

Mine Enemy Grows Older



NOTE:
If this
jacket
(the author
painted it)
is too strong
for you,
take it off.
There's a
conservative
jacket for
conservative
people
underneath.

by ALEXANDER KING

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SIMON AND SCHUSTER
NEW YORK

*All the characters
in this book are real people,
with the possible exception of*

THE AUTHOR

ever, the level of literacy among the inmates is very low and the most popular reading matter besides comics was a long, hideous poem called "This Is My Beloved," which was circulated in typewritten sheets among the jail cognoscenti. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" was also highly favored, and the copy I saw was freely annotated in the margins by previous readers. "You said a mouthful" and "You were a good kid when you had it" were the sort of literary criticism that would have given a real fillip of delight to Oscar Wilde.

Now I became acquainted with the rest of the prison population, its sorrows, its delights and its privileges. There was a large auditorium where movies were shown on Saturday and where the inmate band performed quite often. That year they had one of the best jazz bands I've ever heard. I suppose it is common knowledge that jazz and drug addiction have more than a bowing acquaintance with each other, and yet the greatest jazz people are rarely addicts. Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and a couple of others used stuff, but, by and large, the real top names keep clean.

But there is that in-between world of the not quite ace performers, the kings, queens and jacks of the jazz deck, who derive from drugs that lift of self-deception their frenzy seems to require. When they are off the stuff, they will freely confess that junk has never helped their playing one bit. It can't make them play high, it just makes them *think* high. Also, the life they lead is one of insidious pressure, of great nervous tension, of insufficient rest and unfounded joviality. Junk makes it all "cool." And once you're on it, it's tough to stay off.

Despite the good band, the fine library, and the plentiful commissary, I was pretty much depressed by the place. It really dragged me.

Then somebody suggested that I join the newly formed Addicts Anonymous. I am instinctively leery of joining any-

thing. I never joined the Communist Party, the Automobile Club of America, or even the Camp Fire Girls, but I did go to one of the meetings of Addicts Anonymous. They were nice people, elderly people mostly, who had by their own testimony wrestled bravely with the dope demon. They had always lost. Most of them were chronic recidivists, and some cynics claimed you couldn't join unless you had been to Lexington at least six times. A good many inmate doctors belonged. Not the ablest, nor the brightest, but the oldest. The only exception was their chairman, a doctor in his mid-thirties. He housed along my corridor and it was he who had induced me to come. His name was Elmer Bishop.

There is a quasi-religious aura about these meetings which makes me uncomfortable. This is true about Alcoholics Anonymous as well. At any rate, I didn't go for it. I'm not happy when people confess their sins and trespasses out loud. I also had the feeling that some of these breast-beaters were enjoying themselves immensely as they resuscitated their pathetic crimes. After a while I had the idea that they were less concerned with repentance than with reliving their gruesome but nevertheless thrilling past adventures. Maybe I was off. But they dragged me, too. I wanted to jump up and say to them, "In Heaven's name, go out and get a shot of dope and stop *talking* so much about it."

I was probably wrong. I often am.

That evening Dr. Bishop, their chairman, came to visit with me. He would have been quite handsome, but his chin and his eyes were too wishy-washy. He looked as if someone had made a successful sketch of his head but had accidentally spilled some water under the eyebrows and below his mouth. He was fair-skinned, with straight blond hair, and any sudden emotional change sent a youthful flush of color to his face.

Dr. Bishop respected my misgivings about A.A. But, as I elaborated my objections to joining, the uncontrollable ba-

rometer of his telltale blood rose in his cheeks, indicating signs of distress. I suppose I should have shut my trap and let it all ride. In the end we shook hands, and, because he looked so much like a ripe pimento, I promised to give it another try some other time.

I never went back again, because the very next day, a little before sundown, something happened to settle my mind completely.

It was just about chowtime, and I wanted to ask Dr. Bishop something about my kidney stones. About a possible diet that might help me. Bishop was a genito-urinary specialist, but somehow I had never before thought of consulting him.

I opened the door to his room, and in the semidarkness I thought at first that he was out. His room was full of little domestic touches, such as hand-decorated lamp shades, ash trays he had hammered out of tin cans, and, most notably, three handsomely framed photographs of his demure wife and his sweet hypnotized-looking little daughters.

