

Recidivism Preferred

By JOHN JAKES

Mellors was happy in Pineville—except for one problem. Why did he keep having that dream about a giant billboard that said only: "Acme Lead Works"?

RANDOLF Mellors ("rhymes with cellars," the newsmagazine *Tempis* in its cover story three weeks before declaring bankruptcy) was the world's greatest thief. His only difficulty as a subject for scrutiny here is that circumstances beyond his control had made him completely uninteresting. That is to say, dull.

But if you had asked the passengers in the long, mighty and black Excalibur Special Touring Saloon roaring down County Highway #2 one hellish hot day during state fair season whether Randolph Mellors was unworthy of study, all three, including that small, mummified, pink-scalped one in the immense tonneau, would have exchanged sly sneers which implied that if you thought Randolph Mellors was

dull, you just didn't understand the workings of free-wheeling capitalism.

Still, Randolph Mellors was a soulless hulk of his former conniving self.

Oh, the looks were there. He had aged somewhat. The sleek hair was a trifle gray. But the willowy frame remained. And the inscrutable mouth, the long jaw, the cadaverous frame. But suavity is a difficult item to merchandise while selling turnip greens, baking soda, peanuts, baby bottle brushes and bunion remedies from behind a counter of pine planks in a crossroads store. Where oh where, was the Raffles-like glory of yesteryear?

Who cared? Certainly, not the inhabitants of Pineville. To them Randolph Mellors was only a slightly suspicious (because

strange) outlander who had come shuffling through the gum-trees one spring morning. An outlander who had gradually oriented himself to Pineville community life or what passed for it around eight shanties, two stores and a gas pump. He kept his mouth shut and made no mistakes when totalling up purchases in Larry Lumpkin's Emporium.

Larry Lumpkin liked to show dogs, hunt possum and play checkers. Hiring a clerk gave him the time, now he was getting along. (Of course that wasn't any accident either. His psychic readiness to employ a clerk had been thoroughly researched.)

But other than the relaxing Larry Lumpkin, who, in all honesty, cared a hang about Randolph Mellors? Certainly not Vinnie Mudgerock, for whom Randolph was just now wrapping up a bolt of muslin and a pack of disposable diapers. Outside on the pine sidewalk Vinnie Mudgerock's wee month-old infant reposed in a broken-down perambulator, sucking eagerly on a nutritionally deficient peppermint stick.

"That be all, Miz Mudgerock?" inquired Randolph, wiping his hands on his apron. Randolph had always been a consummate actor. In Pineville he had managed to acquire a trace

of the local dialect, which demonstrated conclusively that no matter how hard bureaucracy tried, bureaucracy could not win every hand. (As the three assorted inhabitants of the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon, a quarter of a mile out of town now, engine snarling, were hell-bent to prove.)

When Miz Mudgerock said that would be all, Randolph said, "Leave me carry this bundle out to the car for you."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Mellors." Miz Mudgerock gave him a yeasty smile.

RANDOLF Mellors, of course, found it impossible to smile. He did not know why. He also had a violent dislike of anyone who looked at him straight in the eye. He did not know why about this either, except that it made him want to start running. Further, he had periodic dreams in which he saw only one thing, a vast signboard in the rain, painted with three-foot letters reading:

Acme Lead Works.

Even including these three idiosyncrasies, however, the dullness of Randolph Mellors was reasonably total.

Distantly down County Highway #2 boiled fuming clouds of tan dust. Pineville dozed. The sky stretched blue and bright all the way to the state fair-

Illustrated by ADKINS



RECIDIVISM PREFERRED

grounds where Larry Lumpkin was doubtless engaged right now in a checker game, having left Randolph to mind the store. Randolph put the paper sack into the rear seat of Miz Mudgerock's dust-yellow flivver. Then he walked over to where the lady was picking up her infant from amongst gooey blankets.

While burping the smeared tot, Miz Mudgerock's mouth dropped open.

"Why, Mr. Mellors, you have the funniest look on your face."

"I do?" said a surprised Randolph.

"You sure do. What you lookin' at? That silly ole candy stick?"

"I guess I was," said Randolph, suddenly extremely nervous.

"You hongry or suthin? You looked like you wanted to chew up that ole peppermint stick just to bits."

"Hon . . . uh, hungry? No, er, not in the least." With a real feeling of terror Randolph Mellors said, most truthfully, "I loathe. . . er . . . don't like candy."

