

KEYHOLE MYSTERY

Magazine

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THE DEADLIEST GAME

by JOSEPH WHITEHILL

AS FAR AS ANYONE WATCHING HIM could tell, Phillip Tussig had no intention whatever of entering the wide gate before the Academy of Art.

Yet he stood now by the stone gatepost with the smiling Easter sun warming his shoulders under the tweed of his rough gray jacket, tensing with an inchoate sense of

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his conspicuousness and trying to discover why he should now feel watched. Suddenly, with a klaxon blare through the halls of his brain, his hands cried for his eyes' notice!... That was it!... His hands!

Phillip had grown so used to his lame hands, and lived so well within their deficiencies, that hardly once in a month would he affront them—bend a wrist too suddenly to suit the rubbish of bones inside, or misjudge the weight of an object and drop it from his numb fingers. He had even learned, many years ago, how to shake hands without flinching.

His hands cried for notice, he knew, because he was now, for the first time, standing outside the gross old building where he had lamed them some twenty-three years ago. And such a foolish, wanton misfortune it had been!

The faculty, in Phillip's days at the academy, did not even suspect the existence of the Shaft. Indeed, he felt, it was unlikely that they had ever learned of it at all, for it was a passionately guarded secret kept, as boys' knightly secrets are held, with a dire and solemn fervor. Somehow, in the erection of the academy hundreds of years ago, an error was made, or an early idea of the architect was later forgotten; for a slender flue dropping plumb through all four

stories had been left behind, with no use assigned to it.

In Phillip Tussig's day, when he was a promising young student of painting, the Shaft was reached at its upper end by removing some of the boards at the back of the sweeper's closet on the top floor, where the boys slept; and it fell straight down through the building, with not another opening, until it emerged beneath a heavy iron grate in the alley between the academy and the building next door.

The Shaft had been held by the boys to be a ritual touchstone of bravery, and so indeed it was.

One boy, little apelike Becker, had gone down the Shaft not once but *four* times, and had then crowned his glory by climbing back up, something never before attempted.

Becker, then only thirteen, had remained in the shaft more than five hours, even calling for food and drink, which was lowered to him in a small hamper.

That had been the real cause of the trouble, Tussig reflected. Teasing and insulting him, Becker had one day so enraged Phillip with his taunts that the smaller boy had unthinkingly caught at the proffered dare, and angrily agreed to make the descent of the Shaft without a rope.

Of the actual fall down the Shaft, Phillip remembered little. He had wormed his way about a

third of the way down when a bit of mortar had broken under his heel and, with gasping suddenness, he had hurtled down between the rough, abrading walls until he had struck the littered bottom. When he had awakened and begun to think again, it seemed to Phillip he must have landed on his knees, with his wrists beneath them, in a kind of foetal position; for in the dim light that came down through the iron grate he could see that his limp wrists no longer bent at a definite joint, but appeared to wilt smoothly over a longer curve.

He had shouldered aside the heavy grate and climbed out, wracked with greater pain than he had ever known.

When Phillip Tussig had returned to the academy a week later with both his arms in casts to the elbows, Becker had been one of the first to greet him. Becker had led him into the seclusion of his own room and passionately apologized to Phillip for having set the dare upon him. He had pleaded so earnestly, gesturing and grimacing in his Iberian manner, that Phillip smilingly had to tell him that no grudge was kept.

Then Becker had asked, "When will you be able to paint again?"

And Phillip had replied, "I don't know. I may never be able to." Phillip had invented this awful fate for himself only to

watch Becker writhe in the coils of his guilt, but later, after the casts were sawed off, the terrible thing was true. His hands, though unscarred, felt like fish flesh, and his wrists were agony to bend.

