The Outlaw

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Abstract

"Miss Rogers, bring in Martin Eldrup’s file!"
the tree was there. The tree would be there for you, just as surely as any other existence.

Here John would pause and once again his eyebrows would fall back into the dirty line on the table. The skull would cut through the thick haze to serve more beer. John would continue, not noticing her absence. “It therefore occurred to me that, since all matter is fluxion, why should I not create a world of my own? This table I have before me is the table to which I have been conditioned, but I may, if I desire, create another table on top of this one. I may place chairs around this table. I may even by a supreme mental effort remove myself from this plane to the one above it which I have created. This new world is yet to me one of halation, but I am convinced that after sufficient practice it can become as concrete as our present one.” The eyebrows descended even below the murky damp line in the table. John would be silent for a moment, then continue: “The machinations of man fade bitterly. Long, long do red stars whirl through the miasmatic mist. My manumission is complete. My feet rest on mercury. Sempiternal freedom is mine.”

Once on the high cat back of August night, lascivious night, we asked the skull why she listened to John. “Oh, I don’t know,” she said, “he’s different.”

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**The Outlaw**

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“MISS ROGERS, bring in Martin Eldrup’s file!” As I went into the inner office with the manila folder, I noticed that Dean Hamilton was so upset that he had even forgotten to turn off the dictagraph, and the Dean was a man of frugal habits. I was pleased, for the Dean in anger becomes garrulous, and though I had heard of Martin Eldrup many times since coming to work for the Dean, I had seen him only twice, once as he went into the office and once as he left with an air of amused indignation just before the sharp buzz of the speaker interrupted my typing.

Unobtrusively I stopped the noiseless cutting of the dicto and sat down.
“Miss Rogers, I want you to close out Martin Eldrup’s file!”
“Completely?”
“Yes. He will not be coming back.”
“Didn’t he care to return?”
“Yes, he did! That’s what’s so blasted exasperating about the whole thing! He was willing to come back, even eager, but when I offered to forget his conduct and reinstate him in college, he insulted me and walked out! I can’t figure it out!”

This was going to require tact and the whole office force was relying on me. I decided on rhetorical sympathy.

“Dean Hamilton, what is the matter with Martin Eldrup?”

“He’s a conceited pup, that’s what’s wrong with him! Just like the rest of the younger generation today! He won’t take any advice from his elders! From his brothers, from the faculty, from me—”

“Can’t his father do anything with him?”

That was the combination.

“His father—do you know what happened the first day he came here?”

I sat back for the story.

“His father—the whole family—his father, mother and his two older brothers took the trouble to bring him down here to the college when he got back from the army and see that he got started right. His father is a fine man. The chemical research genius of the Grosmonte Chemical Corporation. And his two brothers are following in the footsteps of a brilliant father. But he wouldn’t take the advice of any of them. Least of all his brothers. And they must be at least fifteen years older than he is and successful men in their own rights already.

“They brought him down here—took time off from their jobs—and brought him to see me, personally. They saw that he was accepted in the same fraternity where his father and brothers lived when they attended college. He didn’t have to do a thing; they did it all for him. They introduced him to all the professors of the division and put in a good word for him and then he—well, he didn’t appreciate their efforts.

“They spent a whole day picking the best courses for him to take. But he came in here the next day and made me change his whole schedule. He even made me change his division. He transferred to the school of journalism. Didn’t give any reason for changing, just did.”
I said, "Perhaps he thought he was more fitted for journalism."

"But he isn't! All through high school his interest has been in chemistry. The tests the Veterans' Administration gave showed that his interests and aptitudes are scientific! Oh—and he had trouble with the V.A., too. He's under the Rehabilitation Law, you know, and the V.A. wouldn't authorize him for any curriculum but science, so he refused the benefits of the G.I. Bill and is going to go to school on his own money."

"That'll make it tough for him."

"Well, it seems he has plenty of money. He was a sergeant on some island in the Pacific where there was nothing to buy with his pay and it seems he made a lot gambling. But if he hadn't been so bull-headed, he could have had his education free and have all that money left to start with when he graduated."

"Do you think he can make a success of journalism?"

"No, of course he can't. He isn't fitted for it. He belongs in science, like his father and brothers. They even offered to get him a job with one of their corporations when he graduated. You'd think most students would jump at the offer, but not Martin Eldrup! Oh, no! He's too—"

"He wasn't expelled for that, was he?"

"No. He was expelled for another matter; something else."

"Grades?"

"Well, no, he's intelligent enough I'll admit. He was making passing marks, even though he didn't seem to try very hard. Do you know what he did? Well, after his family had left, he moved out of the fraternity after his brothers had taken the trouble to get him in and took a room down town. He took a double room alone because he 'wanted room to think.' Well, that would have been all right but he didn't do any thinking. He used to have friends in every night—not once or twice a week—but every night, and they would sit up till two and three in the morning, drinking and discussing 'philosophy.' And yet with apparently no studying, he got passing marks.

"He used to have this girl in to be hostess for him and she would serve the drinks and make cheese things on a hot-plate in the corner—oh, I got it all from one of the boys who had been there! As soon as I realized what was going on, I notified his parents, of course, and his father began writing him letters twice and three times a week, trying to straighten him out. Huh! You'd never have caught his father doing anything like that, nor his
brothers, either. They wrote, too, and do you know what he did with the letters? He pinned them up—unopened, after the first few—and threw darts at them!"

