

GARRY THOMAS MORSE / Minor Episodes XII—Clean as a Whistle

One desultory summer's day, full of remorse, *the accused* takes a few extra seconds to shield his eyes, while a couple of gawkers lose theirs to the momentary eclipse. The Stropper stands behind a pricey pair of blinds, hands clasped behind his finely tailored back. The obelisk in the public square has been converted into a portable lethal injection chamber. The Stropper would have preferred a guillotine, almost to the point of forgetting his shaving fetish for an entertaining hour of anticipation, followed by that inevitable *denouement*, set to the *Symphonie Fantastique*.

Jazzy Sharp, the shoeshine boy who made good and became the chief oligopolator of all gentrified parts, is promptly scheduled for public death. And the Stropper is tickled by a printed sign that reads:

PUB IC DEATH

"Dignity to the end, eh? Well, better him than yours truly!"

And it is common hearsay that in the course of Jazzy Sharp's career, he has embezzled countless funds for personal zoos and faunas, has attended every *Who's Who* from here to the farthest undiscovered constellation, has in general fiddled and bugged and illegally upgraded and wriggled in and out of the sketchiest of situations. To touch him would be to approach a meal of eels without a fork. He has ingested every mind-bender known to man and has recovered after the shortest of naps. And he has trolled in the swartest of eventides for the lost and desperate and sadly confusèd.

When they brought him the tax forms to sign, he had sneezed and shat upon them and wiped himself clean with them and then washed his hands of all traces of his general amusement at the very impertinence of such an imposition. Once he had fed an entire census board to his pet piranha. That was sooooo Jazzy. But then the pressure of a vise had taken a fancy to his short hairs. His stretch van had been seen in the area on more than a few evenings. His JZZY vanity plates were unmistakable. And there were *stories*. Jazzy liked his afterhours activity a little rough. And he had an appetite for the *unheimlich*, although no one in the press knew precisely what this meant.

Even for the hunchback politico, it was embarrassing to have his inventory of personal pleasurewear and leisure toys paraded through the papers and parodied at local fashion shows. The *Jazzy Dill Rub Stud* was just now the talk of the catwalks. And his mug shot was also an object of amusement. True, he was still very well to do and protected by the best of funneling and finagling tricks. But he had never intended for anything really *criminal* to happen. To be led away in handcuffs during a routine downsizing of the local exchange and to witness that sudden floundering in the dead eyes of the regulators was a bit of a downer. After retiring early from the police force and failing to become famous spies, the most these investigators could hope for was a spot of fun harassing a legal clerk now and then before laying hands upon their second or third pension. To have come this close to solving an actual case was a red letter day.

And for Jazzy to see those faces on the Street he had never got around to tossing out onto the pavement, why, it was undeniably a bit of a burn. He had been just about to transfer all tower dealings into a sterling data cell reservoir upon his left hip when the news hit. His head swam with headlines:

Jazzy Pants and Pate Piece Found at Scene!
Sharp Mogul Moonlights in Murder!
Jazzy is a Bloody Spazzy!
Police Comb Over Jazzy Evidence!
Jazzy Challenges Jizzy Analysis!

But in the end, it was the boredom of celebrated financial reporter Dick Frains that led to his general condemnation—the word of a man who slept through all the hearings he attended, and for that reason scarcely attended a single hearing, and wrote a scathing column the next day anyway, based on a cut and paste program that collected transcripts and wire services. In fact, most of the time, he relied on his trusty pet baboon Booboo. His fiscal puff piece about Jazzy Sharp was enough to douse the imagination of the public in petrol and ignite it with a few words (another triumph for Booboo). It was then that Jazzy went from being a risk management *wanker* to an unlicensed public domain *whacker*. That was the gist and grist of the article anyway. Jazzy watched his soiled reputation sinking into the vague quicksand of public opinion.

“Whad’ya know? Our grand poobah has no clothes . . . the sicko!”

“After all his corporate epithets, he was nothing other than the Stropper!”

“Yeah, let’s do it after the market closes. I am sizzling with *schadenfreunde* right now!”

“No, I’m on the level. They fingered Jazzy downtown! No, not like that.”

“Would Booboo lie?”

And having a name like Jazzy Sharp didn’t help one sliver.

The square is being prepared. A rather fetching Miss Sharp rubs a tear from a corner of her veiled eye. Minor inclines his head solemnly, holding his porkpie over his heaving chest. He has never known such an aphrodisiac as the dead or the dying. With customary decorum, he reaches over and extends the end of a toffee roll. She declines, incensed. Minor hastily withdraws his last toffee.

“Shame of a way to go.”

Some choose a mild demise, death by sodium laurel sulfate, $\text{CH}_3(\text{CH}_2)_{10}\text{CH}_2(\text{OCH}_2\text{CH}_2)_n\text{OSO}_3\text{Na}$, the common ingredient found in toothpaste and shampoo and a number of personal care products. It has wonderful properties of removal, and excels as a garage floor and automotive engine degreaser. In fact, Minor has a patent in motion to produce a damnably whitening cleanser without this agent, mostly because he suffers from inflammatory carbuncles and breakouts the paste and shampoo exacerbate. He was almost certain Jazzy would want his clock cleaned this way, and would nobly decide to be brushed or scrubbed to death by giggling local breakfast television hosts. Although he had once seen a marketing executive subjected to this fate and the cleansing agent went straight for his follicles. He met his maker bawling, and balding on the spot, but clean as a freshly polished whistle.

“Sodium laurel sulfate. A poetic death if there ever was one! And so much more humane.”