Then, as my eyes became accustomed to the sparse light, I suddenly saw him. He was kneeling beside his bed, with bowed head in an attitude of quiet reverence. I felt like a blundering ass and proceeded silently to back out of the room. I made it, too, without his having seen me.

But unfortunately for my soul's equilibrium, *I had seen him*. He had his sleeve rolled high up above his elbow. His eyes were closed in unmistakable ecstasy, while with his right hand he was giving himself an imaginary shot in the arm with a nonexistent hypodermic syringe.

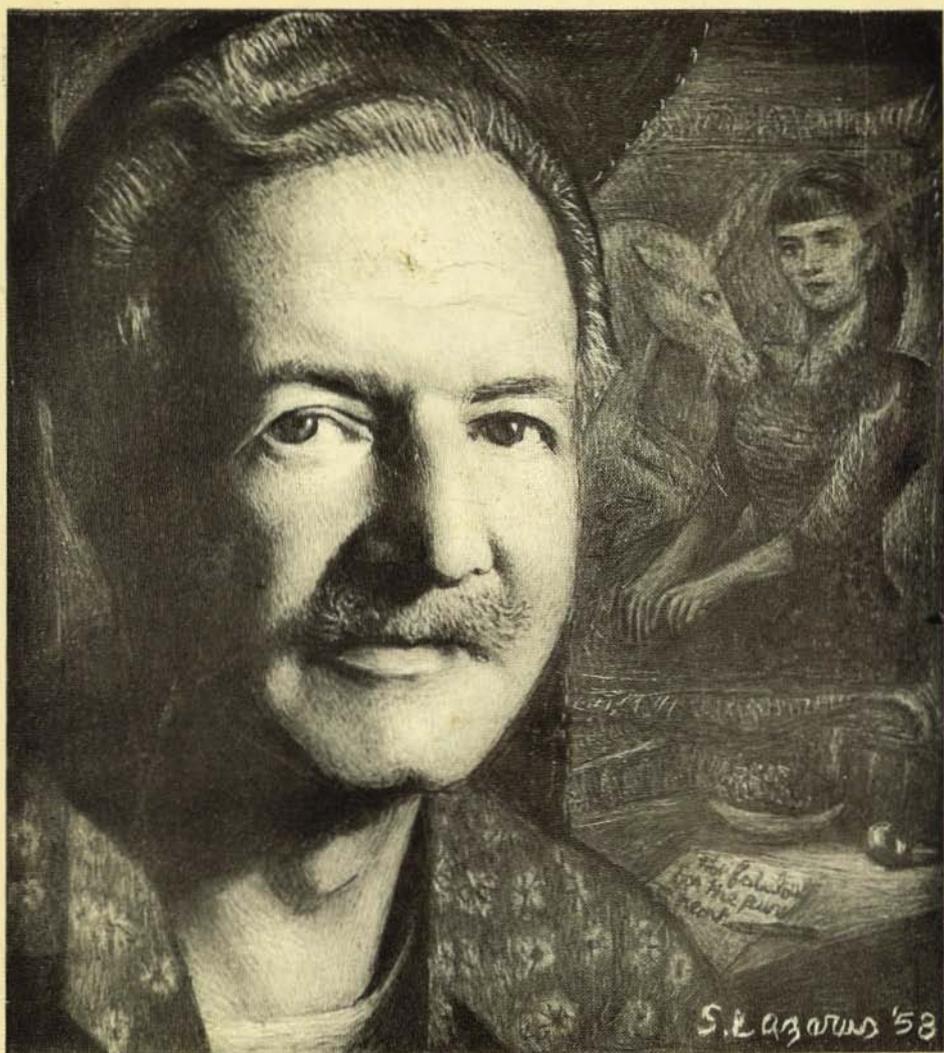
I took a quick look at the shadowed faces of the three dependent women in his life and noiselessly closed the door behind me. What price salvation, now? I thought.

The following day I asked to be released from the institution.

I am one of those unfortunate people who don't believe that this life is just a curtain raiser, and that after it has closed I shall wake with heightened awareness to some purer form of existence.

Well, if this is the whole works, you would imagine I couldn't possibly spare any time for doodling. Nonetheless, I returned to Lexington three more times and spent, altogether, fourteen months within its walls.

The last two times I returned against my will, as a prisoner.



ALEXANDER KING