"Well," I said, "was that what he was expelled for?"

"No, no," growled the Dean, "it was—that other thing."

"What other thing?" I asked.

"Oh—well, there was a scandal. Concerning that girl. It was just talk, I think—nothing that could be proved, but we felt that where there's smoke, there's fire, and we couldn't risk the college's reputation besmirched, and so we had to request him to drop school."

"And so he did?"

"No! He made us expel him!"

"But why?"

"He said—I think he was drunk at the time—he said that no lot of fog-bound fogies—those were his words—'fog-bound fogies'—like the president and myself—or his father and brothers—he brought them into it, too,—the men to whom he owed most—were going to scare him out of school. He said that we could kick him out, if we wanted to, but that he wasn't going to be 'intimidated' into leaving!"

"And so you expelled him."

"We had to! What else could we do? He was setting a bad example for the rest of the students. We had trouble with two other younger boys, later, who were using him for an excuse!"

"I suppose that when he found out that you were really going to expel him, he settled down."

"Not by any means! He wouldn't even admit that he had done anything wrong! When we called him before the board to show any good reason why he should not be expelled, he told us and his father and brothers to mind our own business. He used all the old arguments: His life was his own! As long as he kept his grades up, anything else he did was his own affair! He was no longer a kid; he was twenty-one and his own boss!

"When the president demanded that he apologize, if not to us, at least to his family, he swore and told us that he wasn't going to stand for any more interference from anyone, least of all, his family! 'Interference!' Can you imagine that? The family that had raised him, that had supervised his entire youth and directed
him for his own best good, and he repudiated them all! Well, he's made his own bed; now he can sleep in it!"

"Well, Dean Hamilton, did he finally decide he'd better settle down? After he was expelled? Or what happened to make him ask to be let back in?"

"Oh, that. Well—he didn't ask to be readmitted. You see, his father was so distressed about the whole incident that he came to me and explained that Martin hadn't been exactly right ever since he got back from the army. He felt that he hadn't quite gotten used to the idea of being taken from the discipline of his parents and put under the control of professors, some of them not much older than himself, and that, given another chance, and handled carefully, he might eventually straighten out. I could see his point; the boy had only been out of the army about a week when his family decided that he ought to get started in school and he was probably nervous and tired. And since I had gone to school with Harrison I, and had the two boys, Harrison II, and Jonathan III, in my charge during their school days, I felt that I could afford to be lenient and give the boy a second chance—"

"Excuse me, but I've been wondering about that—I mean, those numbers on the older boys' names. What—"

"Well, Harrison II, is named for his father, of course, and Jonathan III, is named for his grandfather. Martin was born late in his parents' lives and they just didn't have another name, so they picked "Martin," more or less at random, I suppose. But you'd think that a youngster like that, would feel more grateful toward his family after they had given him the benefit of their experience and advice all through his youth! Why, they watched over him so carefully that he couldn't go wrong; they wouldn't let him go wrong!"

"But he wouldn't accept when you offered to reinstate him?"

"No, he—oh, oh-h! I don't want to talk about it any more! My stomach gets upset when I even think about it! I'm churning inside right now! Close out his file, please, Miss Rogers, and—oh—here's a letter on the dicto for you to transcribe. Send Haskell in immediately, when he comes, if you will. That's all for now, I think."

"Yes, sir."
I eased myself out of the office with the folder and the record, leaving the Dean boiling and sputtering behind his desk. I was sorry to go because I knew that in half an hour he would have regained his temper and I would never find out just what happened between the Dean and Martin Eldrup.

I closed out the file and sent it to the Registrar and then sat down to transcribe the letter on the dicto record. It takes some time to get used to those records. They're full of scratches and noise but once you get onto the knack of listening through the pops and fizzing, you can understand them quite easily.

In this case, I got the needle down too far along and only got the end of the letter.

"—at our earliest convenience," said the record. "Yours for continued cooperation, signed, et cetera. Fzzt! Pop! Pop! Sizzle!"

And then there was the sound of the office door opening, a clack as the Dean laid the mouth-piece on his desk and his solemn voice saying, "Oh—Eldrup."

"That's right, Dean."

"Sit down. Now then, about this matter of reinstating you in college. After due deliberation of the board, and careful consideration of your father and brothers' requests, we have decided to give you another chance. If you will apologize for your conduct, and return to college with the proper attitude toward your instructors and department heads, and if you will correct your relations with your family and promise to conduct yourself in a manner befitting your status as a student of this college and the son of a great father, we will be willing to forgive you and admit you to the rolls again."

There was a long pause of sizzles and snaps and then faintly—so faintly I couldn't be sure—but I think I heard Martin Eldrup say in a completely astonished tone, "Forgive—well,—I'll—be—damned!"

Then came the slam of a door and the angry buzz of the inter-office speaker.

"Miss Rogers, bring in Martin Eldrup's file!"

I played the record through once more and then, removing the cylinder from the machine, carefully and accidentally smashed it on the edge of my desk.