not Mardian," he said. "My name is Clawson."

"Oh, you had a sabotage plan, all right, but it was bigger than The Post ever dreamed of. Bigger and more diabolical. Want me to tell you what you were really up to? You had one of your own agents leak that sabotage story to The Post. It was brilliant. You knew that the moment all those numskulls in the Democratic party read about Republican sabotage operations, they would immediately go home and tell their wives the reason they'd lost wasn't because of their own dumbness at all, but because they'd been sabotaged. Don't go for your gun, Clawson. I've got you covered."

"My name's not Clawson," he said. "It's Stans."

"Yeah, a cute plan. You figured the whole bunch of them would say, 'Gee whiz, I wasn't so dumb, after all. There's no reason at all why I ought to quit.' And you figured next time the whole bunch would come back and run the same kind of campaigns and do the same things and you Republicans would slaughter them. That's dirty, Stans."

"My real name is Dole," he said.

"You figured Hubert Humphrey would be encouraged to come back again in 1976 and destroy all the other candidates again, didn't you, Dole?"

"I'm not Dole. My name is Chotiner."

"And you figured Muskie would say to himself, 'Why, if it hadn't been for Republican saboteurs making me cry in New Hampshire and stopping me from being decisive, dynamic and charismatic, I could have won it all in 1972. Why not go again in '76?' That's flendish, Chotiner."

"My name isn't Chotiner," he said. "It's —"

"I know," I told him. "It's Nixon, and you've toyed with my integrity. Now I'm going to have to call the reporters in."

A thousand light bulbs short-circuited inside my skull. I don't know how many days passed before I revived. Since then I have been sitting in this sealed room with nothing to do but write and dream of old beatings. There is another person in the next room. She says her name is Mitchell.