

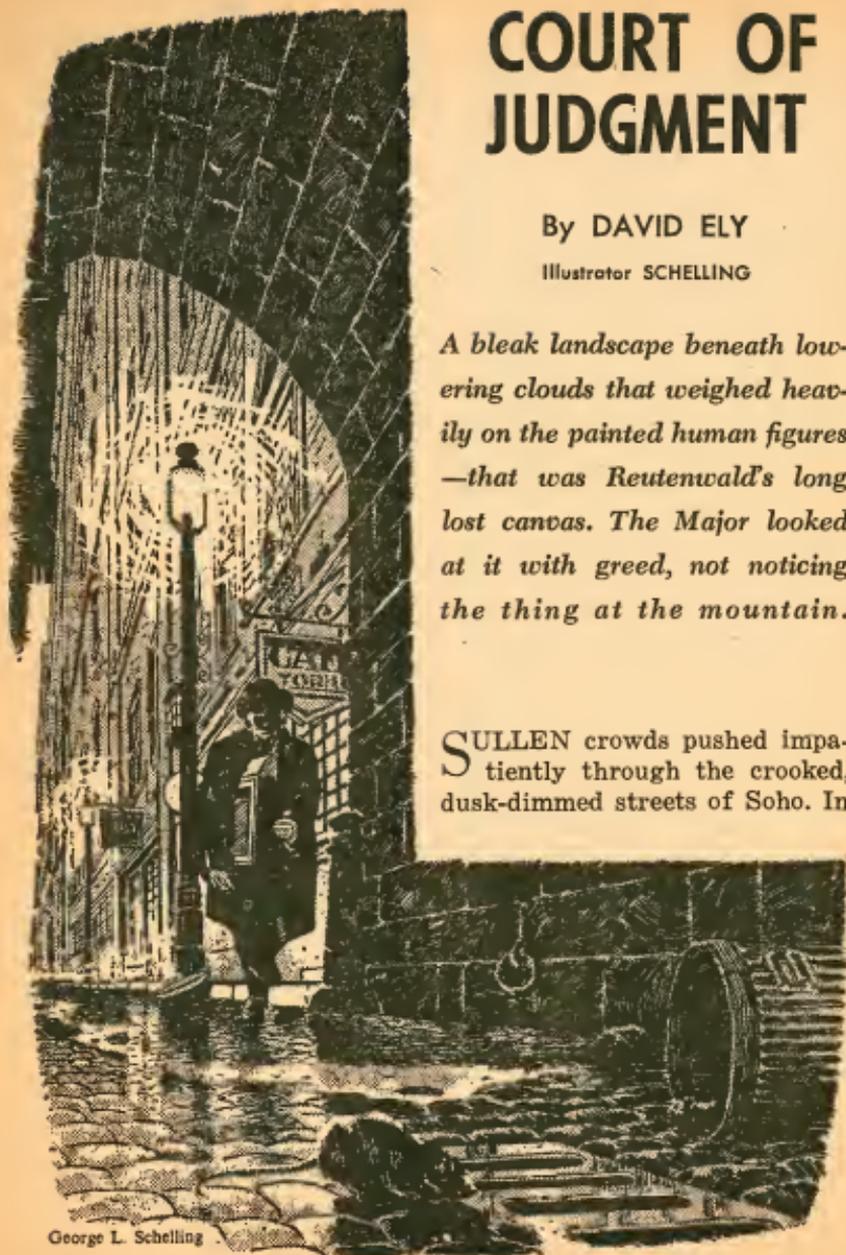
COURT OF JUDGMENT

By DAVID ELY

Illustrator SCHELLING

A bleak landscape beneath lowering clouds that weighed heavily on the painted human figures—that was Reutenwald's long lost canvas. The Major looked at it with greed, not noticing the thing at the mountain.

SULLEN crowds pushed impatiently through the crooked, dusk-dimmed streets of Soho. In



George L. Schelling

the gathering fog, the cautious cars honked softly, like worried geese; street lamps had begun to spot the fast-falling night.