Thus Phillip had prepared Becker for the grievous shock without preparing himself, and it was Becker, quieter and more serious now, who had helped Phillip grow used to his disablement and to think of ways of accommodation. Phillip's instructors had discreetly withdrawn their demands of performance upon him, and had subtly shifted the weight of his studies in an academic direction, so that he no longer had to submit charcoal or washes, and it was even rare that they asked him to use a pen to write with.

It was at about this time, within a month after Phillip's accident, that the Committee of Judges had selected one of his earlier pastels, a still life, for permanent purchase, and had bought it from him and hung it in the Center Gallery on the third floor. When the news was out, Becker had run to Phillip's room to congratulate him. "How perfectly marvelous! To know that a picture of yours is going to hang there forever! Ah, how I envy you, Phillip."

A short time later, Phillip Tussig had modestly resigned from the academy and returned to his

parents' home in the Province, leaving his pastel hanging on the gallery wall.

It was this drawing he was thinking of now. Somehow, in spite of the great personal danger he courted by exposing himself to view in this town, he was driven by an obsessing need to look at it once more.

So it came to pass that Phillip Tussig returned to his academy after more than twenty years, deserting for just this once the safety of his guardian wit; the wit which had so long kept him whole, or at least protected that wholeness which was left to him. For Tussig, during all the years of his service, had never carried a pistol or a knife. He had learned early that his hands were too slow for such things, but some time after learning it he had found that without these weapons he was estimated by others as inexplicably more formidable than those who went armed.

Promising himself that he would stay only a moment—just long enough to see his picture—Phillip crossed the courtyard of broken terrazzo, moving among the holiday groups of students and their parents, and climbed the hollowed marble steps to the entrance.

Inside, he was forced to pause in the dark, cool atrium to orient himself. Groups of best-dressed

folk were talking in clumps or silently studying the paintings hung around the walls. Scanning quickly, Phillip Tussig saw that his was not among them. He caught sight of a blue-sashed monitor loitering at the foot of the great staircase, talking with two younger students. They looked up respectfully as he approached, and he asked, "Please, might you tell me where the Permanent Exhibit Awards are hanging?"

The boy consulted a printed card. "They are on the third floor, sir, in the Center Gallery."

"Thank you."

When he reached the top of the staircase, Phillip looked down. The boy with the blue sash had disappeared. Phillip felt sweat starting in his armpits. Instead of ascending higher, he walked down the long corridor he remembered as leading to the music rooms.

He found one empty, and after shutting the thick door, he sat down on the piano bench to think. His heart was beating far too fast for his taste; he felt the blood moving in his tingling wrists.... What use is all that training and proud experience if I must run like a hare at the sight of my shadow?...

He fingered the keys of the piano silently while he tried to divine the source of his panic. The

rumors he had heard of Becker's return to this country had never been confirmed. Besides, it was highly unlikely that Becker knew of his, Phillip's, part in the opposition movement. Phillip's communicants had for years posted him on Becker's movements and activities, and nothing in their generally sound reports had indicated that Becker was aware that now he and Phillip were pulling on opposite ends of the rope, or, indeed, that he even remembered Phillip.

It must have something to do with Becker and the Shaft, and my hands, Phillip thought.

"Fah!" he exploded as he rose decidedly from the bench. He left the room and walked down the corridor toward the side stairs he remembered. As he climbed the stairs alone, the risks seemed to have returned to proper dimension.

While he stood at the door of the Center Gallery listening to the emanating hum of voices, Phillip suddenly discovered with a shock that he was staring right at his own drawing. The back hair of his head crawled in the nostalgic joy of seeing it again after so long. And it now hung directly before the door! Just where it was the first to be seen when one entered!

The small brass plate tacked to the wall beside the drawing read not his name, but another's, and titled another picture from anoth-

er year. How is this? he thought. Somebody has made a stupid mistake. Then he noticed that where his picture now hung, the monk's-cloth wall showed a rectangular area of cleanliness that matched neither the size nor the shape of his own drawing. Part of the cold truth was already upon him as he thought, My drawing does not belong here at all. Someone has put it here in place of another. And, as he remembered how he had entered this room, eagerly and in a straight line toward his own picture, an icy awareness of *trap!* came over him. He stepped back in momentary indecision, then coolly turned toward the door.

