

HANGMAN

By William Borden

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****If performed for contest, where no props are allowed, everything can easily be mimed. Otherwise, a fairly thick rope is needed as a prop.***

CAST: THEODORE and ROGER

THEODORE: Are you sure the order's for me?

ROGER: ***(Pats his pocket)*** "Order of execution."

THEODORE: For who?

ROGER: For whom.

THEODORE: For whom?

ROGER: For you. ***(Starts to make a noose or mimes doing so.)***

THEODORE: You don't even know my name! What's the name on the order?

ROGER: I don't need to know your name.

THEODORE: Of course you have to know my—

ROGER: The order is for the prisoner in my custody.

THEODORE: That could be anybody.

ROGER: That would be you.

THEODORE: They have to know who they're killing.

ROGER: They're executing you.

THEODORE: They don't know who I am.

ROGER: You're here. I'm here.

THEODORE: It's a mistake.

ROGER: Mistakes happen.

THEODORE: You moron!

ROGER: You think I'm not smart?

THEODORE: I'm sure you're very bright, but that's not...

ROGER: You bet I'm bright!

THEODORE: I imagine you have a Ph.D.

ROGER: Right again. ***(ROGER checks noose.)*** That's a foolproof knot.

You don't want anything to go awry, do you? It's like packing your own parachute. Who are you going to trust with your life? Or the end of it? Here, test that knot. ***(THEODORE tries to test the knot.)*** No no, no no! ***(ROGER grabs the noose.)*** You intellectuals are so stupid! ***(ROGER makes the noose bigger, then smaller. Proudly...)*** Now that's a knot. Isn't it?

THEODORE: ***(With irony)*** It's beautiful.

ROGER: You bet!

THEODORE: Guaranteed.

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ROGER: Lifetime guarantee.

THEODORE: To kill instantly.

ROGER: Not instantly. We want you to ponder your ways, reflect on your errors, as you dangle, swaying slowly in the breeze. Then we allow you to expire.

THEODORE: Expire?

ROGER: Expire.

THEODORE: "Awry." "Expire." You have an enormous vocabulary.

ROGER: Thank you.

THEODORE: A veritable prodigious lexicon in your cerebrum.

ROGER: I read vociferously. No television, no card games—I have the complete collection of The Great Books.

THEODORE: The Great Books?

ROGER: A whole shelf. Forty-eight volumes.

THEODORE: There are exactly forty-eight Great Books?

ROGER: Didn't know that, did you?

THEODORE: I never knew the exact number.

ROGER: You guys think you're so smart.

THEODORE: Who wrote them?

ROGER: You know those guys, from Homer and the Bible to Melville and Prowst.

THEODORE: Prowst?

ROGER: You're not too well-read yourself, are you? Prowst was a French guy, wrote in a cork-lined room, suffered from asthma. He pursued the nuances of the past. *Cherchez the past. (ROGER pulls at the rope.)* I invented that knot myself.

THEODORE: No!

ROGER: Yeah!

THEODORE: I didn't think there was any room for innovation in knots.

ROGER: There's a lot you don't know.

THEODORE: How many knots can there be?

ROGER: There are approximately forty-eight knots in existence.

THEODORE: You're sure it's new?

ROGER: Have you ever seen it before?

THEODORE: You know me and knots.

ROGER: No one ever made that knot before...in recorded history.

THEODORE: It might be too sturdy.

ROGER: What do you mean?

THEODORE: I might not dangle long enough. I have a lot of sins to reflect upon as I die.

ROGER: They go fast. Whole life in a flash. So they say.

THEODORE: Who says?

ROGER: Well...

THEODORE: No one comes back to say!

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ROGER: Those who come close say.

THEODORE: It's not the same.

ROGER: It's close.

THEODORE: As I dangle?

ROGER: As you dangle.

THEODORE: In the breeze?

ROGER: In the breeze.

THEODORE: What breeze? We're indoors. Miles from daylight. So you've told me.