His tweedy bulk brushed packages from a woman's arms. As he bent to retrieve them, the blood thundered up behind his ears. He gasped, "Terribly sorry." The woman seized the packages and darted off. He leaned against a cold and unfriendly wall until the dizziness passed. How had that idiot medical man phrased it? "Spend the winter in a more congenial climate . . ." Yes, that was it. Congenial! He twisted his gray mustache bitterly and started off again. On a military pension? The fool!

Somewhere in the damp arcade, an unseen drop of moisture echoed faintly, like a distant footstep. He found the shop and peered for a moment through its grimy window. Inside, a single unshaded bulb illuminated a bald head, glinted off a pair of spectacles, gently touched a dusty background of paintings, sculpture, a tarnished breastplate, a stuffed malicious owl, a fierce-eyed parrot swinging in its cage.

The doorbell twinkled. Old Mr. Carstairs glanced up greedily from his littered desk, his blurred eyes searching; the parrot screeched and tore vainly at the bars.

"Ah, Major Dance!" Mr. Carstairs said, blinking in uncertain

recognition. The Major inclined his massive head. He noticed that his Indian niello pipe still gleamed on the shelf.

"Nothing yet?"

Mr. Carstairs shook his head. "No offers, even," he said in his wrecked tenor. A professional expression of dubiety threaded among the seams of his face. "My dear sir, I feel you are asking too much for it."

"But the Maharajah himself presented—"

Mr. Carstairs cut him off with a fluttering hand. "Undoubtedly, it has great sentimental value to you, Major. Undoubtedly. To you. But to a stranger—?"

Outside, the dripping moisture beat a slow funereal drum, muffled and distant. Major Dance traced circles in the desktop dust.

"Fifty pounds!" Mr. Carstairs croaked. "I myself," he declared pityingly, "I would buy it from you now—on the spot—for twenty." The parrot chuckled and swung from side to side.

"Twenty!"

"No more, dear sir."

MAJOR DANCE stared hopelessly at the sharp features beneath the smooth pate. The tiny shop seemed suddenly close, unswept and musty, like an unclean cage. Mr. Carstairs rocked gently back and forth; so, gravely, did the parrot.

"A lovely pipe, it's true," said the old man, soothingly. "Twenty pounds—not to be sneezed at." He sighed and scratched at his stained gray vest. "Perhaps you have other mementos you would like to sell?"

Major Dance shook his head. There was only one thing left, back in his threadbare little flat—the regimental sword. He would never part with that.

"Come, sir—be of good cheer! We will try some more. Perhaps there will be an offer." Mr. Carstairs absently stroked his glowing skull, then snapped his fingers. "Ah!" He hustled toward the rear of the shop. "I have a treat for you, Major. Just wait, sir. With your interest in curiosities—"

He came struggling back with a large framed canvas, covered with a sheet of brown wrapping paper.

"German Renaissance," he puffed, propping the picture on a chair beneath the light. He chuckled gleefully as he clawed at the string which held the brown paper in place. "The bargain of a lifetime—can you believe it? My nephew discovered it in a country house near Paris last week—bought it in my name immediately—for fifteen pounds!"

The covering slipped to the floor. Major Dance stared at the painting; it was curious indeed.

"Fifteen pounds!" cried the old man. "You will recognize it, of course, sir." He cocked his narrow head and gave the Major a quick knowing look. "Reutenwald's 'Court of Judgment,' lost since the siege of Paris in 1870! Fifteen pounds!" He clutched the Major's sleeve. "The missing 'Court of Judgment!'"

It was a gloomy scene in grays and reds and heavy greens; a bleak, frosty landscape beneath lowering clouds that seemed to weigh upon the painted human figures. Major Dance tugged uneasily at his mustache.

"Compelling, compelling," he rumbled.

Mr. Carstairs quivered in delight.

"I'm putting it on the market tomorrow. Five thousand guineas!"

Major Dance cleared his throat. "Five thousand. You don't say."

Mr. Carstairs withdrew some papers from his coat pocket. "It's incredible, but it's true." He waved each paper at the Major in turn. "My certificate of ownership—duly notarized! The bill of sale! The previous record of ownership!" He laughed until he coughed and was forced to drop the papers on the desk and reach for a handkerchief.

"Interesting circumstances about Reutenwald," he said, when he had recovered himself.