In the side of his eye, Phillip saw what he knew he must. Becker was indeed there, talking to two heavy-shouldered young men with close-cropped hair, and watching him with a slight smile on his large-lipped mouth.

Becker left his two companions with a nod and, striding swiftly with his ape's gait, intercepted Phillip at the door. "Ah, dear Tussig! So many, many years has it been! How are you—how are you?" Becker's hand was groping for Phillip's, but Phillip kept his hands in his pockets.

Phillip kept walking, rudely shaking his head. "No—no." He was trying hard to reach the Gal-

lery of Sculpture, just ahead, where he saw the safety of a large crowd and an open room with several exits.

"Phillip, Phillip!" Becker kept up. "It's I—Becker! Surely you know me!"

Phillip, seeing now that Becker was certain of his identification, allowed a light of recognition to show. Above all, there must be no disturbance. "Ah, yes. Becker. How are you these days, Becker?"

"Busy as can be. Let us sit over here where we may talk." Becker led the way to a couch at one side of the Gallery of Sculpture.

"Believe me, Phillip, I am glad to see you," Becker went on when they were seated. His eyes flickered over Phillip's face and person in a proprietary manner which reminded Phillip of the way of an Argentine beef buyer. Then the animation left his face and he went on, "We were terribly afraid you wouldn't come into the academy at all. It was my idea to wait for you here. We could hardly have gone out into the street to get you, you know. That's the exasperating part of it all. One must be so discreet, is it not so?"

Phillip shifted on the couch and said puzzledly, "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Becker's bland face belied the fury in his voice, which hissed somewhat as he lowered it. "Look, Tussig; let's stop this. Personally,

I would delight to sit and chat with you about this and that, but we haven't time. Let me be plain. Just as you know of me, so I also know of you. I know what you have been doing all these years. Our corps may move clumsily at times, but our information service is just as adept as your own. Now . . . are we understood together?"

Phillip paused, assessing the chances of a quick bolt down the staircase, then said, "What do you want, Becker?"

"Now, that's better." Becker smiled briefly the old smile of fraternity. "Really, you know, it is quite curious that our ways have not crossed before. Do you suppose we have been being polite?"

"I thought you were in a hurry," Phillip said.

"*Touche*, Phillip, so I am. Well, to go on—you surely know what we're after, do you not?"

"No."

"Of course you would say that. I will tell you, then. We want to know, first, how it was that you people managed to engineer that little currency coup of yours in February? Only the very highest men in our corps knew when that transshipment was to take place, but you clever little people were there right on time. Submachine guns in a hay wagon—well, *really!* Tussig, we *must* know where our

leak is. And the other thing we must know is, why are you yourself in this town at this time? That is all."

Phillip squinted thoughtfully. "Supposing for a moment that I know the answers you want, what is to induce me to tell them to you?" This, Phillip knew, was just a formal question.

Becker pulled at his lower lip while he paused in thought. At length he said, "I was just trying to decide how much to tell you. I think we will save time if I tell you everything. The two men with whom you saw me in the gallery are my platoon leaders. In this building are the members of their platoons. There are eighteen men here throughout the academy who know by now that you have been found and that I am talking to you. If you tell me what we want, I will walk with you to the gate outside and let you go your way. If you don't tell me what I need, you will be dead in an hour.... Phillip, do not force my hand. Please."

"Why do you not take me away for torture? I have heard many reports of your excellence in this area. Why this gentlemanly method?"

