



“I’M a very busy man,” said the editor.

“I know,” said his visitor. “I won’t take long.”

“You can’t,” said the editor. “I have too much to do. Sit down.”

“Thank you,” said the visitor, sitting down.

“Now,” said the editor. “What is it?”

“First,” said the visitor. “I’d better tell you who I am. Doctor Philip Lambert. Medical doctor. And I’ve been to three psychiatrists. They all said I was sane, that I haven’t been having hallucinations.”

“Okay,” said the editor. “What haven’t you been imagining?” He looked at his watch.

Lambert leaned forward. “Patrick Henry is dead.”

The editor stared at him. Finally: “This your idea of a joke?”

Lambert shook his head. “No. He died in my house at eight-seven last night.”

The editor waved his hand between Lambert and himself, palm out. “Wait a minute,” he said. “The only Patrick Henry I know lived during the Revolution.”

Lambert nodded. “That’s the one.”

The editor stood up. “Three psychiatrists said you weren’t nuts?”

“That’s right.”

"Give me liberty, or give me death!" was merely a quotation from a history book to Dr. Lambert until Patrick Henry walked into his office and complained of suffering from a chronic headache.

OR GIVE ME DEATH

By Donald E. Westlake

Illustrated by H. W. McCauley

"They were nuts."

"They talked to Patrick."

The editor stood behind his desk, staring at Lambert, and then walked over to the door, hung a home-made sign saying, 'Go Away' on it, closed it, and returned to his desk. He sat down. "Okay," he said. "Tell me. I believe anything."

Lambert smiled thinly. "He came to me about four months ago.

Of course, I didn't know then who he was. To me, he was just a bent old man, very thickly lined of face, who came to me for relief from a chronic headache. I couldn't find any superficial reason for the headache, so I gave him a thorough examination.

What I found was astonishing, impossible. A bit of metal, probably a bullet, embedded in his brain. A faint scar, caused by a

deep wound years before, on his heart. Other things. He should have been dead a dozen times. Besides, he was a lot older than anyone I've ever examined before. He should have long since been dead of old age, if nothing else.

After I'd examined him, I sat and looked at him for a while, trying to make some sense out of it. Things that would kill any human being hadn't killed him. Why? After a while, I asked him, "When were you shot?"

He looked at me oddly. "Why?"

"It should have killed you."

"Eighteen twenty three."

He said it just like that, and it was a minute before I caught it. *Eighteen* twenty three!

"How old are you?" I asked him.

"Two hundred and seventeen," he said.

I got to my feet, backed away from him. "What are you? What do you want from me?"

"The word to use is *who*, not what," he said calmly. "I'm Patrick Henry, and I want you to do something about this headache."

"Patrick Henry's dead," I said.

He shrugged. "They buried him anyway. In 1799."

"Do you mean you're a spirit?"

"Hell, no," he said. "I'm as alive as you are. Probably more."

I sat down again, feeling weak. "I don't get it. How can you be Patrick Henry? How can you be alive at all, whoever you are?"

"I'll tell you," said Patrick. "Remember that speech I made, when I said, 'Give me liberty or give me death?'"

I nodded.

"Somebody in the hereafter must have been feeling prankish. That's the only way I can figure it out. They decided I wanted one or the other, that I was giving them the choice. They gave me liberty."

"You mean they refused to give you death?"

"Right."

"By golly," I said. "That's wonderful. Immortality!"

"Bah!" he snorted. "When a man's outlived his time, he should stop living and quit cluttering up the world. Living gets to be a bore after a while. Why, when I first

realized I couldn't die, I was overjoyed. I soon got sick of it, though. So I tried to give the humorist a hint. I got myself buried. For a year and a half I lay six feet under, with no air and no food, but I didn't die. I got so hungry I ate my clothes and the lining of the coffin, but I didn't die."

"How did you ever manage to get out?" I asked him.

"Some damfool young medical student dug me up to experiment on. Huh. He almost needed a coffin himself when I sat up and said hello."

"I can imagine," I said. And it *was* somehow funny. I could imagine the scene. Then I thought of something else. "How is it nobody knows about you?" I asked him.

"A few people do," he said. "But if I went before a whole crowd, they'd think I was a vaudeville act, or a television mimic, and if I wrote to a magazine or a newspaper, they'd put it in their letter column as the gag of the month. A couple of the people who knew me tried, but they either wound up in a padded cell, or were laughed out of town. Besides who cares about Patrick Henry any more?"

"You could get a government pension," I said. "Live in a vine-covered cottage outside Richmond and write delicate little stories about the Revolution."