"Each year, on his birthday, he began a new painting and put in as many figures as he was years old."

Major Dance pursed his lips. There were many figures in the "Court of Judgment." All of them, oddly enough, were staring out of the canvas right at him—in fearful supplication, as though he were their judge.

"For example," Mr. Carstairs continued, "when he was forty, he painted 'The Satyrs'—the one in the Louvre, you know. How many figures in it? Forty!" He coughed once more.

"And on this one now," he went on, "here's the date as plain as pie—1530. Reutenwald was twenty-eight then. And how many figures here? Twenty-eight, by Jove! Count them yourself!"

Major Dance obediently began to count. The figures were grouped in twos on a steep hillside. Yes, there were twenty-eight. Back in his flat he had an old volume on art history; he would look up this Reutenwald chap . . .

"It's cursed, of course."

Major Dance looked inquiringly at the old man.

Mr. Carstairs chuckled. "A fashion of the time, you know. Religious enthusiasm—a touch of the occult! With Reutenwald more than most. He placed a curse on this one in particular.

I must tell you about it. It's quite interesting."

But Mr. Carstairs was interrupted by another spell of coughing, so violent and prolonged that at its peak his spectacles flew from his nose and shattered on the floor.

"The devil!" he cried in despair, groping helplessly among the fragments.

Major Dance clucked sympathetically.

The old man peered around. "There's a second pair in the top drawer, Major. Would you be so kind?"

"Of course."

THE drawer held a stock of forms. As he felt cautiously behind them for the spectacles, he noticed that they were of two kinds: one for purchases, one for sales. He paused for a moment, his heavy hands thrust into the drawer; to one side, the parrot swung in silence, eyeing him moodily—beyond, beneath the light, the twenty-eight figures watched and waited. Five thousand guineas!

"Did you find them, Major?"

He felt a tingling along the slope of his shoulders, as if all those watching eyes—the parrot's, the old dealer's, those of the painted men—were probing him lightly there, like snaky filaments. Sweat gathered at his temples.

"Yes, I have. Here they are."

He turned with the spectacles. Mr. Carstairs shuffled forward. His body blocked the canvas; the light bounced sharply off his skull, its reflection flashing in the Major's eyes as he extended the spectacles. Before the old man's hands quite touched them, they fell.

But they did not break.

"Oh, I say!" Major Dance puffed in annoyance, forestalling Mr. Carstairs' confused fumbings with an authoritative wave. "Awkward—deuced awkward. Allow me, sir."

He stepped forward firmly as he stooped. There was a grinding crunch.

"Good heavens, Mr. Carstairs! I'm afraid that's done it!"

Mr. Carstairs groped for the corner of his desk, squinting helplessly toward the floor.

"Terribly sorry, sir!" cried Major Dance.

"Not at all, Major," the old man muttered mournfully, gripping the desk. "Not at all." In its cage, the parrot swung violently. "Accidents," said Mr. Carstairs, blinking in despair, "will happen."

Major Dance straightened up. "The pipe," he said. "I'll sell it to you for twenty pounds."

"Eh?"

"Twenty pounds—the pipe."

Mr. Carstairs brightened and smoothed his puckered cheeks.

Then he waved his hands ruefully.

"Perhaps you can come back tomorrow? I can't make out a slip properly now." He tapped one eyelid apologetically.

"I must be—in Manchester tomorrow. For a week or two," the Major said. "Perhaps I could fill out the slip . . ."

There was a brief hesitation. On the wall beyond the parrot's cage, the light cast the shadow of an enormous bird, its curved beak drooping.

"Ah yes, of course," Mr. Carstairs declared, rubbing his hands briskly. "You can fill out the slip—very good. And I'll sign, if you will guide my hand to the spot." He made a fluttering gesture of irritation. "You have no idea how vexing—to have one's faculties impaired, so to speak."

The Major had already turned, had selected the form, was filling it out. Mr. Carstairs signed blindly where his hand was placed. He clawed for his wallet.

"Permit me, sir," said Major Dance, firmly. He took his own wallet from his coat pocket and carefully counted out twenty pounds, which he folded into the old man's hand.

