

The First Two Pages: “The Mercy of Thaddeus Burke”

By David Dean

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The idea behind “The Mercy of Thaddeus Burke” was a simple one—a young thug, having crossed the line with his mob, goes to an older thug for help.

Most of my ideas are simple ones. Many would say that this is an accurate reflection of my intellect, that I stand indicted by my own body of work. All true.

The first two pages of the story bear this out and are what I saw in my head when the idea (not yet fleshed out) came to me—more setting than plot, really. As the characters are members of a fictional Irish-American criminal gang out of Elizabeth, New Jersey, I decided right off that the meeting would be in Jefferson Park in that very city. Perhaps not a bold literary decision but, I felt, a sensible one.

My friend and fellow writer John Floyd has written and had published more stories than I’ve had ideas—lots more. He credits some of the reason for this, besides his undeniable talent (I’m saying that), that when he begins a story he heaps misery upon the protagonist in great quantity. That’s not an actual quote but I think it captures his intent.

This is good advice and I’ve tried to heed it—but not in this story. I didn’t choose to ignore his literary wisdom, I just couldn’t figure out how to put it into effect because all three of my characters (the third arrives at the end) are more

antagonist than protagonist. I did make it rain on them a little, so I'm sure they weren't all that comfortable.

That being said, the younger mobster has made a major mistake in judgement and is in fear of his life. Desperate for help and someone to intercede for him with the gang, he turns to the old Irishman, Thaddeus Burke, who has attained a kind of senior statesman role. But when it comes to killers and thugs, can anyone be trusted? Yes, I know the title of the story has the word "mercy" boldly emblazoned, but there's all kinds of mercy... and mercy itself is not without consequences. Within the first two pages, I've tried to set the stage for the revelations that will follow in a story that is more about what might happen, than what does. Here they are:

Making a show of feeding the pigeons, Thaddeus Burke watched the younger man from the corner of his eye. He had been sitting in Jefferson Park for nearly an hour and was growing weary of the waiting game. Though he was sixty-two, he remained energetic and was not given to patience in the normal course of things.

A flock of the gluttonous birds waltzed back and forth in front of the park bench he sat upon as if in time to unheard music, drawing closer with each pass. "Will you be much longer?" he called out to the skulking Dermot Browne. "I'm not getting any younger waiting on ya, and at my age, every moment counts."

Turning his slender frame, he witnessed Dermot step out from the elm tree he sheltered beneath, his right hand in his jacket pocket.

"You should've worn a hat, at least," Thaddeus observed, touching the brim of his own wool cap. "You look a bit damp." He could see drops of moisture suspended in Dermot's curly locks.

The day had been one of chill, spring showers, and Thaddeus had seen but few strollers, mostly local workers cutting through the park; the occasional junkie or vagrant from time to time.

He kicked out with a scuffed shoe to send the birds aloft. "Greedy, filthy birds, them pigeons," he announced patting the space next to him on the bench.

Dermot stood over him without speaking for several moments; then said, "Please open your coat, Thaddeus."

Peering up at the taller and younger Dermot, Thaddeus pursed his chapped lips together in apparent thought and replied, "The devil you say," flicking open his filthy, once-beige rain coat.

"And here I thought we was friends," he added with a sigh.

Leaning down, Dermot used his left hand to pat down the older man's shirt, coat lining, and pockets, his short, broad nose wrinkling in distaste at the rank odor.

"Insult to injury..." Thaddeus murmured.

Standing once more, Dermot scanned their immediate environs.

"Satisfied?" Thaddeus asked, snapping his coat closed once more. "I could take my trousers down too if you'd like, though I'm afraid it might damage your self-esteem."

Unsmiling, Dermot shook his head. "I'm sorry, Thaddeus, but you know that I've got to be careful."

Thaddeus noticed how pale Dermot was, his eyes wide and dilated. He recognized fear when he saw it. "What I *know*, Dermot darling, is that Seamus Tyrrell is a bit miffed at your recent lapse of judgment. That auction house heist was supposed to come back home with you, but we've yet to see a dime of it. What were you thinking running off with all that cash?"

"That's why I come to you, Thad," Dermot began. "Seamus trusts you...he'll listen to you. He says you're old school Irish, seen it all, done it all. Everybody respects you."

"I've lived longer than many," Thaddeus confirmed with a smile, then added without one, "and the chances are good that I may live longer yet than some." He patted the bench seat once more. "Take a load off, Dermot. It's making my neck ache looking up all this while."

Dermot's face went paler still and he said nothing in answer. "Fearful, are you?"

Dermot avoided the older man's eyes.

"Suit yourself then." Folding his hands together, Thaddeus crossed one thin leg over the other, and waited, the younger man remaining just beyond his striking distance.

Yes, it's a bit of *Waiting for Godot*, but how could I resist? The Irish character of Thaddeus seem to demand a laid-back, philosophical approach, even as I tried to convey that he remains, despite his age, a dangerous person—a slender reed to place one's hopes on. But... he has his secrets... which we come to *after* the first two pages.

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David Dean's short stories have appeared regularly in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, as well as a number of anthologies, since 1990. His stories have been nominated for the Shamus, Barry, and Derringer Awards and "Ibrahim's Eyes" won the *EQMM* Readers Award for 2007. His story, "Tomorrow's Dead", was a finalist for the Edgar Award for best short story of 2011. He is a retired Chief of Police in New Jersey and once served as a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division.