

The Dannold Cheque

*how can a memento
of courage and fame also be a
testament to a man's downfall?*

fiction By KEN W. PURDY



HE PROMENADE des Anglais. Late May. Blue sea, sugar-white buildings, still a wash of yellow in the sunlight, ten in the morning. Evian Tassopol

behind the shutters, waist-high and waxed, that made the back wall of his show window, in one hand a demitasse cup, stark, bone white, the saucer in the other. Blistering-hot coffee, double espresso of his own roast, grind and brew. A sad, unpretty girl stops to look, lifts her eyes to his, blinks, goes away. A bicycle at the curb, unpainted glistening silver alloy, a monster blond—German? Swede? Russian?—holding it stationary in balance with twitches of the handle bar, twitches of the lumped muscles in his legs, calf muscles like bread loaves.

Faint mosquito hum of electric motors from the crawling jam of autos on the promenade. Tassopol carrying the cup and saucer to the little room in back. Basta. Business.

At 10:15, as he had said he would, Henry Dannold came in.

"Ah, Monsieur Dannold," Tassopol said. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Monsieur Tassopol."

"Please sit down, Monsieur Dannold," Tassopol said. "I shall bring coffee."

Henry Dannold opened the cigarette box. It was gold-framed jade. He pressed the spring and lifted out the false bottom. Tassopol kept the good cigarettes tucked away. They were Merions, handmade, half Macedonian tobacco and half hashish, the only thing fit to smoke, Dannold thought, and sadly beyond his means these days. He lighted one. All cigarettes

should be oval, he thought; what a barbarism that they're not! He sensed the first light curling of his nerve ends, fern fronds in sunlight, with the second drag, and he waited in comfort for the coffee. It would have, he knew, a drop of rum in it.

The round table, not 50 centimeters across, stood on a tiny balcony at the back of the shop, two steps up from the floor. The light in the shop was golden now: Tassopol had pressed the OFF show-window button, the Glaverbel glass had turned mirror on the street side, and the word FERME shone jet-black in the door.

"I see," Dannold said, "that you have a new Churchill on the south wall."

"You are observant," Tassopol said. "I bought it yesterday. Let me show you." It was a holograph letter, written at Chartwell on the 22nd of June, 1938, 16 lines long. There was a reference to a drought that had interfered with the lawns, and a tuft of grass, a dozen blades, had been fastened to the letter by a double cut in the paper. A contemporary photograph of Churchill, Churchill as bricklayer, overlapped the letter, corner to corner, and the whole collage was held in a narrow gold frame, restrained and elegant.

"Very nice," Dannold said. "What will it bring?"

Tassopol lifted his shoulders and his head tipped, as if the great mass of black hair overweighed it. He smiled with golden teeth in his golden face. "A hundred thousand francs," he said. "Not less. Because of the grass, you know."

"Yes. Like that Gerald Mattock you had last winter, that 2026 water-color sketch with the bit of cloth from his shirt."

"Exactly. But this is so much older. Just think: Those leaves of grass were pulled over 150 years ago, by Winston Churchill's own hand!"

"Yes. Remarkable." Dannold held rich smoke in his lungs and squeezed. How had it been that day in 1938, he wondered, what had the great man's green-grass-stained fingers held for tea, that same day, as a wet English sun lay red on the rolling fields of Kent? Biscuits? Toast? Honey? Whiskey? He was moved. "So many bits of history on these walls," he said. "A remarkable idea you had, this combination of autograph, artifact, photograph. And that you have got so many of them together!"

"So, but it has been twenty years, after all," Tassopol said. "I am known."

"True. You are well known."

"In the matter of your cheque, Monsieur Dannold," Tassopol said, "I have thought of something novel."

"I was sure you would."

"Yes. First, of course, we have the cheque itself, and a handsome thing it is. Coutts' bank was the last bank in the world to use that big, almost square cheque, you know. And, not to overlook, the amount. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds! Three million francs, even then! And the vom stamp in violet ink. All most impressive. There can be no problem about a photograph. It must be Jenille's. After all, Jenille won the Lord Thomson of Fleet Prize that year. Here." It had been in his jacket pocket, a six by eight, marvelously composed, as if Jenille had had all day to do it, instead of a half second (it *must* have been chance, Dannold always thought), catching Dannold just as he broke



Smith's finger and twisted the gun away, the prime minister staring, bump-eyed, terror just rising in him, his bodyguard, the Welshman, Coffyd, grabbing, huge hook hands shooting his bony wrists out of his sleeves stretching for Smith, and off to one side, a tinkling grace note of comedy, the P. M.'s daughter smiling at the little boy who'd given her the bouquet. It was, indeed, one hell of a photograph. Dannold remembered seeing it on a billboard in Birmingham and he remembered feeling the rush of blood to his head, and then the pounding in him somewhere, down inside. That was the day, O my friends, that was the day!