Becker shook his head sadly. "Phillip—Phillip. This is unkind of you. I shall again be truthful. Right now, it is mechanically impossible for us to take you any-

where. We have nowhere to take you. They watch for us everywhere. We are as alien here as you. But you are outnumbered. Myself, I am glad of this, in a way. Do you assume that because we find ourselves today in opposition, I can put out of my heart all I know of my friend Phillip Tussig? Indeed, do you believe I *have* no heart? Of course not. Simply because our generals and our colonels tell us that you are black and I am white, or you are North and I am South, must we believe this to do our work?"

Watching Becker's earnest face, and the tense, pleading gestures of his hands, Phillip Tussig was half moved to believe that Becker was right; that it was possible to admit humanity to their two-valued system. How odd it was to be caught in a mortal trap, yet find that to love the trapper was not impossible. Phillip said, "Becker, I must have time."

"How much?"

"An hour."

"Too long. My friends and I must be away from here and out of the town in an hour." Becker paused. "Fifteen minutes."

"Half an hour, then."

Becker looked worried for a moment, then smiled quickly and gently grasped Phillip's hand. "For a friend, yes," he said. "Ah, the hands. How are the hands, Tus-

sig?"

"Better than they were once."

"I am glad. I have dreamed of those hands often."

Phillip grew impatient. "What must I do? Where will you be when the half hour is up?"

"By the foot of the great staircase. Please, Phillip, do come to me. If you are not down in time, I will leave alone, and my friends will come to you, wherever you are. I know your head is on straight, but please remember you will be watched every second. Do not make a scene." Pressing his hand once more, Becker rose from the couch. "Half an hour, then," he said softly, and with a little wave he strode from the Galley of Sculpture.

Phillip sat for long minutes with his elbows on his knees and his hands dangling loosely toward the floor.... That this is where the end should be, he thought. Right here again where the end might have come twenty years ago, had chances so said. The preposterousness of his position, and a concomitant sense of the unreality of it all, made him raise his head to look about the vaulted room and among its statuary, to find whoever it was who watched him. There were several men of differing sizes and types standing each alone and absorbed in the sculpture. None seemed interested in

Phillip. Probably, he reflected, he would never have time to see their faces when they, whoever they were, came to him. He sighed and rose from the couch.

Moving slowly, and in evident aimlessness, so as not to alarm the secret eyes, Phillip went to the door of the Center Gallery and glanced in. Yes, there it was—his drawing—so placed that it was the first thing one saw on entering the room. Phillip stepped aside to the statue of Perseus, which stood with bowed head and sightless eyes, holding aloft the marble head of Medusa with his hand buried among the marble snakes. Phillip took off his coat and folded it neatly and put it across Perseus's feet. He loosened his tie and collar and pushed up the cuffs of his shirt sleeves. Then, with a bustling walk, he sallied into the Center Gallery.

There were nearly a score of visitors there, grazing like cattle among the paintings. The two heavy-shouldered young men were no longer there. Phillip hurried in, then came to a flustered halt, raising his hands in a Gallic gesture of shock as he looked at his own drawing. Several of the visitors looked at him. "Tut *tut*," Phillip said, "Such a stupidity! Ah, the help one gets these days!" He smiled sadly at a young couple who were attending his mono-

logue. "Just look at that, I ask you," he said as he pointed fussily at the drawing. "*Completely out of place!*"

Then, like a hound on a baffling scent, Phillip Tussig trotted around the walls of the gallery peering at the little brass title plates; craning, bending, and dodging for his view around and between the amused visitors. At length he found the plate which carried his name, over in an ill-lit corner, with the wrong picture hung beside it. The pain in his wrists as he lifted it down brought quick tears to his soft brown eyes, but he shook his head in a petulant way so that people could not see.

With every step he took across the room bearing this wrong picture to its right place, he felt his wrists flex and could hear the stony grating of the bones inside. He almost dropped it as he put it down under his own drawing; yet, without pausing, he took down the pastel of the two partridges and the ring of keys, and carried it back to its proper place. Though to hang his picture took a nearly superhuman denial of the pain that echoed now even to his elbows, he achieved it at length and, straightening the picture with one hand, he mopped his face with a handkerchief wrapped around the other.