"You *are* a puzzler," said Miz Mudgerock. "Where'd you ever come from, to a place like this, anyhow?"

"Up north," Randolph, mortally terrified now. It was the best answer he could give, considering he didn't know the correct one.

The roar of the Excalibur Saloon grew thunderous. The dust cloud bloomed. A yellow hound narrowly avoided being jellied beneath the tires of the highway monster. Randolph Mellors wiped his hands furiously on his apron, as though he'd done something unsanitary. A view of the Acme Lead Works sign flashed on and off in his head, for no apparent reason.

"Excuse me, Miz Mudgerock."

He quivered and plunged like a scared hare back into the crackery gloom of Larry Lumpkin's store. He stood with his back to the fly-specked plate glass in the diffused sunlight which filtered through it until he heard the fliver putt off up into the rolling hills. Once again he was face to face with the dreadful enigma of himself. The sensation was akin to staring at a newly wiped blackboard of the dimensions of the Great Wall of China. Only the deafening peal of Larry Lumpkin's jangling store bell prevented Randolph from plunging further into a morass of futile introspection.

THE TRIO from the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon were certainly a sight.

The first tapped one mummified spat-clad foot and peered at Randolph from out small ratty eyes. The old gentleman wore

an old-fashioned high collar and eye glasses on a black string, plus a pin stripe suit which even Randolph Mellors—somehow—knew was out of style. The small old gentleman's companions, however, were startling studies in what could either be termed the seedy or the raffish. Or worse.

There was a fat one, three hundred pounds, in a suit the size of a tent, that sported egg stains on its lapels. He had a tangled brown beard the size of a spade and a mass of wooly brown hair to match. His novelty was further heightened by the suggestion of alien life within this hairy mass.

His companion, an epicene youth hardly old enough to vote but possessing a head too big for the rest of him, appeared to stare inside himself, if that were possible, from behind like plate glass window spectacles. He looked as though he might unveil a hatchet from somewhere within his obviously rented chauffeur's uniform and go totally berserk any minute.

The little old mummy advanced. He studied the store, but had no time to speak before the behemoth with the brown beard pulled a whisky flask from his pocket, tilting back his head, and proceeding to pour booze down his throat while orgiastic shudders seized him.

With surprising agility old mummyface danced across the store and slapped the flask out of the fat man's hands.

"All right, Dr. Kloog, that is sufficient. I warned you."

"But—my God—" gasped Dr. Kloog. "Seven hundred miles cold turkey. Banner, you fiend, I've got to have a drink—"

"Which do you need most?" hissed mummyface. "Hooch or a paycheck?"

"Someday," Kloog threatened, "someday some college'll take me back and—(belch)." Dr. Kloog lowered his bovine head. "You win."

The cretinish prodigy in chauffeur's garb sniggered at his companion's expense. The little man addressed as Banner spun around on one of his patent leather toes and pointed a finger.

"As for you, Dr. Rumsgate, you're no better off than he is."

"It's just that the attitudes on vivisection in this country—" purred Dr. Rumsgate.

"That," said Banner with steel in his tone, "will be all."

Returning toward the counter and making a gesture which included the stupefied Mellors, he continued, "If you gentlemen will bear in mind that we're in a public place, and stop making exhibitions of yourselves, I'll proceed with my purchase." Glancing up at the shelves, he

said, "Good morning, sir. I wonder if you could tell me how far it is to the state capital."

"State capital?" Randolph repeated. "That's a hundred miles west."

"Dear me," said Banner. "A wrong turn. I wonder, could you sell me a pack of cigarettes? Do you have Status? Ivory-tipped, if you please."

"No Status, no, sir," said Randolph, running his eyes over the shelves. "How about Board Chairmans? Wolfbaits? Big Cities? Sexos?"

"A pack of Board Chairmans will do." Randolph handed him the brightly lithographed cardboard container, accepted the twenty dollar bill without taking his eyes off the register, rang the sale and held out the change. Randolph blinked. Banner had already broken open his pack, turned his back, and was passing out the door, lighting a Board Chairman while his two flunkies flanked him.

Randolf stared for ten seconds at the nineteen dollars and fifty cents resting in his palm. The Acme Lead Works flashed behind his eyes, three feet high in the rain. Suddenly Randolph felt as though a sledge had knocked him in the head.

He ran from behind the counter and shouted, "Excuse me sir, but you forgot your change."