MR. Carstairs uncertainly held the notes near his eyes and sniffed at them like a bewildered

mole. "My dear sir," he said, "there is a confusion!" He chuckled and extended the money. "I am supposed to pay you!"

"Not in the least," said Major Dance. He took a deep breath and picked up the papers that still lay on the desktop. Then he calmly stepped over to the chair and lifted the "Court of Judgment."

"Good evening, Mr. Carstairs," he said in a commanding tone, not looking at the old man. He walked with his heavy soldier's tread to the door.

Mr. Carstairs began to splutter and wave his hands. His words jerked out in cracked, astonished phrases. The parrot cried and swayed in its cage.

At the door, Major Dance clapped his bowler firmly on his head and turned. "There is nothing more to be said, sir," he remarked in an off-hand manner. "You have just sold the 'Court of Judgment' to me for twenty pounds. I have your signature on the sales slip. You have my twenty pounds. Our business is concluded."

The old man lurched forward. "You can't—you'll never get away with—"

His hands flapped in the dusty air. As he stumbled around the desk, he seemed to fold sideways and clutched at his collar. The parrot screamed in fury. Major

Dance frowned and stood watching; he had seen men die like this before—the signs were unmistakable. A weak heart disintegrating under a sudden violent stress—the staccato gasps, the incredibly quick palpitations of the chest, the purplish coloring . . .

The old man had been propelled backwards by his exploding heart and now lay twisted on the empty chair beneath the light, trying to speak, his face contorted into an angry grin. "You . . . see . . . you . . ." The words spat out painfully, like broken teeth. "You . . . you . . . see . . . you . . . at . . . at the . . . mountain, the mountain!" Major Dance put his hand on the knob and felt the reassuring weight of the picture frame against his side. What last terrible visions were flooding through the old man's brain? On the chair, the gray figure was writhing in the final convulsions. "Mountain . . ."

And that was all. He slid off to the floor like a breeze-blown bit of crumpled paper and lay there stiffly, the open eyes staring, the mouth agape in the fixed empty grin. Major Dance approached the parrot's cage with some distaste and covered it. Then he stepped out into the fog.

THE flat was simply furnished, as appropriate for a retired

officer. But it was a seedy simplicity. The shabby rug and ragged curtains testified to the inadequacy of a military pension. Beyond the cheerless sitting-room lay a tiny bedroom. Doleful was the word for it, thought little Mr. Craddock, the art expert from Sotheby's.

Yet Major Dance was in a jovial, bubbling mood. He bristled with a mounting excitement. Rubbing his hands together, he hovered eagerly beside a modest table on which was propped the painting, covered by a cloth.

Mr. Craddock sighed. It was a hard life, he thought, to be the agent of disillusion. Only last week there had been a nasty case in Kensington. Elderly woman who had found a Titian. An appalling fake, of course. He had broken the news to her as gently as he knew how; but she had, perhaps understandably, said some frightful things to him. Still, she had had no right to order him shown out by the tradesmen's door.

Major Dance could stand it no longer. Pulling the cloth away with a flourish, he stepped back a pace, clicked his heels ceremoniously and turned to his guest. His mustache worked. His marbled eyes gleamed.

"There you have it, sir," he announced, spacing his words. "There—you—have it!"

Mr. Craddock edged toward

the table, looking at the painting sideways.

"Reutenwald's missing 'Court of Judgment,'" boomed the parade-ground voice.

Mr. Craddock squinted, peered, even seemed prepared to sniff (they all said that he could literally smell a fake).

"Five thousand guineas," said Major Dance, "or I'm a Frenchman."

Mr. Craddock pursed his lips. These amateurs, they were all so remorselessly confident. "We must not be hasty, Major," he said.

Major Dance puffed out his veined red cheeks, as though to blow caution from the room. In his heavy tweeds, he loomed over his visitor like a brambly hill. "Look all you like, sir. Take your time. Satisfy yourself."

He chuckled in the safety of his own certainty and drove one great fist into a pink palm. Mr. Craddock glanced up at the glowing face and forced a smile.

"Subject it to every test, sir," the Major continued. "I say, blaze away at it—point-blank!"

He laughed, in what Mr. Craddock feared was a slightly hysterical manner.