"Young man," said Patrick, rising to his feet and glowering, with the old oratorical fire in his eye, "do you realize that if you spell the Revolution with a small r you have something that one of your politicians just recently said always leads to tyranny? Do you realize that I, and all the others with me were a bunch of subversives? Men who refused to do their duty as citizens and pay taxes for the mutual security and national defense of the British empire, who stored up loads of munitions in hiding places, who *plotted to overthrow the government*? More than that, they *did* overthrow the government. Dammit man, those aren't your forebears, I think all those men were sterile, and only the Tories, the loyal, conforming Tories, had any children. Bunch of mealy-mouthed welfare statist! Bah!"

I was a little taken aback by Patrick's sudden blast, but I said, "You're confused. It's the welfare statist who are trying to overthrow the government."

"*What?*" He actually got purple in the face. "Social security, public power, unemployment, insurance, free college education, all the rest of it, the stupid junk they've been cramming down the Tories' gullible gullets, and you try to tell me its the welfare statist who are

trying to overthrow the government? Hell, man, they *are* the government."

"What's wrong with Social Security and free college education?" I asked. "They're progressive."

"Progressive! If I told you suicide was progressive, you'd run out and kill yourself. There's nothing wrong with government insurance. But there's *everything* wrong with *compulsory* government insurance. And giving everybody college education. What are most of them going to do with all that pretty knowledge? All they're going to do is be unhappy all their lives because they were prepared for a better job than the one they got. There aren't enough jobs needing a college education for all these young boobs. Somebody's going to have to dig the coal and make the undershirts."

He clutched his stomach in unfond reminiscence. "Oh, the stomach ache I got when Social Security went through! I couldn't eat anything but liquids for three weeks."

"I don't get it," I said. "What did Social Security have to do with your stomach?"

"Every time the United States loses some of its liberty, I get closer to death. They even off in me all the time. My health and the nation's freedom. The Civil War

scription gave me a heart murmur. The First World War prescription gave me high blood pressure. This one gave me coronary thrombosis. Excise taxes laid me low for two months.

"Of course, there've been times when I was in worse shape than I'm in right now. When the Alien and Sedition Act was passed, I went stone deaf, blind in the right eye, and paralyzed from the waist down. During prohibition, it was my right arm that was paralyzed. Couldn't bend my elbow to save myself."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you doing anything special, got any important engagements, anything like that?"

He shook his head. "No. Why?"

"How would you like to live at my house? I have plenty of room, and all the privacy you want. I'd like to examine you some more."

He thought for a while. "All right," he said at last. "As long as it's examine, not investigate. I've had a beautiful set of ulcers since that word took on its new meaning."

"By the way," I said. "Your headache. How long have you had it?"

"About three weeks," he said.

"You said your ills come from lost liberties. What liberty did we lose three weeks ago? I thought

for a minute. "Around the first of the year. End of '54, beginning of '55. What liberty did we lose then?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he said. "Sometimes I get the ache before the thing becomes public. Whatever it is, we'll know about it soon enough. And, whatever it is, the Tories all over the country will welcome it with open arms, as long as somebody tells them it's progressive. Bah!"

"Don't be bitter," I told him. "You'd be murder in a political discussion."

"I can back up my statements with diseases," he said.

"I'll close the office now," I said, "and take you round to my house."

I closed the office and brought him home.

There was a long pause. Then, the editor said, "Is that all?"

"Just about," said Lambert. "I examined him some more, did what I could for the headache. He claimed it was getting worse. He first came to me three months ago. After a week, I went to see a psychiatrist. He suggested I go away somewhere for a nice long rest, so I brought him home to talk to Patrick. He went home dazed, but convinced that I was sane and Patrick was alive and, well, *Patrick*. I got a written statement from him and from two other psychiatrists.

Just in case I ever wanted to tell anyone about this without Patrick around, for proof." Lambert reached into his breast pocket, withdrew a flat envelope. "Here they are," he said.

The editor looked at the notes. He knew the names signed to the bottom of them. All three said that Doctor Philip Lambert was sane, that Patrick Henry lived, and that Lambert's account of him was correct.

"Okay," said the editor, dropping the notes on his desk. "Say I believe you. So what? Do you want some free publicity for Patrick, or what?"

Lambert shook his head. "I told you. Patrick died last night, at eight-seven."

"Then what *do* you want?" asked the editor. "Just an obituary notice?"

"No, no, *no*," said Lambert impatiently. "Didn't I tell you that Patrick had received liberty instead of death, that until all liberty was gone from the United States, *he could not die?*"

"What are you trying to say?" asked the editor.

"That at eight-seven last night, we lost the last of our liberties. I don't know what it was, what happened, anything about it. All I know is that this is no longer a free nation."

"Now that's enough," said the editor. "There I can check you up. I run a paper here, and I put in it anything I want to put in it. I say whatever I feel like saying. If I couldn't, then this wouldn't be a free country. But I can, so your Patrick Henry story is a lot of—"

The door opened and two men walked in.

THE END