THE expression on the mummified face of the little old man as he turned back into the store was maniacal. For a long moment he seemed frozen in a beam of sunlight, giggling and leering at his two scientific mates. He nudged each one in the ribs. Dr. Kloog snuffled like an elephant about to charge. Dr. Rumsgate rolled his eyes. Somewhere within Banner's shrunk ribcage a peculiar sound was building, a sound of crackling paper that passed for hysterical mirth. It came bursting from his scissors lips and he began to caper up and down.

"He's the one," Banner cackled. "Oh, mercy, yes, he is the one."

"Don't let's waste time," said Dr. Rumsgate, as though sadistically titillated.

"Grab him," said Dr. Kloog in a pant.

"Wait a minute, gentlemen—" Randolph began. "You're making a mistake—"

Dr. Kloog, Dr. Rumsgate and Banner, all three, looked Randolph straight in the eye.

Something wild, like a whip, cracked in Randolph's head. He put one hand on the counter and vaulted.

He came down like a cat on the balls of its feet, perfectly poised, as though going off balconies and second stories were old stuff. One lithe hand whipped

out. A silver gleam caught sunlight. Randolph crouched in the shadows near the magazine rack. He made small wicked circles in the air with the blade of the carving knife he'd ripped from a faded point of sale card.

"Stay back! I—I don't want any part of you three."

Dr. Rumsgate sniggered. "Automatic reaction. Partial breakthrough."

"Weak conditioning," nodded Dr. Kloog. "It'll be a cinch."

"Ah, God, to have the chance again," exclaimed Rumsgate, "after being de-licensed—"

"Keep quiet!" Banner snarled. They did. Banner tried to assume an ingratiating air before the tigerish man crouching beside a display of the July issue of *Hollywood Love Thrills and Confessions*. "My dear Mr. Mellors—"

"How do you know my name?"

"Never mind, Mr. Mellors, we know it. I want to assure you that—"

"Get out of this store before I do some carving."

"You're being extremely uncooperative. If you only knew—"

"Leave me alone," Randolph shouted suddenly, an odd, desperate sort of pleading note in his voice. Almost like a child he yelled, "I haven't done anything!"

"But my dear man," shrieked Banner, "that is precisely the trouble."

"Get him!" exclaimed Dr. Kloog, and launched himself through space.

THE ambition of Dr. Kloog was considerably more elevated than his trajectory. One supple spring to the top of a cracker barrel by Randolph and Dr. Kloog found himself tangled in the magazine rack, *Hollywood Love Thrills and Confessions* raining down upon him in profusion. Dr. Rumsgate, apparently had an aversion for the physical. He hopped back and forth from one foot to the other, clapping his palms together as if he could not contain his excitement. Banner couldn't contain his excitement either, except that it achieved a somewhat more lethal nature. Its release took the form of curses, then physical blows rained upon the persons of the two scientists. By that time Randolph Mellors, raising his forearms to shield his head, had gone through the plate glass window of Larry Lumpkin's Emporium in one magnificent crashing leap.

"Oh, you wretched bunglers —!" Banner howled.

A smooth muffled roar filled the store. The gas pump disappeared in a cloud of saffron dust. The Excalibur Special Touring Saloon began to weave up County Highway # 2 at something near seventy, its course a continuous S-curve, as though a mortally

terrified man were at the wheel. Which happened to be the case.

Dr. Kloog, peering through the fractured shards of glass, did a double take and caught hold of Banner's arm.

"Banner, hang on. Banner, don't punch me that way. He took the bus."

"—vile, unspeakable, bungling, wretched—"

"Ah, *ah!*" shrieked Dr. Rums-gate. "Yes, *yes*. Banner, the remote, the *remote!*"

"—unprintable, censorable, bowdlerized *fools*, you'll never—"

Banner's eye blink rate suddenly accelerated. His breath hissed between his two thousand dollar New York City teeth. Then he let out a queer little chuckle.

"The remote! Why, of course! Poor Mellors. Been out of the city too long." From the inner breast pocket of his suit, he pulled a small electronic pack housed in plastic and covered with knobs, similar to the units used in a less advanced day to tune televisions across a room.

UNAWARE of the manipulations about to be committed, Randolph Mellors drove like hell over, around and through the execrable chuckholes and corduroy strips of the county road. Behind him a volcano of dust obscured the crossroads in the mirror, which was just as well. The horrid vision of staring eyes in

the store's musky interior haunted him and brought unbearably cold sweat to every point on his body.

