

A Good Character for a Novel

Proving that the ability to argue both sides of a question can have alarming consequences

By Rex Stout

PURDY'S friends often told him that he would make a good character for a novel. Not that he was a card or anything like that; they meant a serious character; it was so remarkable for a man of action and impulse like him to be also so broad-minded. He always saw both sides of a question, and what was more, he insisted on other people seeing them too. That trait of his character came out in little things as well as big ones. For instance, he might happen to have an evening conference, lasting until midnight, in his office on the top floor of the bank and business building which he owned, and on leaving with his associates and walking down the corridor to the elevator, there would be a couple of scrubwomen with pails cleaning the floor. One of the frowsy women would let her mop slip and swish dirty water on one of the men's shoes. Purdy would be at her like a flash: "You! No excuse for that! See Mr. Squill tomorrow; you're through!"

That was the natural unstudied impulse of him, his genius for direct and forceful action; but not more than twenty seconds later, on the way down in the elevator, he would see the other side. He would laugh apologetically to his companions: "After all, I suppose that poor woman works all day at something before she comes here at eight o'clock to scrub floors, and she's probably too tired to know what she's doing. A rest won't hurt her any, poor woman." Then he would as like as not give them some statistics on industrial fatigue, for he owned factories too and was an authority on that, having considered all points of view.



Gangsters and Detectives

Lithograph by Russell T. Limbach

Almost never did a point of view get by him. When the Junior Charity League sent a telegram to the state legislature urging the ratification of the child-labor amendment, he threatened to cut off his daughter Aline's allowance unless she resigned from the league at once; but that very evening he told his wife that he understood Aline's attitude perfectly well, indeed he sympathized with it; he did not at all

condemn her innocent girlish sentimentality, he merely could not permit it to interfere in practical adult affairs which Aline was not old enough to understand. That was the pattern of his conduct in both public and private concerns; never bigoted or intolerant of others' opinions; in action, bold and firm, tempered, as necessity might require, by prudence; in comprehension, catholic, sensitive, hospitable.

It is a melancholy thought, and a brutal impertinence to mankind's dear belief in a natural justice, that the source of calamity to a man may be his most shining virtue. That was what happened to Purdy. In spite of his vigilance and firmness, outside agitators gained a foothold among the workers in his largest factory. His well-organized system of espionage failed miserably; before Purdy Himself was aware of the danger, the agitators had injected the poison of discontent into every artery of that splendid organism; and when things came to a head and a strike was called, more than 70 percent of the force of nearly 2000 men proved to be disloyal. The factory heads blustered, to no purpose. Purdy himself, with his customary courage and directness, harangued the men; they actually booed him! A few of the company guards, naturally provoked by the boos, became a little over-enthusiastic, and a scuffle ensued on the edge of the crowd, but only half a dozen of the strikers were injured, and none fatally.

Days passed, and the misunderstanding—for Purdy saw clearly that that was all it amounted to—got pretty hot. Of course the factory had to shut down. Purdy was compelled to refuse to negotiate with the strikers, because he saw the futility of such an attempt as long as they were being influenced and bullied by the outside agitators. He tried first to get some sensible ideas conveyed to the men through those individuals who had formerly handled the inside espionage for him, but found that that circuit had a short somewhere. He tried yelling at his factory heads, but that only made him hoarse. He tried hiring new men, but the picket line was too much for him. That made him madder and firmer and bolder, and he decided to shoot the works. He sent out a call to agencies for strikebreakers and guards, demanded protection from the mayor and got it, and bought a thousand cots and blankets and installed them in the packing rooms. That put the strikers in an ugly mood. They insisted on gathering in groups, they hurled insults and threats, and some of them even threw stones. With the strikebreakers and guards inside, the factory was in a state of siege. The agitators had to be arrested to prevent the possibility of serious violence. Guards were posted every fifty yards around the high board fence surrounding the property.

Purdy did not sit comfortably in his uptown office and let his lieutenants bear the brunt of it; that was not his way. Twice a day he visited the factory himself and surveyed the battlefield; and on the second night after the strikebreakers had been installed, he was impelled by his conscience and the sense of his responsibility to inspect the scene after dark. After dinner he got in one of his cars and drove out alone. The street approaching the factory enclosure was dingy and dark, but the big gate was like day under the floodlights, and the only thing resembling a picket line was a group of sullen strikers standing fifty yards down the street from the entrance. Three cops were at the gate and, recognizing Purdy, they opened it and let his car through. He stopped just inside and got out and one of the cops walked over to him.

"Everything quiet, Sergeant?"

"All serene. Sir."

"Good. I'll stroll around the fence."

All would have been well if he had contented himself with entering the factory, or if he had taken the cop with him, or even if his tolerance and broad-mindedness had not chosen that occasion for display. The tragedy was abrupt, brief, and absolutely unnecessary. Purdy started off along the fence, thinking to go clear around and return to the main entrance. There were lights at intervals, but rather dim ones, and there were stretches that were almost dark. He strode on the gravel to the first corner, turned it, sloped down and up again across a depression, having accosted three of his hired guards as he passed them.

He was in a good humor, having enjoyed an especially fine dinner, and probably that accounted for the fact that he began to see the other side as he walked along; and, seeing it, he naturally had to give expression to it. He spoke aloud to the night: "Yes, certainly, I can see their side of it. I can even understand those goddam agitators. I can see how a man of that type would say, 'You listen to me, boys, and we'll make that bastard Purdy sign on the dotted line. You join my union and pay me to run it, and you'll get what you want and I will too. Either that or we'll blow up his goddam factory and bust him. Purdy gets all the gravy and all you guys get is plenty of nothin'. ' If you stick with me we'll show that son of a bitch Purdy. "

Purdy, interested in his exposition, did not notice that he had reached a break in the fence where there was a subsidiary gate, nor did he notice that a guard had popped out and reached for him; the first Purdy knew was that someone, there in the semi-darkness, had grabbed him by the neck and was calling him names. Impulsive, furious, Purdy raised his hand and pushed, and as luck would have it, he happened to poke his finger directly in the eye of a burly thug who had been bored stiff for ten hours. The thug yelled with pain and rage and came down with a club with all his might; Purdy tried to dodge; the club got him just below the medulla oblongata and broke his neck; he crumpled on the ground. The thug bent over to look at him and growled in disgust:

"By God, I think he's dead."

He was. The whole thing was deplorable.