ROGER: Well, you see, as gravity grips you in its relentless passion for closeness, and you plunge downward, the rope, at the same time, in its vigorous insistence on verticality, jerks you upward. This opposition of forces gives your body what they call a torque, an angular momentum. Hence your body, as it's expiring, will swing, utilizing its own potential energy. You'll sway in quiet, graceful circles, or possibly ellipses, around and around. And around.

THEODORE: Like a pendulum.

ROGER: Exactly.

THEODORE: I would become a clock?

ROGER: If I left you there.

THEODORE: Then you were lying about the breeze.

ROGER: It was a bit of poetry.

THEODORE: Do you write?

ROGER: Reports.

THEODORE: Poetry.

ROGER: Me?

THEODORE: Let me hear something.

ROGER: Naw...

THEODORE: Please!

ROGER: Really? **(THEODORE waits expectantly. ROGER pulls a scrap of paper from his pocket.)** You'll laugh. **(THEODORE waits. ROGER hesitates, then starts to read.)** "The rope sings like a nightingale as it snaps across the breeze"—Maybe breeze isn't right there. **(ROGER takes out a pencil.)** "The rope sings like a nightingale as it snaps...as it snaps..."

THEODORE: into...

ROGER: **(Writing.)** Into...

THEODORE: the...

ROGER: snaps into the...

THEODORE: abyss...

ROGER: abyss of death! Snaps into the abyss of death!

THEODORE: "Death" sounds trite.

ROGER: **(Hesitates.)** You're right. "into the abyss..."

THEODORE: We need to go back. How does it begin?

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ROGER: "The rope sings like a nightingale as it—"

THEODORE: "Nightingale" is wrong.

ROGER: I like "nightingale."

THEODORE: "Raven." "Like a raven." The raven circles, the way the body circles...dangling. "Raven" connotes the harshness of the moment.

ROGER: It's not a harsh moment. It's a beautiful moment. It's a lyrical moment. And for those who disagree, there's the i-ron-y, the poignant reversal of expectation. "The rope sings like a nightingale as it snaps...into the...abyss...of..."

THEODORE: "Horror."

ROGER: No. "Abyss of..."

THEODORE: "Meaninglessness."

ROGER: No. "Abyss of..."

THEODORE: "Nothingness."

ROGER: No.

THEODORE: "Darkness."

ROGER: No!

(ROGER stuffs the paper and pencil back into his pocket.)

THEODORE: Aren't you going to finish it? ***(ROGER hands THEODORE the noose.)*** What?

ROGER: Put it around your neck.

THEODORE: I'm not going to help you murder me.

ROGER: Execution, my friend. Words are important.

THEODORE: Shoot me! That will make it murder!

ROGER: However I do it, it's an execution. I'm the executioner. It's a matter of definition. The man who writes the dictionary rules the nation. I can execute you now with one quick shot—or, while you tie the noose, and while we engage in scintillating dialectic, you can have another minute or two to enjoy God's bounty on earth. Which do you prefer?

THEODORE: Shoot.

ROGER: That seems mighty short-sighted, my friend. Who knows what might occur in the next 90 seconds? An earthquake might kill me and free you. The rebels might stage an attack and divert my attention, allowing you to escape. There might be a coup from above. A foreign invasion. The Commander might commit suicide. You might receive a pardon. Don't forget—what's his name? You know, the Russian—

THEODORE: Dostoevsky?

ROGER: That's the guy. In front of the firing squad, seconds from the order to fire, the messenger rides up on his horse, the pardon in his hand. The saddle on the horse smelling of old leather, and cigar

smoke, and sweat... It could happen to you. Anything can happen. At any moment. A man on a horse...a father...one day the horse comes back, the saddle's empty... Life is ruled by chance, old boy.

THEODORE: Everything is fated.

ROGER: An Augustinian!

THEODORE: There is a destiny—

ROGER: God's? Or the inevitability of historical materialism?

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