Next to him on the seat shone the fierce, naked brightness of the carving knife. Glancing at it, Randolph experienced a mysterious shudder of revulsion. He quickly rolled down the Excalibur's side window, steered with one hand and flung the weapon off into the pines.

A moment later he wondered just why he had thrown away his only means of defense.

His wonderment was transitory. The window began to roll itself up.

Randolf tried to crank it down manually. No go. He felt the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon begin to decelerate. He crushed the floor pedal all the way down. He swung the steering wheel in a full circle. It did not object. The Saloon, however, was now running in a perfectly straight line, corduroy and all, at slightly less than thirty miles per hour.

Next thing Randolph knew, the car nosed itself into a side road, threw itself into reverse and started to cruise placidly straight back toward the crossroads where three figures and a gas pump stood waiting.

Randolf flung himself to the other side of the car. But every exit including those in the tonneau, had been remotely locked.

Helpless, sweat popping out all over his face, Randolph sat under the wheel and watched like a man hypnotized as the Touring Saloon rolled inexorably back to Lumpkin's store.

The brakes gave a faint squeak as it stopped in the dust. The three strangers surrounded the vehicle, whose doors now popped unlocked. Banner opened the one on the driver's side. He motioned in a most gentlemanly way for Randolph to climb out.

Terrified, Randolph asked: "W—what—please tell me what I've done."

"Nothing," said Banner, false teeth gleaming. "You're an unfortunate victim."

"The process," rumbled Dr. Kloog as he rummaged in the tonneau, "is called Socialization. You're social, that's all. Now where are my instruments?"

"Actually," came the voice of Dr. Rumsgate, from somewhere behind Mellors, "you'll really thank us after we—"

After? After what?

After the gleaming needle slid into the musculature of his shoulderblade, which was after he screwed his head around to stare at Dr. Rumsgate, who had sneaked up on him by opening the door directly to the rear of the driver's seat. Now Randolph's horrified gaze locked with the slightly mad eyes behind the window glass of spectacles. Ran-

dolf felt himself consumed by that gaze, swallowed by it. He tried to crawl from the vehicle. Somehow or other that devil Rumsgate had injected simple syrup into his veins.

And the simple syrup was spreading. His legs turned into it. Then his arms. When he tried to move, flee, escape, all he could do was ooze. He had no power left.

Most amazingly, it was raining inside the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon. Raining on Dr. Rumsgate's big head.

No, Randolph thought to himself, bemused now, gripped by a pleasant twilight lassitude, he doesn't have a head at all. On Rumsgate's shoulders sat the sign over the main gate of the Acme Lead Works, the Acme Lead Works in the rain in Sep . . .

In Septe . . .

In Septem . . .

September!

IT BURST from the back of the whirl of his mind: *September.*

Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars stashed in a three-wheel icecream truck labelled Yum-O FreezieTreats.

Pedalling away down the rainy road . . .

Ding-a-linging his bell in triumph.

Roadblock.

Federal men.

Vendor back from vacation,
but too late, tri-wheeler stolen,
too late to alter plan . . .

Worked anyway . . .

Greatest coup . . .

Until . . .

Pedalling, pedalling . . .

No reverse gears on Freezie-

Treats wagons . . .

Manacles . . .

Dark rooms . . .

Guilt, shouting guilt:

Yes (Randolf heard himself
crying in that rainy September
in the darkness of his mind) *yes,*
you sons of satan, I foxed you
again!

Too bad (whispered ghost voices). *Too bad. So colorful.*

One of the last (went the whispering voices blowing through his dimming head). *The last, the the last. The last of the great.*

Penological triumph (keened a ghost-choir). *Break down the walls. Rebuild the personality. Disassociate. Assimilate. Integrate.*

SOCIALIZE.

—reporting from geographical selector, chief (CHIEFCHIEFCHIEFCHIEF went the dark black echo down the fast-failing electrical paths of his reworked, muddled, tired head) *and we find* (FINDFINDFINDFIND) *ideal—re-adjustment—environment—Pine* (PINEPINEPINEPINE)—

For one virtually unbearable fraction of time Randolph Mellors stared again into the looming

erudite eyes of the psychosocializer who had leaned over him in a room tiled in green and lowered the face mask for the submerging.

The eyes . . . *the eyes* . . .

Guilt.

Guilt.

GUILT!