Now that his picture was back in the obscurity where it deserved

to hang, Phillip Tussig left the gallery without another glance at it. Outside, he took his coat back from Perseus and put it on. Then he straightened his tie and ambled out of the Gallery of Sculpture toward the side stairs. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw two men approaching—two men who before had been standing apart looking at separate statues.

... Better now than not at all, Phillip thought, and he raced up the stairs three at a time.

When he reached the top floor, his thin legs tingling and trembling with the exercise, he took a great lungful of air and held it, the better to hear his pursuers. They were, from the sound of their pounding feet, not far behind. Phillip ran down the hall and had to try two doors before he found the sweeper's closet. He pulled the light cord and quickly shut himself inside.

He stared a moment at the closed door, lit by the pendulum swing of the feeble bulb. Now it was the Lord's turn.

Moving as quietly as he could in his haste, he pulled out the canisters of sweeping compound and powdered soap, and the broached case of toilet paper, biting his lip to distract the agony of his wrists. He could hear the men outside in the hall trying doors and calling to each other in

voices of strained softness.

Finally the back wall of the tiny closet was bare, and Phillip's shoulders sagged in relief as he saw in the dim light the blessed dirty thumbprints of countless young heroes on the loose boards there. In an instant he had slid out the boards and switched off the light and swung himself feet-first and awkwardly into the small opening. Bracing with his elbows and knees against the rough walls, he inched himself downward a little way, then stopped as he heard the door open in the closet above him.

"Look at that."

"What?"

"The light cord swinging. He has been in here."

As Phillip listened to their talk, he opened his throat as wide as he could, to diminish the noise of his breathing.

"There is a hole back here."

"Would he go into a hole?"

"Give me a match."

"Here. Try it this way. Strike the match and drop it while it still flares."

The match spluttered brightly and dropped. Phillip gasped in pain as the burning match landed with a wasp's sting on the bare nape of his neck.

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes. He is there, all right."

"You had better go down and get Becker."

"Very well."

"Be quiet about it."

"Of course."

Above, there was now silence. Phillip Tussig, cramped between the walls of the Shaft, loosed one hand and beat at the smoldering collar of his coat where the match had set it afire. The pain in his wrist as he brushed with his hand brought him near to fainting, so he stopped and scraped off the coals by hunching against the bricks.

Then he began descending the Shaft, moving in those tortured inchworm motions that brought so little travel at each cycle. First, Phillip, your left knee down. Brace it. Then right knee down. Brace it. Then skid your back down the wall and bring your elbows down one at a time. Thus ten centimeters are gained. Now repeat all the motions and keep repeating them, long off into distant time; for to reach the bottom hole, you must do this a hundred and fifty times.

Like a crippled beetle, Phillip Tussig made his way down the Shaft, counting wordlessly as he began each cycle, thus to prove his progress. He dislodged a chunk of mortar and breathed deeply twice before it struck the bottom. He heard a whispered voice above him and stopped, head hanging on his

chest, to listen.

"Phillip," said the whisper. "It is I, Becker. I have found a rope. Will you take it?"

Phillip shook his head.

"Here it comes."

A hard, dusty snake of rope fell across his straining arms, and Phillip cried out in anger, "Get that thing off me!"

"Quietly, quietly," said Becker from above. "Please take it, Phillip. I don't want you to do this thing."

"You left me wide choice," Phillip gasped, suddenly sensing for the first time the hungry void below him. "Take away your rope, for God's sake. It's heavy!" The rope rustled and went back up in the dark.

"I never believed you would do this, Phillip," Becker whispered when he had retrieved all the rope. "All you had to do was to tell us two little things, and then you could have walked out. Not *this*."

