

## REVENGE

By ARTHUR PORGES

Hell may have no fury like a woman scorned,  
but the fury of a biochemist scorned is just as great  
—and much more fiendish.

I

f the Syndicate is half as powerful as some people have claimed, they'll murder me any day now. I object on principle to being killed by evil men for a good deed, so maybe lynching by stupid ones is preferable. I mean you, and you—the suetheads who profited by my work, but refused your help.

You've been yammering about narcotics for years—how drug addiction was spreading, reaching down even to your unmannerly, spoiled brats, who despise their parents and our venal society to the same degree. The stuff comes in by the ton across the Mexican border; they grow it for our benefit in Red China; and a few "friendly" Asian countries don't mind exporting some now and then, either. In spite of heroic work by our small group of poorly financed narcotics agents, the flow of drugs cannot be halted.

Oh, you and your elected representatives made a lot of panicky moves to combat this threat. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was given a new Bureau, set up like the F.B.I., and headed by Myron P. Bishop, a man trained by that distinguished expert on narcotics, Anslinger, himself.

But as to sensible solutions, such as legalizing the sale of heroin to break the world-wide criminal control on the distribution of drugs—that your vapid Puritan morality wouldn't permit. Millions of dollars for enforcement, and to punish the sick, but not one cent for prevention, and almost nothing to find out why people become addicts in the first place, and how to cure them.

It wasn't entirely your fault. You listened to the experts, usually career policemen who expect to cure any social evil with clubs and prisons. I am reminded of the simpleton found measuring two horses with a tape in order to be able to distinguish the black one from the white. Until I came along, nobody had ever reached the core of the matter. You don't kill a flourishing plant—in this case an Upas Tree—by lopping off a handful of leaves. You strike at the roots. That's what I meant to do—and did—for your benefit. Oh, I admit there were a few dollars in it for me, but so what? The ox that treads the wheat is not muzzled. When a man saves a manufacturer \$50,000 a year by some improved process, or even by using three bolts someplace instead of four, they gladly pay him three per cent of the annual savings, or something like that, as a reward. Most big outfits have such a policy, and it's a good one. Well, if I cut millions off the government budget, is a lousy \$100,000 too much to ask? I just wanted to go on with my researches without battling a horde of bill collectors every month. Fat chance—I didn't get a measly dime. You, your elected and appointed officials, and your kept press just gave me the all-time horse-laugh. Well, he who laughs last—you'll remember the old saw; I'll see to that.

I'm writing this so you'll know how they treated me. You mustn't think I'm a crank, mad at the world for no reason. My case is better than Dreyfus' and Sacco-Vanzetti's combined. Here I was prepared to remove the drug scourge forever, and at a piddling cost. Did I get courteous handling, or at least a fair hearing? Not bloody likely! I was an idiot to expect anything from the world's most inflated bureaucracy—Dickens' Circumlocution Office brought up to date.

Let me start at the beginning; then you'll see who's right. I'm a biochemist

by profession. A damned good one, but too individualistic to please the big research centers. They like docile teams—scientific Percherons to pull the big red wagon. So I taught at one jerkwater college after another. Sooner or later my superiors, all dodderers who stopped thinking with sighs of relief once they had their PhD union cards, objected to my attitude. If I published, they were jealous; it made the other faculty members look bad. If I failed to produce, then why was I wasting lab facilities and neglecting my classes? The students wanted their term papers back within five days; the other teachers could manage it, why not me? The difference between what my colleagues expected from their pupils and what I did was the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning. Those students! They didn't want biochemistry; they want a letter on a card; a "C" would do. Damn few of them got it from me, I'm happy to say, and those that did, knew more about the subject than most PhD's.

Now, I take as my creed the fruitful dictum: Think in other categories. A famous researcher once invented—or discovered—this maxim in a dream. It is the secret of many great advances in science. Get off the main line. Stop fooling with the leaves of the tree, and turn to the roots. Invert the problem, if necessary.

I was thinking about the narcotics scandal. A teacher at my college had a lovely sixteen-year-old daughter, carefully reared, who was badly hooked. I saw that poor man's hair whiten in a few months. How would you feel, knowing that your daughter had been so degraded by a drug as to sell herself to anybody with enough money to buy her a fix? An innocent, playful sniff at a party, and some punk, probably an addict himself, had trapped her in order to finance his own habit. They talk about cures, but people on the inside know that permanent escape from the trap is as rare as portraits of Trotsky in Russia. Or integrity among politicians in this country.

