

The Short Career of Michael Jenkinson - Criminal at Law

I don't know if many people appreciate how boring success can be. Particularly when it's in a field where failure doesn't carry any risk or stigma. Take a booming criminal law practice like mine. I specialise in defending the great unwashed when their business endeavours take a downswing and that great variable, the law, decides to take a hand in their fortunes.

I do very well. And, of course, I demand cash in advance.

Yet, I had to confess to a sense of being unfulfilled. It came from associating with my clientele and actually, well..., envying them. Envy their enthusiasm - their job satisfaction, for want of a better term. Unlike me, they seemed to have implicit faith in what they did. It was their trade, their hobby and their mission.

As Gelly Jimmy said to me on the occasion of one of my early failures, stroking the embossed lettering on my briefcase that said "Michael Jenkinson - Attorney at Law" with one of the remaining two fingers on his left hand, a small legacy of one of his own professional failures.

"Not ter fret, Mr J, it's a dirty job yer got, but someone's got ter do it. Yer worked hard ter get the sentence reduced an' it was me had orl the fun, takin' the chances."

That was it, of course. The element of risk.

The club was more or less quiet, that Wednesday. Golfers golfing somewhere out of sight, faint clicking from the billiard room punctuating the snores of the port drinkers and an occasional crackle from a dying fire. I say more or less quiet, because a voice like a wetted finger on crystal was cutting through the somnolence of the autumn afternoon.

The Right Honourable Roger Willoughby (OBE, MP) was holding forth on his favourite subjects, hunting and himself, to some unfortunate soul, hypnotised, no doubt, like a rabbit before a stoat and fixed to his seat by the Willoughby stare.

"Headman's still a bare-arsed savage, d'ysee? Knows nothing about the outside world and couldn't care less, but he recognises the value of the American dollar. Converts it in a trice to goats or whatever the local currency is and if it's a man eater y'want, he'll have some shivering local tied to a tree in a moment for bait."

A polite sound from the depths of one of the armchairs and Willoughby crashed on.

"Anyway, must take advantage of the situation while it still exists. This time next year he'll be wearing Savile Row and taking bookings through Thomas Cook. Leaving on

Saturday for the last two weeks before the rains. There's still a few rare specimens I haven't had. Did I tell you about the rain there? Now... y'may think you've seen rain, but..."

Another timid sound from his victim and he was away on a different tack. I settled back in my chair and folded the Times and my hands. Something Gelly Jimmy had said was setting off little flashing lights in my mind and I sat very still and thought about it.

"Y'got ter be quick, Mr J. Not just doin' the job - gettin' the tip-off's just as important sometimes. I learned that from Paddy Nolan - the master - speakin' of whom... 'e ain't bin seen for some time. E's not in the nick, so 'e must 'ave made 'is pile an' retired. 'E used ter say yer never know when yer goin' ter pick something up an' yer gotter be tuned in at all times. Course, gent like you's gunner mix in rather better circles than 'e or I could, an' the info y'pick up should be worth more. Still, I do orlright, 'ey?"

This last with a conspirator's wink and a dirty finger tapping his large and crooked nose.

Willoughby Grange. Repository for antiques, heirlooms and valuable items. Hereditary home and fortress of the unlovable and unmarried Roger. Who would soon be departing for warmer climes and the further enhancement of his ego. Leaving his worldly all to the attentions of the unscrupulous.

Providing they could find a way through the alarm system and past the dogs.

I shifted in my seat at the thought of the dogs. Willoughby's grating voice recalled another overheard monologue.

"Dogs, Carter... big ones. Rottweiler crosses. Finest damn deterrent y'can get. Hundred and twenty pounds of raw, ugly power. Charles turns 'em loose at night and they come back in the morning t'be fed. If they haven't caught anybody, that is! Haw, haw, haw, eh? Gotta keep the buggers separated, of course. Fight t'the death if y'put 'em together."

I sat there a long time after Willoughby's voice had pursued his audience out of the lounge and down the steps to the car-park. Eventually, I stirred myself and made a telephone call. Jimmy sounded quite pleased, if a little guarded, to hear my voice.

In the public bar of the Cooper's Arms, Jimmy listened without expression. I can't say whether he believed my story of a client and the questions posed by the prosecution on a hypothetical security system. Perhaps it was because of the nature of our own business relationship that he gave me the benefit of his experience without any

questions of his own.

I left the bar with some amazingly simple solutions, a few rough diagrams and a surfeit of adrenaline. Next day, I bought two pounds of steak, a pencil torch, masking tape, rope-soled shoes, and a black polo-neck and balaclava.

I passed late Saturday afternoon at the airport, waiting for the Nairobi flight to take off and I was pleased to see the unmistakable figure of Roger Willoughby strolling indolently across the tarmac. I waited until he boarded before making my own unhurried way to the club where an out of season grouse and an excellent Moselle served to raise my spirits still higher. If I cared that Dribworth beat me soundly at billiards afterwards, I hid it well as I bought the loser's round and thirty minutes later, I was off home.

It was a fine night and I left the roof down as I drove home. It was all going to work out as planned.

Much later, with the Mercedes parked in the street outside the house, I made much of the ritual of securing my bay-windows so that I could contrive an exchange of waves with Brigadier Richards, out on a late-night constitutional with Bodger, his ageing spaniel. My bedroom light went out convincingly at around midnight, but I contained myself until almost two before slipping out by the back door and making my way to the small public park and the Cortina rented by me in the name of David Summerton.