"And then," Tassopol was saying, "we must have a text. And here I am going to ask you to indulge me. I would like the text to be—I warn you, this is very presumptuous—a letter to me, describing exactly what happened that day, the 14th of August, 2049. Yes, to me. You *would* be so good? And because it will be longer, must be longer, than one side of any note paper, we will have it typed, the first page on one side only, for the main collage, and the other pages on both sides, and those in double frames, you know the sort of thing, the way stamp collections used to be shown in museums, and everything beautifully hinged together. What do you think of that?"

"Splendid," Dannold said. "And as for its being a letter to you, I don't see why not. The whole thing was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Ah, thank you!" Tassopol said. He poured coffee. "See this," he said. "This is the paper we will use. It was made for me in Paris, hand laid: there are only two men in France who do this work in the old way, one hundred percent linen fibers, just as a thousand years ago. This paper, under glass, sealed in argon, will last absolutely forever! You see, Monsieur Dannold, we will both be immortals, you and I, more or less immortals."

"More or less," Dannold said. "A sobering thought. Not, I think, that I wish to entertain any sobering thoughts, just now."

"At ten-thirty, which is to say, five minutes from now," Tassopol said, "my secretary will come in. I suggest you dictate the text straight off to her. I have rented a Nagra XI typewriter. You will sign the finished, perfect copy. My man has already made the main frame and six leaves, probably twice what you'll need. He will be here at two-thirty. At three, the Dannold cheque will be finished and upon the wall in the place of honor! The frame, by the way, is of polished chestnut taken from a beam certified to have come from No. 10 Downing Street when the building was demolished."

"Remarkable," Dannold said. He was ever so slightly high, his persona, or whatever ragged thing was left of it after the nibblings of the years, being gently

tugged this way and that, like a lost balloon, up coffee, down rum, sideways-slanting-spiraling hashish and tobacco something else.

Secretary. Punctual. Competent.

"Dear Monsieur Tassopol," Dannold began, "Wednesday, the 14th of August, 2049, I returned to London from a weekend's fishing in New Zealand. As I left the Chelsea Hoverstation, George Marten-Dow's car pulled up to the curb. He had won the general election a few days before and he was off on holiday. The chauffeur aside, there were four in the party: the P. M. himself, his daughter, Elaine, his private secretary, Noel Hoskins, his bodyguard, Will Coffyd. My first thought when I saw him, seeing that our paths would cross, or that at least we would pass in parallel, was to wonder if I should merely nod and give him good morning or stop and congratulate him. We had known each other for some time—politically quite well, socially in a casual way. He was much older than I. He was an eminence among the Whigs, whilst in the Liberal Party I was still known, in a revolting term then current, as a comingman. We were opposed, of course, and one reason I questioned the propriety of stopping to chat with him was a speech I had made in Commons. It had been, I must say, a small masterpiece of invective and abuse. It had put him off seriously; his reply had been lame. Some people said I had been rougher than need be, that I had risked making a real enemy of him. They were thinking of our relative positions. Marten-Dow would clearly be called to the palace sooner or later, whilst my foot was still on the bottom of the escalator. To put it plainly, my friends thought I should have played it safe. But that was not my nature.

"The P. M. and I were 20 feet apart when I decided what I would do: Bow, say 'Good morning,' add 'Well done, sir,' and go on, not having stopped. Two seconds later, everything went up the spout.

"Because the television cameras were running continuously, we were able, later, to determine the exact length of the episode of the attempted assassination of the prime minister: six-point-five seconds. At the time, I'd have thought it was all over in *two* seconds: looking back on it afterward, it seemed *hours*. In moments of tremendous excitement, time is elastic. I think of the episode as a film running in what used to be called stop motion—alternate jerky blurs and knife-sharp stills. That was my first impression: a jerky blur as the man Smith jumped out of the crowd and a sharp still of him ten feet in front of the P. M., the right arm well out, aiming the gun as carefully as a shooter competing at Bisley.