Well, I put my brains to work on the problem. It seemed obvious that, as in the case of Prohibition, you couldn't possibly lick the drug traffic by cutting the lines of supply. Not in a country as big as ours, with the Mexican border and Red China on the side of the enemy. Not when a package the size of a watch could be worth a fortune.

Think in other categories, I reminded myself. How can a biochemist, rather than a policeman, stop the Syndicate? Then it came to me, simple and obvious. Hit the source, the weak link, the roots of the poison tree. In short, Papaver somniferum, the opium poppy itself.

Basic, isn't it? Destroy the plant, and you cut the heart out of the drug traffic. No cops; no hopeless warfare against cunning smugglers; no battle with big-money corruption of officials. And remember: no chemist alive can synthesize opium or its derivatives. Sure, there are a few other bad narcotic drugs from different plants, like marijuana, but they play a relatively small part, and can be controlled. Besides, it was my intention to destroy their sources as well, when the time came. But first the biggest culprit.

I go to work, re-examining all the recent work on tobacco virus and similar plant killers. New studies on the key protein chains of the genes were the foundation stones of my plan. The disease had to be highly specific and deadly. I couldn't risk even the remotest possibility of harming food plants in a hungry world.

But, as I've said, with no false modesty, I'm no slouch in my field of biochemistry. I took a harmless poppy rust from our California flowers here, and treated its genes with certain chemicals. It was a matter of six months, and well over eighty tries, but finally I came up with a virus that killed the

opium poppy like smallpox wiped out the Sioux. No; more than that. Some Indians were, or became, immune to the disease, just as insects build up resistance to the most potent poisons. But with my virus that's simply not possible. I won't get technical here, but to become immune to this stuff would be like a man's developing anti-bodies against his own tissues. It couldn't happen without killing the organism faster than the virus does. Once this epidemic began, not a poppy would survive.

So far everything was fine, except that, as usual, I lost my job. I got fifty term papers behind. It didn't bother me, because there wasn't a student in my three classes who knew any more biochemistry than a baboon. In the first paper I'd found this gem: "It is well known that a mammal reproduces by suckling its young." Faced with more of the same, it was a pleasure to be fired.

Now, in any really civilized society, they'd have my statue on top of the capitol building, and with neon lights to boot. But in our bureaucratic wilderness of Washington, with a thousand government-hired cretins running interference for each big, appointed super-cretin, my troubles had just begun.

I took some sample poppies to the H.E.W. offices. They were in vacuum-sealed plastic envelopes, because I knew that once my virus spores got loose in the atmosphere, they'd spread all over the world like radioactive dust, or faster. I hoped to see the Commissioner of Narcotics, Myron P. Bishop, but His Magnificence was harder to reach than the whole College of Cardinals. It was impossible to put my point across. Plants, was it? That way to the Department of Agriculture. Oh, poppies. Pamphlets on wildflowers could be had from Documents.

I wrote countless letters, pulled what few wires were within my reach, and haunted Washington like the ghost of Calhoun. And finally I got ten minutes with El Pomposo himself.

As I've said, dumb students are nothing new to me. But even the worst of them couldn't have been any more obtuse than Bishop. I had the dead plants, all brown and withered. There were simple charts showing exactly, in terms of time, how the virus worked, killing the poppy within forty-eight hours, and even destroying the viability of any seeds that might be ripening.

Did this jughead appointed by the President to fight the terrible drug problem comprehend the miracle being offered to him? The simple solution that would make him the greatest—in fact, the only—success in his post that this country had ever known? Not he. I had to spell it out in nursery school terms.

But I've penetrated many a numbskull in class by dint of persistent drilling, and finally got through to the cold oatmeal under his parietal bones.

Did that clear the air? If you think so, guess again. He threw up his hands in horror. Turn a plant disease loose on the world deliberately! It was a violation of the conventions against germ warfare. It was barred by international law. It was unthinkable that the United States would indulge in such irresponsible behavior.

All right, I said. Take it to the U.N. Let them distribute the poppy killer. He brightened a little at that, since every bureaucrat loves above all to pass the buck. A clear-cut decision is fatal to the species. Then he gave me a note to our delegate, Wilbur Cavanaugh, Jr.

