

A Tale From the Underground

The indictment of the Rev. Philip F. Berrigan and other priests and nuns on Federal charges of conspiring to kidnap Henry A. Kissinger and blow up the heating systems of Federal buildings in Washington is itself almost a conspiracy against sober reason.

Representative Anderson of Tennessee, who at considerable political risk to himself has courageously championed Father Berrigan, is right in saying that it is good that these charges are to be tested in court rather than left floating as one of Mr. J. Edgar Hoover's *obiter dicta*.

Yet the images conjured up by the indictment are worthy of a Graham Greene "entertainment." Indeed, like the defection of Stalin's daughter, this is one of those events which would not be credible in the pages of a novel. Life once again has outdone fiction.

The scene is vivid. The fanatically pacifist priests who believe that only symbolic violence can express their love of peace have captured the German-accented *realpolitik* professor who believes that it is sometimes necessary to wage war in order to win peace. They are gathered in the catacomb-like depths of a Federal building, perhaps the gloomy basement of the Capitol itself or—dare we suggest it?—the Justice Department. Naturally, the lights are out since the conspirators have blown up the electrical system.

In the darkness, the priestly captors and their worldly captive debate the great issues of peace and war, of military violence and symbolic violence. A citation from St. Francis of Assisi is countered by one from Bismarck, the moral claims of John XXIII set against the wisdom of Metternich. As the discussion proceeds, gentle nuns "come and go, talking of Michelangelo," bringing cups of tea or reports of the frantic manhunt going on overhead, perhaps inquiring how to make a Molotov cocktail; for they, too, are converts to direct action.

But all this is fantasy. Father Berrigan and his friends may, in fact, be as crafty as the Tupamaros, although it is hard to believe in a conspiracy carried on through letters sent in and out of a Federal prison. The information released by the Government is so exiguous that any outside judgment is impossible. Yet the indictment is an indictment, no frivolous matter. The nation can only await the serious evidence which the Government presumably has to support its accusation. The imagination leaps wildly, but reason must await the facts.