"One can think most remarkably quickly in such circumstances, and instantly. I thought, he's a bloody amateur, sighting like that, a professional wouldn't aim at all, he'd simply empty

the revolver into George's middle. It was that thought, I believe, that set me off. There is a *chance*, I thought, and I went for him. Actually, the television films, which were taken from three angles, showed definitely that I began moving toward Smith *before* he stopped; that is, before he took aim at the P. M.; but I had a contrary impression—obviously, my brain was lagging behind my body, or something of that sort. Smith was right-handed, and I was on his left, so it was easy to pick the move; it was one I had done at least 500 times in practice in my UN military service. Grab the revolver with your left hand around the cylinder. Now he can't fire. At the same time, take the gun-hand wrist with your right. Upward on the wrist, down on the revolver. And that was that. Marten-Dow went off to Sicily for his holiday and I went home.

"The phone was howling as I opened the door. I had expected it would be. Mrs. Dannold was out; it was cook's day off. I picked it up: 'BBC here,' the man said. They were laying on an hour's program, if you please, on the history of assassination and its effect on humanity down the ages. Obviously, the man said, my presence was imperative. It was for ten o'clock that night. By all means, I told him, you may count on it.

"It was a select company. We had all promised to be on hand at nine, and everyone was, except Peter Merriam; there'd been some trouble on the train from Oxford. John Travis was there, he was leader of the Opposition, and Barrett of *The Times*, Clive MacDonald, Toby Haversford-Moore, Morris Stavinsky—he was really at the top of his fame just then, it wasn't long after he'd shot Jelko—and even Jean Fauriere of *Le Matin* had come over, first time he'd set foot in England in 20 years. They gave us sherry and we laid the program out in a general way, nothing hard and fast about it.

"When we went on the air—live, of course, according to the BBC's unvarying rule—old Merriam gave a five-minute rundown on the history of assassination, absolutely brilliant. Then films were shown, beginning with Sarajevo, 1914, and running up to Jameson in Pittsburgh in 2045. There was a general discussion. Then the best of the stuff the TV people had made that morning went on the screen and I was asked to comment. I explained what I had done, technically, why I had picked the move I used, and so on. The film ran out.

"Someone asked me if I had been frightened and I said yes, badly. Had I thought I might die? Yes, I said, as a matter of fact, I had thought it very likely I would die. Oddly, I didn't think Smith would kill me, because I was convinced he was an amateur and didn't really know anything. I thought the P. M.'s bodyguards would kill me. I

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Congress a new and better nominating system.

It might be that the best solution to the Presidential nominating dilemma would be this: Let primaries in each state pick convention delegates on a popular-vote basis and, at the same time, register the public's feelings toward the leading Presidential candidates. Then let the conventions meet—with their honestly elected delegates—and make the final choice of their candidates.

The 18-year-old vote would be the final stage in making the President of the United States a truly popular leader who can reunite this country and guide it through the perils of the future. We saw in the primaries of 1968 how young people can be turned on by Presidential politics. And we saw at the two conventions how they can be turned off again. As my colleague from New York, Senator Jacob Javits, argued in *Lower the Voting Age* (PLAYBOY, February 1968), if we are really sincere in deploring the dropping out of young people from society, why not bring them back in again by making them full partners in the American system? Youthful interest in government invariably begins with the Presidency. Let's give them a piece of the action the

minute they turn 18, and give them a real stake in the future.

These reforms, as I said at the outset, will not come easily. But I am convinced that they are necessary if the American system of government is to regain the confidence of the people—especially the young people—without which I do not believe the system can survive.

These reforms also are necessary if we are to get what I think the people crave but are failing to receive—strong, personalized Presidential leadership. The public becomes cynical when candidates cater to power blocs, when they make deals with political bosses, when they seem to rate the favor of interest groups higher than the public interest. Yet the public desperately wants to be led—by a man who has earned their confidence and fired their imagination.

If the American people will demand that this session of Congress set in motion the necessary reforms in the Presidential system, I think we can look forward to a future of strong, responsible Presidential leadership, and to a united nation ready to build itself a new and better future.



"Just who the hell does this Bill Blass think he is?"

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expected they would all start shooting at Smith and I would catch it, too.

"Some ass in the studio audience asked me how it felt, being a hero. I said I wasn't a hero, because the heroic act, in my view, implied a choice. I was *there*, on the scene, I knew what to do when I did reach him. I loathe violence, I told them, and the idea of political assassination is sickening, revolting. Further, I said, when you get down to it, George Marten-Dow is His Majesty's first minister, and even only as such, his life is worth more than mine. I meant all of that quite sincerely. And, indeed, merely saying the words gave me a bit of a glow, lifted me. Emotion took over, I suppose, to the detriment of judgment. I had said I was nothing heroic, but I know now that I wanted to give everyone reason, argument, to prove the contrary. I wanted everyone to know how selfless I had been. Two minutes later, I had destroyed myself.