This character was a bit sharper. He heard me out, looked at my deceased poppies, and arranged a conference with a bigwig from the State Department. Then things got really messy. When I pointed out that in a few weeks every

damned opium plant in Asia would be deader than the Ming Dynasty, this little creep from Foggy Bottom almost had kittens on the spot. It seems that just now our relations with Red China are highly delicate. If we turned the virus loose on them, even if it did kill only poppies (and he had his doubts about that. What if—shudder—it attacked rice?) the Reds would scream murder. They'd yell germ warfare, and have us cold. They could ship us opium by the long ton—that didn't affect the delicate condition, though.

It seemed to me, however, that there was something ambiguous and wistful in the State man's attitude, and I thought I understood. When a country sends a spy to do some dirty job, they disown him officially if he is caught. Except for that U-2 fiasco some years ago, when the U.S. broke all the unwritten rules and made jackasses of us before the world. Now, obviously, if I killed all the poppies in the world, that would be a fait accompli. Washington could deny knowing anything about the cause of death, especially since it would work indiscriminately even in friendly parts of Asia. Just as long as I got my hundred thousand, I didn't mind skipping the official credit. In fact, it would keep the Syndicate off my back.

"Suppose," I said, "on my own responsibility, I release the spores and ruin the opium trade for good. Will you see that I get paid?"

He was horrified. In the first place, nothing whatever could be done until the virus had been checked out by government scientists. If I would give him the virus, and my notes, he'd start the ball rolling. I know that Washington ball; it's all angles, and doesn't roll worth a damn. I went cold at the thought. Before you can get an okay on anything big from a bureau there, your long, grey beard will be sweeping the floor.

For a moment I was tempted to take my plans to England, but then remembered that by sane legislation legalizing the sale of drugs under controlled conditions, they had already licked the problem, and wouldn't be in the market. For two cents, I thought, I'd make China pay me the money to keep the virus buried. For that matter, the Syndicate would gladly kick in with a million. But I'm an American first, and couldn't play it that way, especially remembering Professor A's daughter.

I thought the thing through, and decided that if I turned the disease loose, so that every good poppy is a dead one, any decent government will quietly pay me off. They only need to know that no other plants are affected.

And that's the way I played it. The next day I sprayed a few grams of concentrated virus into the humid air of Washington, and went home. If you read the papers, you know the rest of that particular story. In eight months not even Sherlock Holmes could have found a live opium poppy on the face of the earth. Once current stocks are gone, there'll be no more narcotics deriving from that particular plant. The government sensibly outbid all the addicts and operators in order to save what is left for medical use. It should last for fifty years. All according to my plan—fine!

But when I tried to collect, they didn't know me from the late Lucky Luciano. There was no proof whatever, they said, that my virus did the job. After all, their scientists had not been allowed to check my work. I could have faked the whole thing, attempting to take credit for a mutant disease which began naturally, especially since dozens of bacteriologists were now isolating the virus.

When I pressed harder, they dragged out an F.B.I. file showing I was a crank and maverick, unable to hold a job, and guilty of signing a peace petition in 1949. If Bishop or Cavanaugh tried to help, I don't know about it. I suppose

I'm lucky that the Syndicate has been equally skeptical. Otherwise, being out many millions, they would have liquidated me by now.

But basically it's your fault—you, the people. I took my case to you, as a court of last resort. A few papers gave me a fair enough shake to present the evidence, but you paid no attention. I tried to get your signatures to a petition to purge the H.E.W. Department, or to start a Congressional investigation. You just laughed at me. You enjoyed that headline: "Crackpot Chemist Claims He Killed All Those Poppies. Was it Self-Defense?"

Well, my jovial friends, I'm going to teach you a lesson. I could easily wipe out half of you by killing some selected food plants, but I'm not a mass murderer, and would rather make a more subtle job of it. I've two more viruses just about perfected; after the first, it's easier. When I turn them loose, you'll have a real grievance against me. This time, you're getting notice in advance, so nobody can talk about "natural" disease. Besides, the appended lab notes will easily convince a few key men in biochemistry; and they'll confirm me.

Now let me point out the two plants you'll miss badly.

One is yeast. Yes, yeast. When you read this, the one-celled organisms responsible for wine, beer, and alcohol generally, will be dying as a race. In a few months, good liquor will be scarcer than an electric blanket in hell. Sure, grain alcohol can be synthesized, but bouquet isn't that simple, and you'll pay dearly for it—how you'll pay!—and decent lab-made whiskey won't be on the shelves tomorrow, either.

The other plant you'll miss even more. I mean tobacco. No more cigarettes; no more fat cigars—and hallelujah!—no more tobacco commercials on TV. Did you know, tobacco cannot be synthesized at all, at any price? Get it, you two-pack-a-day fiends?

THE END