Willoughby Grange was immense. The house itself occupied most of the grounds, and as I clung, panting, to the top of the garden wall, it seemed that the nearest window was within easy reach. Below me, a gloomy corridor of intervening garden was divided in two by a steel framed mesh fence.

Craning my neck, I could make out a stout gate in the fence, and risking a flash of my new pencil torch, saw that it wasn't locked.

With masking tape and a couple of paper clips the sensors of the wall alarm were surprisingly easy to foil, and just as I finished, I heard a soft padding beneath me. In the shadows, a darker shadow had appeared and now stood, motionless, staring up at me, silent and menacing. I clawed out a chunk of steak and flung it into the abyss.

A surprised grunt and much snuffling later, I heard the sounds of a large animal feeding. I hauled myself up onto the wall and rested. Down in the garden the dog became restless and paced back and forth, staring up and whining. I dropped another titbit and this time it was pounced on immediately. The next, I threw as far away from the gate as I could and it took the dog much longer to find it.

Seizing the moment, I straddled the top of the frame and humped my way

clumsily along to where I could hang head down, heart hammering as I scabbled for the latch. It slid easily, and as the gate swung open under its own weight, the fence was rocked by an enormous force as I swung my legs up out of reach and scrambled back to the outer wall. There, I watched the colossal beast turn away curious, to the open gate, where, after an uncertain pause, it padded through into the other section.

I threw another morsel far into the darkness and almost as soon as the dog found it, another dark shape appeared without a sound from the shadows of the far compound. I hurled one of the biggest pieces of meat towards where the two dogs stood, frozen and stiff-legged at the sight of each other.

My dog, as I thought of him, moved first and snapped up the bait with a challenging snarl at the newcomer. I waited just long enough to see him drop his prize to meet the charge of the other before I dropped into his vacant domain and re-latched the gate. In the other section a battle royal was raging, silent except for primordial grunting and the crackle of breaking shrubs.

I may not have been as soundless as Paddy Nolan when I shattered my selected pane, but taped as it was, it came out neatly and quietly and I was in.

If Willoughby Grange was enormous from without, inside it was cavernous. Downstairs, the furniture was ponderous and dark and every wall seemed covered to a great height with gloomy portraits, medieval weapons and hangings. I stole silently from room to room, taking it all in.

I climbed the broad stairway to the upper floor and began searching each room. You must understand that I wasn't looking for profit; I was savouring this adventure to the full and something tangible was needed for proof that it had really happened. The upper floor was clearly the stronghold of Willoughby's ego. Apart from scores of staring heads lining the passage walls, there was a most bizarre feature in the decor.

I actually cried out in terror when I crept into the first bedroom to come face to face with a tiger, frozen forever by the taxidermist's skill into a snarling crouch. The small brass plaque that I had not noticed on the door said simply "The Tiger Room".

Another plate screwed to the animal's plinth said "Indian Tiger - Peshawar 1946 - .475 Weatherby"

The next was "The Grizzly Room" and contained a towering grizzly bear, massive forepaws wide-spread as though to embrace me. I wondered how Willoughby's guests managed a wink of sleep with all this embalmed wild-life keeping watch over them. There followed a moose, a leopard, a lion, African and Asian buffaloes and a rhino that occupied most of the room it was in.

On each base or mounting were brief details of the creature's demise at Willoughby's hand.

Then in a vast bed-chamber, obviously Willoughby's own, a full-sized African elephant. My torch glinted off the massive tusks and the trunk, extended far above my head. It was so immense that I couldn't see it all, nor imagine how they'd got it into the room in the first place. The obituary plate said "African Elephant - nGorongoro Crater 1948 - .500 Nitro Express".

I prowled Willoughby's bedroom, looking at his things and trying to decide. In an adjoining study, a glass cabinet held an impressive array of rifles and shotguns. I considered taking one of these, but it would be cumbersome to carry and impossible to explain if I was caught. The heavy drapes were drawn so I risked a switching on a small desk lamp as I searched the drawers of the enormous desk for some token prize. An untagged key caught my eye.

I'd seen enough exhibits in court to recognise a safe or vault key, and I studied the walls of the study. Opposite the desk, the outline of a door was dimly visible in the pattern of the wall-paper. Holding my breath, I used the key and the heavy steel door swung open.

Muted spotlights came on automatically in the vault to light the walls and a breathtaking array of jewellery and plate on racks in Willoughby's treasury. I stepped forward, open-mouthed, staring at the stuff. As I reached up involuntarily to touch a magnificent salver, I sensed that I was not alone.

I spun about to see a crouching figure near an open wall-safe. It was frozen in the act of stuffing a Georgian teapot into a sack and was motionless, as though hoping not to be seen.

"Aaar... ahh...I'm...ah sorry - I didn't know you were here. I wouldn't have... I mean, I wouldn't dream..." I managed in a hoarse stage whisper. The figure didn't move or answer, but there was something familiar about the man. I shone my torch indirectly in his direction and still he didn't turn away or move.

"Paddy? Paddy Nolan? Is that you? What are you...?" I started and then stopped as I realised that he was never going to answer another question. Not on this earth, at any rate. I crouched to read the plate screwed to the base of his plinth.

It said "Common Thief - Willoughby Grange 1950 - 9mm Parabellum" Suddenly, the smell of formalin was very strong in the room.

I left everything as it was and slipped out of the house. The surviving dog growled

painfully at me but did not rise as I scrambled back over the wall.

I spent a long time burning the clothes and dumped the torch and other bits and pieces. The memory of Willoughby's most recent trophy will never be so easy to erase.