Phillip Tussig did not answer. Left knee down.... Brace it. Right knee down.... Brace it.... A great cramping pain settled on his shoulders, and he was tiring. His feet found a course of brick which protruded just enough to hook his heels on and let him rest. Mortar dust sifted into his mouth and grated loudly inside his head when he set his teeth. Phillip heard from above the sounds of a con-

ference. Evidently all three of them were in the little sweeper's closet with the door closed, for he could easily hear every word they said, nor was there another sound to confuse the meaning of the words. Briefly, Phillip wondered if it would be like this to hang still in dark outer space and listen to the Lord and two angels chatting quietly about him.

"We could drop our knives on him. Point down, you know."

"Ass. What for?"

"Well, to kill him or make him fall or something."

Becker said, "Those little knives of yours have no weight. They would just sting him even if you managed to hit him."

"They might make him fall."

"To what end?" Becker asked. "What good would his falling do us?"

"Well, he would be punished for running away. He would be dead, perhaps."

Becker sounded choked; whether with rage or tears Phillip could not tell. "Oh, you *fools!* Stupid, beastly fools. Do you think I want that man dead? Werner, listen to me. Are your ears open, Werner? When Tussig was caught out here in the building, I told him to inform or be killed. His life or death was just an article of currency between us. It is information I want, not killing. Don't you think I live with enough already, without having his idle death on my head?"

"I thought he was an enemy," the other said sullenly.

"Agh! He is first a man."

Becker's voice now came down more clearly as he leaned into the Shaft and said, "Hey, Tussig, are you all right?"

"Yes."

"How are the hands?"

"Not too bad."

"How far down are you?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps halfway."

Phillip began again to climb downward. The joints at his elbows and knees seemed to hurt worse after his short rest. They felt abraded and warm, as though they might be bleeding. He climbed down for a time undisturbed. It might have been fifteen minutes, or half an hour—he had no way of telling—before Becker again broke the silence.

"Phillip."

"Yes."

"Do you think if you fell now you would be killed?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"That is good.... I think you need some light."

There was a sound of scraping and rustling from above, and Phillip dared not look up. A brightly flaring match tumbled by him, and another, and another. Then came an incandescent shower of them, hissing and leaving smelly sulfur trails. Several landed on Phillip's clothing, and he brushed

them off as best he could, before they set him afire.

Becker's voice came again, sounding hollow and gleeful in the distance. "That was light for your soul, Phillip.... Now, here is something to whiten your soul, Phillip." Several thumps sounded, and Phillip lowered his head and tried to cover it with his aching hands. A cascade of powdered soap poured over him, filling his nose and causing him to sneeze loudly several times.

"*Gesundheit!*!" whispered Becker in a voice with some love in it. "Now, let me see... Ah! Here, Phillip, this is to teach the soul humility under degradation!"

An avalanche of cedar-smelling, greasy sawdust flowed down over Phillip, seeking out every gap in his clothing and trying to smother him with its warm, oily filth. Phillip kept moving as best he could, hurrying to escape this catechism.

"Now, this is the last, Phillip," Becker cried hoarsely. "This is to remind the soul of its humanity." A roll of toilet paper struck Phillip a soft blow on the shoulder and rolled off into the dark. Then came another, partially unrolled, trailing a tangling, spidery-feeling train. Soon they were falling in a rhythmic bombardment, some hitting him, and others missing in their hurry.

Phillip knew he was about to fall. Sheer will could no longer keep him wedged there between the walls of the Shaft. His arms and legs no longer obeyed, and, in their numbness and weakness, they seemed not his, but a child's. He looked down for the first time. Then he loosed his legs and dropped the last three meters and landed in a sprawled heap on the

pile of soft stuff Becker had used for ammunition. He was hardly jarred.

He flopped out of the shaft like a dirty, tired seal, to a place in the well under the iron grate, and lay there limply on his back, looking up at the small piece of the blue sky, the Easter sky, which he could see between the tops of the buildings. ■ ■