They just couldn't make the eyes benevolent. Writhing (they had strapped him, he remembered in a roman candle burst of remembering) he saw the eyes blaze guilt which already, as the hormones and the enzymes and the catalyzers bubbled through him in the first moments of social metamorphosis, already he had come to loathe.

Guilt; he loathed guilt.

But you sonsofbitches (he shrieked before they gassed him all the way into being somebody else entirely) *you're making me so damn dull* (LL . . . LL . . . LL) . . .

AT sundown, a great red sun-down suggestive of far places waiting beyond the pine hills, the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon was parked on a bluff overlooking Lumpkin's cross-roads store, but concealed behind a sufficient quantity of trees so that observation could be carried on discreetly. A panel in the rear fin had been opened, from which a spring steel trellis shot forth a powerful optical tube.

Through this instrument Harlow B. C. Banner was now observing the interior of the store.

Distantly through the still, crisp air came the putt of a flivver. Banner clicked his false teeth in exultation.

"What's he doing now?" asked Dr. Kloog. In point of fact, Dr. Kloog actually said, "Wuzzydoo-now?", as a result of the reward given him by Banner following the surreptitious re-direction of personality that took four hours. This reward was a fifth of premium Scotch whisky. Insatiable and triumphant, Dr. Kloog had also consumed a pint of rubbing alcohol out of the medical supplies. He was even now suggestively eyeing the tin of canned heat bubbling over which their dinner cooked.

"Writing a note." Chuckling, Banner screwed the lens adjustment so that he could peer more effectively inside Lumpkin's. "Wait, I'll be able to read in a minute—"

"Delicious," came the piping cry of Dr. Rumsgate somewhere within the tonneau of the vehicle. Dr. Rumsgate had not bothered to convert the tonneau back from an electronic operating pad into conventional seats. In fact it was his particular reward to be able to leave the pad up a while, and conduct some sort of procedure which Banner didn't care to inquire about.

"Just as I thought!" Banner exclaimed. "He's writing a fare well note to Lumpkin. Now he's coming out. Locking the store, and—oh-oh. Car pulling up. Blasted woman. Getting her buggy out, too."

"Bassids," belched Dr. Kloog, in reference to his former faculty colleagues. He gestured flamboyantly with his empty pint of spirits. "All bassids. Jus' because man geds de-licen don' mean he don' know how 'just personality . . ."

"Don't pat yourself on the back," sneered Banner, furiously adjusting the eyepiece. "He was easy. After all, he had strong anti-social drives."

"Has," Kloog corrected with several lurches. "Z goddam bag."

Banner refused to pay further attention to his disreputable comrades. The scene captured within the circle of the lens fascinated him. Randolph Mellors had emerged from Lumpkin's Emporium just as Miz Mudgerock wheeled her perambulator up the sidewalk and kicked on the footbrake. Mellors was standing in the winy red sunlight, one thumb hooked rakishly in his belt, his other index finger through the eyelet of his coat, the coat over his shoulder.

Whatever the woman desired in the store, Mellors told her to get it herself, with an insolent

jerk of his thumb. She scuttled out of sight. Glancing in all directions, Randolph Mellors leaned over the pram. In a twinkling he darted back popping half a peppermint stick into his mouth.

EVEN from high on the bluff Harlow B. C. Banner could hear a faint squall of protest. Mellors stepped off the sidewalk into the dust. He turned beside the gas pump and thumbed his nose at Lumpkin's. Then, swinging his coat and whistling, he walked up County Highway #2 into the sunset.

"He *smiled!*" Banner shrieked joyfully. "He actually *smiled!* Ah, in a month, maybe less, the crimes—the delicious crimes."

Banner snapped his fingers.

"All right, Kloog, Rumsgate—pack up! On to the next town.

We've got that sex degenerate. I'll teach those bureaucrats!" Righteously, Banner shook his fist at the reddening pines. "Try to stamp out crime, will they? Try to adjust criminals into goodie-goodies, will they? Illegal or not, I'll show them they can't tamper with free enterprise—destroy what I built!"

"Wunnerful," said Dr. Kloog. "Wunnerful for me, wunnerful for you."

"You bet it's wonderful!" cried the little old mummy. "After ten years of bureaucracy—near bankruptcy—" He clamped hands on the oversized Kloog and his whole larcenous face was illumined. "—finally, *finally*, Banner Newspapers will once again have some news that's fit to print!"

THE END



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