

The Criminal Element

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Jan. 24—I was walking the streets thinking of Diogenes the other night when Sleek John stepped out of the shadow of a gingko tree and, gun in hand, said, "This is a stick-up."

It had been a long time since Sleek John had robbed me at gunpoint—almost three years, in fact.

"Seems like old times, don't it, sir?" John said, as he accepted the seven one-dollar bills and 54 cents in change.

"It certainly does, John. How are the wife and kiddies? Are they all working these days?"

"Lord love you, sir," Sleek John said. "They've got to work, poor things, or else old Sleek John would never be able to spend his time on the streets these nights doing his bit for the uplift of humanity. Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I'll have to relieve you of your wristwatch, too."

"What's this about uplift, John? You haven't seen the light and joined the crusade to improve the human race?"

"I have indeed, sir," Sleek John said, "shameful though it is to admit it. Would you come across with the overcoat, sir? It will make the world a better place for the yet unborn grandchildren of both of us to grow up in, when they come along, the sweet little things!"

As I removed the overcoat, and then the scarf, followed by the necktie, suit jacket and trouser belt, Sleek John spoke of his conversion. "I had given up the old stick-ups, sir, after the madam told me they were sinful and showed a slothful disposition, and for a long while I went to work every day selling antiques, which was not so different from what I'd been used to."

"You really need the shirt too, John?"

"I do, sir. I do. You've no idea how it will improve this old world of ours. I'd no idea myself of the duty I'd been performing for us all until I began reading the newspapers. When you're in the antique business, sir, it's sometimes a long pause between victims, and a man picks up the reading habit."

He stuffed jacket, scarf, necktie and belt into his suitcase and said he would

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have to have the shoes, too. "Duty, John? I don't quite follow you."

"Well, you see, sir, I began reading about various fellows who had been engaged in what we had both thought of at one time, sir, as the criminal line of work. It was a most unusual revelation. The socks also, if you please, sir."

"But what was revealed?"

"The goodness of the so-called criminal act, sir," said Sleek John. "I read of a young man in the South who murdered a number of people before the police did him in, and was given a hero's burial on grounds that he had elevated murder to the status of an important political statement."

"Not convincing, John. Not convincing at all."

"I was only mildly impressed myself, sir, until I read of several young men in Brooklyn who got themselves caught after committing a holdup and killing a policeman. These young men pointed out that their acts had not been unsocial at all; to the contrary, they were motivated by the highest ideals—the religious, sir. They had done it for God. Your trousers, sir, for the sake of a more pious society."

"John—" I was becoming exasperated—"you never insisted on taking the pants in the old days, at least on cold nights."

"That was before I understood the political, religious and social importance of my work."

"Social?"

"That's right, sir, social. I hadn't appreciated the social value of the so-called criminal act, sir, until I read in the papers about a rapist, a variety of felon for which I had never before had the slightest respect. But this rapist was not a bad sort at all. After his beastly attacks he conscientiously explained to his victims that he engaged in rape only to protest the evils of the social system."

Sleek John apologized but said he would have to have the underwear

also. "To fight Communism," he explained. He had been reading about the Watergate trial and had learned that the men caught in that burglary had declared themselves proud because they had not actually been committing burglary, but fighting Communism.

Sleek John hates Communism. He wanted to do something patriotic, even if it meant working nights on cold dark streets, he said, putting his suitcase into a car he had stolen.

"There is nothing beats a stolen car, sir," he said, "for making America safer against tyranny, Godlessness and social decay."