And the public were mad to see Jazzy washed right out of their hair for good. But Jazzy did not desire a prolonged lathering, nor a deadly fluoride dip. Without warning, the Stropper appears at Minor’s side, tenderly mopping his immaculately smooth countenance.

“Balmy weather we’re having! You’d never know it was summer.”

Minor accepts the firm manly paw and small-talks away, all the while feeling his psychical senses reeling. His palmy device begins to cricket. A voice crackles to life.

“Sir, we just analyzed the circadian rhythms of the stains in evidence and they bear a common tone, traceable in fact to the very square you are schmoozing in right now! And Sir, I want to be the first to announce, in the hope of instantaneous promotion, that the Stropper is right beside you, scratching his cheek and fidgeting with his nose. I hope you don’t mind, I took the liberty of using the speakerphonic channel! Mom, are you out there? It’s me, your boy, LummoX. I found the Stropper for Mr. Minor! I found the Stropper—”

Minor flicks off the palmy device. The Stropper smiles at him, reaching into his overcoat.

“Where are your manners, Minor? Why, I could have slit you from ear to ear by now, were I not a gentleman. This is no longer your case, you have been reassigned, ever since that incident at the waterfall. You might say, you are all washed up.”

Minor unbuttons a single button and reveals another button, a button far more tender.

“First of all, that wasn’t a waterfall. And you’ll never get a furlong farther! Let this arena of bleakness do its thing and move on. I’m not so fond of you, but I’m not so fond of the Sharp progeny either. Between the prospects of a local slasher and an infuriating in-law, the choice is obvious. I pulled some strings. And Jazzy was the outstanding nominee.”

“*Touché*,” snarls the Stropper, ceding some distance between them. “Normally unstoppable, I see on this occasion, I am completely outstripped and unstropped.”

He commences with a run-on speech traditional to most cinematic psychopaths.

“Shhhh,” shushes Miss Sharp.

Jazzy allows himself to be strapped into the *PortaLethal*. He is ready. Minor finds a place on the concrete bench and makes a show of tearing at his porkpieless hair. Then he does something queer. Everyone said so afterward. He kneels on the ground in front of Miss Sharp and starts to recite dusty poetry.

“Was woman ever in this humour woo’d? Was ever woman in this humour won?”

Miss Sharp, preoccupied amply with protecting her discount mascara, gives Minor a minor slap, before spitting her wad, toffee and all, and no wad like was ever expectorated up previously or since.

“Foul toad! Not only am I worried about my brother, but presently, I am up to my ears and skyward ankles with a bit on the side.”

Minor doubles over in the square and douses himself in positively orgasmic shampoo. His back begins to welt and bubble, before a giant cyst (or implant) bursts forth, ruining one of his favourite shirts. The populace take account of this grandiose display of blood and pus.

“The sign! The sign!”

Minor implores everyone to heed his words with molecularly unstable limbs. He is starting to melt, more than any man can ever have melted.

“I was the crazed killer! Let this nutjob go free. Let this pervert be at liberty, I say!”

“Sodium Laurel sulfate,” announces the coroner, licking his fingers. “And minty fresh!”

Mr. Jassimino Sharp is unstrapped and pardoned at once, and carried down the street amid much fanfare for an entire block, until the crowd notices a twenty percent off sale and starts breaking windows. The Stropper hails a passing cab.

“Hardly worth the price of admission. Red light and step on it!”

Minor oozes up out of the puddle of himself. The lethal injector becomes an obelisk again, and then an opera finale pyre. The production designs this year are exquisite! The corporate sponsors glare up at the surtitles, yawning. Minor offers the dissipating crowd a poetic tributary.

“Come un bel dì di maggio / che con bacio di vento . . .”

Then he stands erect and looms over the waning lynch mob, speaking through the flames:

You I salute. You who have given shape to my days and a sense of supernatural differentiation between all these meaningless ticks upon this timepiece.

He brandishes a pocket fob with sienna animals crawling about its smiling face.

No one can deny the horizons I have traversed, or take away the mirage I have lived. I managed to shake loose all my friends and contacts (although I found the means to seduce them all over again) for the abandoned theatre of your image. I have translated you into the most simple of things. A step in the night, a shadow beneath the streetlamp, a smothering chill of snowfall in the bones, an annihilation of mortified sunlight, an open raincoat in the rain. Although you strain yourself to hear this music and lend it meaning with your ears, it is no less existent. And when these frail surfaces have eroded and rusted upon their very scaffolding, when flesh has melted away from bone, I will know it was never a waste of time to hold vigil or haunt about your portals of sleep, since I have sought nothing but to leave my door unbolted, open for the exclusive beauty of your palms. This is the open door then, leading to magic and love.

Eternity is the healer. The mender of cracks, the overgrowth of untended feelings. And if I am to find you in the last or next world, do not delay me any longer! Tarry no longer.

You have lent breath and life and illumination to this heap of simulacra upon my shelf, a pride of lions one minute, a ferocity of bodies the next. We have, each of us, sung to lonely nights, full to the brim with useless and unspeakable feeling. Was anyone listening? Is anyone listening? Because I am the madman who adjusts his radio and pricks up his ears, listening as an animal to a strange noise in the distance that no one else can quite perceive. Your “reality” still has the gumption to taunt me with rent and expenses and superficial glamour, and in the same breath, still it steals away any hope of real estate. Any hope of something far more precious. Meanwhile, stretching in this manor of my madness, I bid all my subjects pack up their random effects and head home. For you are my one subject in this illimitable world, and I have run out of words.

O come to me come to me, in the eleventh hour of love!

Miss Sharp blinks and shrugs and shivers in the cold of the desultory summer's day, raising upon a twig a marshmallow of the most beautiful powder blue.