"The 'Court of Judgment,' sir," the voice rolled on, "or Sotheby's may have my head, sir." He gestured with one elephantine arm. Mr. Craddock's gaze fell on the room's only orna-

ment, the regimental sword above the tiny hearth.

"I am sure," Mr. Craddock responded, with a nervous laugh, "that we would have no stomach for such an arrangement, Major."

"No stomach for my head! Delightful!"

Mr. Craddock completed his crab-like progress to the table. This picture was beginning to interest him. It was, at the very least, a highly competent imitation of Johann Heinrich Reutenwald, he thought, his mind automatically supplying, neatly bracketed, the dates: (1502-1564). The initials in the corner, characteristically tinged with a faint orange border . . . the date, "A.D. 1530," printed just above . . . the absolute mastery of detail, even to the bluish veins in the eyes of the figures. . . . And the longer he examined it, the more it seemed to fit the careful description of the lost masterpiece by this relatively minor, but interesting artist. The figures of men—the accused and the accusers—looking out from that nightmare landscape as though facing some unseen but awful bar of justice. They ranged along a grotesque, denuded slope, bounded by dark and ancient woods, while above them the clouds sagged threateningly.

"Eerie, eh?" came the voice behind him. "Seems to draw you right in, doesn't it?"

Mr. Craddock nodded politely. He was musing now: Improbable, but—possible. He could not tell. They would have to make the tests, he would have to confer with Mr. Jameson, with Mr. Whitfield . . .

"I heard—that is, I read an odd thing about the fellow," said Major Dance. "Reutenwald, you know."

"Yes," said Mr. Craddock, absently. He tensed himself, leaned forward—and sniffed. His intuition, operating through his nasal passages, told him clearly: Early Sixteenth Century. His imagination plunged about wildly and he clutched at the table for support.

". . . fellow painted a picture on his birthday every year, or some such thing," the Major was saying. "Painted one figure for every year of his life. Twenty-eight in this one here . . ."

Mr. Craddock nodded. He was well aware of Reutenwald's odd fancy. Once more he glanced at the canvas. Surely there was some obvious fault, some trick that the clever forger had overlooked. But he saw none, only those staring faces awaiting justice. What skill the man had possessed! One could not bear to look at it for long.

". . . artist was twenty-eight,

you see," the Major rumbled on. "Twenty-eight figures! I counted 'em myself."

Mr. Craddock repressed a shudder. There was a legend connected with the painting. Something about a curse, about innocence and guilt. He could not quite recall it.

"When I counted 'em at the shop," said Major Dance, moving to the window and gazing down at the street, "that was the final straw, you might say." He turned, like a great ship in narrow waters. "That's when I *knew*, you see." He clapped his hands together. Mr. Craddock winced.

"And so, I snapped it up!" the Major cried.

Mr. Craddock could not pull his eyes away from Reutenwald's vision of corruption and terror. Twenty-eight faces, frozen in time on that bleak mountain slope, mutely awaiting some fearful doom. He thought of silent forests, of werewolves loping through the snow, following a scarlet trail . . .

"A twenty-pound investment!" roared the Major, wagging his bull's head. Then he chuckled. "Five thousand guineas—eh, Mr. Craddock? Quite a return!"

Mr. Craddock closed his eyes to blot out the Gothic horrors. He composed his face into the professional aspect of sympathy

and uncertainty. "One cannot be absolutely positive, Major," he said. "Even you and I, with our experience—"

"I understand, sir!" said Major Dance. "You must have your little tests. You must examine it from every standpoint. You must call in other experts. Oh, yes. I quite understand."

Mr. Craddock inclined his head. "Perhaps we may send our man around for it in the morning?"

"Naturally."

"We are fully insured, of course," said Mr. Craddock. He felt the closeness of the room now. The Major seemed to grow in size every minute. There was really no place left to rest one's eyes. It was either that ballooning bulk—or the picture, and Mr. Craddock somehow could not bear the latter.

THERE was still another question to be asked.

"I suppose," said Mr. Craddock, "that you have the usual evidence of ownership."

The Major fumbled in an interior pocket.

Mr. Craddock accepted the slip of paper. He read it twice. Preposterous. He glanced above it. The fate-ridden faces stared back at him, hopelessly.

