



# ANNALS OF CRIME

## SERVANT OF THE STATE

by Thomas Thursday

I SAW MY first dead man when I was five. They found him floating in the Sandy River that ran through Lock Haven, my hometown. Some said it was suicide; others felt sure it was homicide—but the case never was solved. From that time on, for more than twenty-five years, I have wondered about death.

The man who increased my curiosity and wonderment was Eric Jonathan. He was a very quiet, unassuming fellow when I first met him in my boyhood, at which time he was middle-age. I recall that he was polite and considerate to all he met. I can also recall his wife, Rosalie; she was small, sweet of disposition, with half-gray hair and an air of quiet resignation. For some reason I could not at the time comprehend, the Jonathans never associated with the other town folks.

They had two well-mannered children; Maude, six, and John, five—and when the other kids asked them about their father's work, they would shrug, smile, but never answer. Once I walked to the little brown-painted cottage near the edge of Lock Haven and tried to play with the Jonathan children. I soon learned that they wanted to be left alone. They were not rude or mean in any way, understand. Rather, they were like shy fawns in the forest.

Several times a year Mr. Jonathan would leave Lock Haven for a few days. On such occasions the grown folks would gossip in low, sneering tones.

Once I overheard Joe Maxtell, the owner of our small general store, remark to a customer, "Well, I see where Old Man Jonathan is going to make some more easy money. He can have it; I wouldn't

do that kind of thing for all the dough in the world."

The customer laughed, but it was a nervous, scary laugh. And I also heard Jimmie Kent, our town's pool shark, say, "That guy, Jonathan, must have no feelings or heart; I don't see how he can sleep nights."

So I became very curious about the work of Eric Jonathan, and when I got the chance I sidled up to Jimmie Kent and asked him what kind of job Mr. Jonathan had. I felt it had to be distinctive, or why all the talking and wagging of heads when he left Lock Haven for a few days?

"Listen, son," said Jimmie Kent, "did you ever hear of Ray Brockwell and Tom Haney, the two bandits that held up the First National Bank over in Kaneville last year? Well, they shot and killed the paying teller and the bank guard but they were caught two weeks later in Kansas."

I nodded, although I was not certain what he was talking about.

"Well," Jimmie Kent went on, "Brockwell and Haney are going to get the hot seat tomorrow at State Prison. And Eric Jonathan is the man who is going to pull the switch when they sit in the chair. See what I mean, sonny?"

I was shocked to think that a nice man like Mr. Jonathan could do such a thing. Today, of course, I understand that he was just a part of the law enforcement system, a servant of the state. From then on he held a strange fascination for me; and in my young, developing mind all kinds of questions began to pop. He was such a kindly, friendly man that I found it difficult to associate him with killing

people. But when Jimmie Kent told me that he had executed more than one hundred persons I was horrified. Killing them, mind you, by simply pulling a switch!

OUR STATE PRISON was at Larrimore, fifty miles south of Lock Haven, and I heard that Mr. Jonathan had lived there before he moved to our town. I was told that Mrs. Jonathan wanted to move away from Larrimore, because it was too near his work in the prison. Since he came to Lock Haven he remained at home most of the time, and I used to see him on the small front porch smoking a plain corncob pipe, as if he was meditating. He never seemed to have any visitors and I think that is the way he wanted it.

One day I asked Jimmie Kent how Mr. Jonathan could spend so much time without working. My father had to work every day; so did the fathers of the other boys. Jimmie Kent just laughed, and said, "Listen, son; don't you worry about Mr. Jonathan. Why, each time he pulls that old switch the state pays him \$150. And do you know what? Two years ago he made \$450 early one morning. Yep; that was the time three guys went to the chair for killing two cops in Nixontown."

Regardless of what I heard about Mr. Jonathan, I noticed that he was just about the same as other men in the town—only much quieter and much more unassuming. Three or four times a week he would take a walk down to the Old Mill Road, always alone, smoking his pipe, a little bent at the shoulders, and swinging his handmade birch-cane.

Now and then I'd meet him on Main Street, and I would say, "How are you, Mr. Jonathan?"

He'd always give me a sad, gentle smile and reply, "Quite well, boy; quite well, thank you," and continue down the street, minding his own business.

One day he invited me into the general store and bought me a big dish of ice cream. "Take your time, boy; take your time. It tastes better that way."

He paid for it and left—before I even got started with the first spoonful.

One burning question was seething in my young mind, and I felt I just *had* to ask him about it. However, I must have seen him many times before I got courage enough to put it to him. This vital question so obsessed me that I actually lay awake nights worrying about it. Then, one dark, cloudy afternoon I met him on Main Street and popped it

to him.

"Mr. Jonathan," I said, "does it really *hurt* people when you put the electricity in them?"

He stopped so abruptly, with a sudden cloud appearing on his usually serene face, that I was about to run away. Then he placed his right hand upon my shoulder tenderly, and replied, "Boy, I personally like to think and believe that it is absolutely painless. You see, boy, it is such a quick shock that they say it *has* to be painless. I know that a lot of folks think my conscience bothers me when I execute criminals, but it really does not. I am just as innocent as the police who arrested them, the judge and jury who convicted them, and the warden who admits them to the prison. You see, boy; I am just another employee of the citizens."

It must have been about two weeks after he told me how he felt about his work when I noticed Mr. Jonathan walking across the interurban trolley where our town's only bootlegger had his place. I didn't think anything of this until I overheard Jimmie Kent tell some people, "I see where Old Man Jonathan is starting to hit the old booze. Maybe his conscience is starting to catch up with him. Haw haw!" The listeners echoed the haw-haws and went on to another subject.

Three or four days later a terrific thunder and lightning storm hit Lock Haven, accompanied by tornadic winds. Roofs were blown off like confetti and power-line poles toppled over by the hundreds. Just about the time the storm had lessened its fury, near dawn, I heard the shrill, eerie sound of our town's only police car siren.

I leaped out of bed and rushed to the front room window. My mother got there first. "Get away from the window and go back to bed," she commanded.

"What is the trouble?" I asked. "Wasn't that the police car I heard?"

"There is nothing the matter," said my mother. "Just a false alarm, or something. Go back to bed this instant!"

The next morning I heard all about it from Jimmie Kent. He had followed the squad car to its destination. And they found Eric Jonathan, dead, beside a fallen power-line pole.

"He sure got one hell of a jolt!" said Jimmie Kent. "I guess he fell into one of the live wires."

Even to this day, many years after, I keep wondering if it *is* painless.