"Someone in the audience, a foreigner, I thought, from the sound of it, said, 'Since you have told us, in effect, that you would willingly have given your life for the prime minister's, I presume you admire him politically? May I ask, did you vote for Marten-Dow in the general election?'

"No," I said, 'I did not vote for Mr. Marten-Dow, although that is certainly none of your business. Nor do I admire him politically. Indeed, rather to the contrary. He is, and all his life has been, a most amoral person. He is vain, cruel, self-centered to the point of obsession. Because it is impossible for him seriously to put forward any project that does not bear on his own welfare, political or fiscal, he has not the vaguest conception of public service. He is, further, a stupid man who will surround himself with stupid men, and so he is terribly dangerous. His election was an unmitigated disaster, the only question being whether short-range or long-range.'

"Tommy Hackett of IVR, in the chair, got his breath before any of the others. 'Whilst some of us, and perhaps, indeed, most of us, would not agree with Mr. Dannold's views,' he said, 'I think we can agree it was most remarkable that, holding those views, he was still willing to put principle above all and throw his life into the balance.'

"Someone said, 'Hear, hear!' and the discussion went on, rather downhill. I said nothing more. I had nothing more to say and I doubted I could get the floor, anyway. Tommy Hackett had gone gun shy and wouldn't look my way.

"When the thing broke up, a BBC page came to me with a letter. 'You were

meant to have this before the program, sir,' he said, 'but I couldn't reach you in time.'

"The envelope was of heavy paper and was wax sealed, something I hadn't seen in decades. There was the cheque, £250,000, and a note from Lord Morgan of Fuldale. He was a Whig, of course, but more: He was possibly the most reactionary man in Britain at the time, and he adored Marten-Dow. The cheque was in appreciation of my having preserved Marten-Dow for posterity. In my view, it represented a nearly unimaginable sum of money; to Morgan, it may have meant a month's income.

"I showed it to Helen instantly I got home.

"'Are you going to save it to torture yourself,' she said, 'or are you going to burn it now and have done?'

"'I don't think I shall burn it,' I told her.

"'After what you've said tonight? My dear man, you've burned all your bridges, you may as well burn the cheque!'

"I took it around to Coutts' in the morning. A stop order had come in the minute they opened. They wanted to take it from me, but of course they could not, they had to be satisfied with stamping it void.

"I suppose that night at the BBC was the watershed of my life, the high point. I lost my seat in the next election. But

long before that happened, the Liberal whip had made it plain to me that my only hope of a career lay in playing the villain, the heavy, as we used to say. That is, to become known as The Denunciator, the tongue of fire, a modern-day Robin Hood seeking out evildoers. Made sense, of course: If I went on as before, a fairly quiet, even mousy sort, no one would ever trust me, not knowing when I might rise and let fly. But if ferocity and castigation were my regular role. . . . But I couldn't buy it. Not my thing at all.

"Therefore, when I lost my seat, I retired permanently from politics."

"That should do it, I think," Dannold said.

"I don't know," Tassopol said. "It leaves all of your life since unexplained."

"This was a political episode, Monsieur Tassopol," Dannold said. "It should end coincidentally with the end of my political career."

"It's a point," Tassopol said.

"Yes, and in any case, not much of interest has happened to me since. No point in telling about my fling in the City. Although it could be soon said: 'Broker Goes Broke.' Nor do I want to talk much about why I left England. No, I think it's best as it is."

"I agree," Tassopol said. "And now, what do you say? We will go to Pelly's, sit in the sun, have an aperitif or two, and

it will be time for lunch, right?"

"Right," Dannold said.

. . . .

Dannold got back to the apartment in time for tea. Afterward, Helen called as the door opened. He went over to the balcony and kissed her. There was room on it for one chair and a cushion for the cat, no more.

He'en Dannold looked at him brightly. "You sold it, didn't you?" she said. She was pink-white and 70 and still pretty.

"How could you tell?"

"Oh, you have a sleek and satisfied look about you."

"Should have. We lunched at The Kelp."

"How much for the cheque, if it's not impertinent of me?" Helen said.

"Fifty thousand francs."

"Ah, well, it's something. To think that old piece of paper finally produced money!" She'd been doing her nails, she rested her hand on the spidery balcony rail. "Were you sorry to see it go, after all these years?"

"In one way, yes," Dannold said slowly. "In a practical way. It was the last, well, *thing* we owned, of any monetary value."

"Yes, I thought of that," Helen said. "Pity, but there you are. Did you snatch some of his Merions?"



"What did you say your name was?"



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