

# “THE HANGMAN”

By Maurice Ogden

1.

Into our town the hangman came,  
smelling of gold and blood and flame.  
He paced our bricks with a different air,  
and built his frame on the courthouse square.

The scaffold stood by the courthouse side,  
only as wide as the door was wide  
with a frame as tall, or a little more,  
than the capping sill of the courthouse door.

And we wondered whenever we had the time,  
Who the criminal? What the crime?  
The hangman judged with the yellow twist  
of knotted hemp in his busy fist.

And innocent though we were with dread,  
we passed those eyes of buckshot lead.  
Till one cried, “Hangman, who is he,  
for whom you raised the gallows-tree?”

Then a twinkle grew in his buckshot eye  
and he gave a riddle instead of reply.  
“He who serves me best,” said he,  
“shall earn the rope on the gallows-tree.”

And he stepped down and laid his hand  
on a man who came from another land.  
And we breathed again, for another’s grief  
at the hangman’s hand, was our relief.

And the gallows frame on the courthouse lawn  
by tomorrow’s sun would be struck and gone.  
So we gave him way and no one spoke  
out of respect for his hangman’s cloak.

2.

The next day's sun looked mildly down  
on roof and street in our quiet town;  
and stark and black in the morning air,  
the gallows-tree on the courthouse square.

And the hangman stood at his usual stand  
with the yellow hemp in his busy hand.  
With his buckshot eye and his jaw like a pike  
and his air so knowing and business-like.

And we cried, "Hangman, have you not done,  
yesterday with the alien one?"  
Then we fell silent and stood amazed.  
"Oh, not for him was the gallows raised."

He laughed a laugh as he looked at us,  
"Do you think I've gone to all this fuss,  
To hang one man? That's the thing I do  
To stretch the rope when the rope is new."

Above our silence a voice cried "Shame!"  
and into our midst the hangman came;  
to that man's place, "Do you hold," said he,  
"with him that was meat for the gallows-tree?"

He laid his hand on that one's arm,  
and we shrank back in quick alarm.  
We gave him way, and no one spoke,  
out of fear of the hangman's cloak.

That night we saw with dread surprise  
the hangman's scaffold had grown in size.  
Fed by the blood beneath the chute,  
the gallows-tree had taken root.

Now as wide, or a little more  
than the steps that led to the courthouse door.  
As tall as the writing, or nearly as tall,  
half way up on the courthouse wall.

3.

The third he took, we had all heard tell,  
was a usurer, an infidel.  
And “What,” said the hangman, “have you to do  
with the gallows-bound and he a Jew?”

And we cried out, “Is this one? He  
who has served you well and faithfully?”  
The hangman smiled, “It’s a clever scheme  
to try the strength of the gallows beam.”

The fourth man’s dark accusing song  
had scratched our comfort hard and long.  
“And what concern,” he gave us back,  
“have you for the doomed and black?”

The fifth, the sixth, and we cried again,  
“Hangman, hangman, is this the man?”  
“It’s a trick,” said he, “that we hangman know  
for easing the trap when the trap springs slow.”

And so we ceased and asked no more  
as the hangman tallied his bloody score.  
And sun by sun, and night by night,  
the gallows grew to monstrous height.

The wings of the scaffold opened wide  
until they covered the square from side to side.  
And the monster cross beam looking down,  
cast its shadow across the town.

Then through the town the hangman came.  
 through the empty streets and called my name.  
 And I looked at the gallows soaring tall  
 and thought there's no one left at all

for hanging, and so he called to me  
 to help take down the gallows tree.  
 So I went out with right good hope  
 to the hangman's tree and the hangman's rope.

He smiled at me as I came down  
 to the courthouse square through the silent town.  
 And supple and stretched in his busy hand  
 was the yellow twist of hempen strand.

He whistled his tune as he tried the trap,  
 and it sprang down with a ready snap.  
 Then with a smile of awful command,  
 He laid his hand upon my hand.

"You tricked me Hangman!" I shouted then,  
 "that your scaffold was built for other men,  
 and I'm no henchman of yours!" I cried.  
 "You lied to me Hangman, foully lied."

Then a twinkle grew in his buckshot eye,  
 "Lied to you? Tricked you?" he said. "Not I.  
 For I answered straight, and I told you true,  
 the scaffold was raised for none but you."

"For who has served more faithfully,  
 Than you with your coward's hope?" said He.  
 "And where are the others who might have stood  
 side by your side in the common good?"

"Dead." I whispered. And amiably,  
 "Murdered," the hangman corrected me.  
 "First the foreigner then the Jew,  
 I did no more than you let me do."

Beneath the beam that blocked the sky  
 none had stood so alone as I.  
 The hangman noosed me, and no voice there  
 cried "STOP" for me in the empty square.