"Carstairs . . ." Mr. Craddock mouthed the name on the slip.

Major Dance raised an annoyed eyebrow and turned again to the window.

"Good heavens," said Mr. Craddock, hollowly.

The Major's voice was thick. "Unfortunate case, of course. I suppose it might have been the old fellow's last sale."

Mr. Craddock spoke without reflection. "I didn't mean that, Major. I am simply amazed that old Mr. Carstairs would fail to recognize a Reutenwald. I cannot conceive of it."

Major Dance was frowning out at London.

Perhaps," said Mr. Craddock, "he realized his mistake later. Twenty pounds, you say?"

"Twenty."

From the table, Reutenwald's painting loomed, the tormented eyes gazing at their nameless fate. Almost against his will, Mr. Craddock was impelled once more to meet those stares. Something seemed amiss. He drew one hand across his moist brow and deliberately looked elsewhere—anywhere—finally at the paper in his hand.

It reminded him of something he had heard. He tried to curb his tongue, but in vain. "There was a story about the funeral. Hard to credit, of course."

Major Dance turned, his face bland.

"About Carstairs' funeral?"

"Merely an idle rumor," said

Mr. Craddock. He told himself he had no business rambling on about it. His instincts yearned for the fresh moist air of the street—anything, just to flee from this close little den. But his gaze was fixed on the 'Court of Judgment' and the poised figures painted there. Somehow he could not help himself.

"It was a cremation. This morning. I didn't go myself, but one of my associates did. He said—there were no ashes."

Major Dance stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"I mean," said Mr. Craddock, feeling illogically on the verge of laughter, as though he were about to produce the punch line of a joke, "I mean there was nothing left of him. He—he burned up completely—vanished, you might say—with nothing left. Nothing at all."

"If you will forgive me, sir," said Major Dance in a hard voice, "poppycock, sir."

NOW Mr. Craddock knew what was wrong with the picture. While he had been babbling away about old Carstairs, his expert's eye had been busy, hard at work, summing up.

"Major Dance," he announced, again battling the unseemly inclination to giggle, "there is a flaw in that picture!"

Major Dance's mouth dropped open.

"You are jesting, sir. Why, Mr. Carstairs himself—"

Mr. Craddock broke in excitedly, pointing at the 'Court of Judgment.'

"Count them yourself, Major!"

Now the Major's agitated bulk moved in front of Reutenwald's masterpiece and gruff little noises filtered through the mustache. He was counting desperately, as though a future life of ease and comfort on the Riviera depended on it, which in fact it did. He counted once and swore. He counted twice, then stamped his foot. The sword danced above the hearth.

"By Jove, sir! There must be an explanation for this." He tugged furiously at his mustache. Mr. Craddock edged quietly back, until he could feel the doorknob pressing against the small of his back.

Major Dance snapped his fingers. "The book!" he roared. He transfixed Mr. Craddock with a commanding gaze. "Don't go, sir," he ordered. "I've got a book—tells all about it—could have been twenty-nine years old, you know—"

He fled ponderously into the bedroom. Mr. Craddock could hear him thumping about, searching for the reference work. Then all was silent.

Mr. Craddock waited. Unwill-

ingly, his attention was pulled toward the picture. The terror-stricken eyes stared back.

"Major Dance?"

He could not abide this silence.

"Major Dance, sir!"

His throat was dry and constricted. He longed to fling open a window, but he was unable to move. Relentlessly, the painting confronted him—all those eyes, seeking pity . . .

"Major Dance!"

Mr. Craddock broke the spell, yet he rushed not backward to the freedom of the stairs but forward, past the awful masterpiece and into the tiny bedroom.

"Major Dance!"

On the narrow bed lay a large illustrated volume, its pages carelessly ruffled. In a corner leaned the Major's walking stick; on the dresser were arranged a set of brushes, a tin of denture powder, a book of matches. Above was a single window, its shade securely drawn. That was all—there was no other door.

Mr. Craddock stumbled out of the empty room, pursued by a fearful knowledge. The legend—the curse—he recalled it clearly. He edged past the painting, his eyes averted; he reached blindly for the door-knob. He did not need to count the figures now.

THE END