

READING

The Hangman

The Hangman

By Maurice Ogden

1.

Into our town the Hangman came
Smelling of gold and blood and flame—
And he paced our bricks with a diffident air
And built his frame on the courthouse square.

The scaffold stood by the courthouse side,
Only as wide as the door was wide;
A frame as tall, or 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 raise the gallows-tree?"

Then a twinkle grew in the buckshot eye,
And he gave us 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 businesslike.

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:
". . . Did you think I'd gone to all this fuss
To hang one man? That's a thing I do
To stretch the rope when the rope is new."

Then one cried "Murderer!" One cried "Shame!"
And into our midst the Hangman came
To that man's place. "Do you hold," said he,
With him that's meant for the gallows-tree?"

And he laid his hand on that one's arm,
And we shrank back in quick alarm,
And we gave him way, and no one spoke
Out of fear of his 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,
Halfway up on the courthouse wall.

3.

The third he took—and we had all heard tell—
Was a usurer and 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 out comfort hard and long;
And “What concern,” he gave us back,
“Have you for the doomed—the doomed and black?”

The fifth. The sixth. And we cried again:
“Hangman, Hangman, is this the man?”
“It’s a trick,” he said, “that we hangmen 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
Till they covered the square from side to side;
And the monster cross-beam, looking down,
Cast its shadow across the town.

4.

Then through the town the Hangman came
And called in the empty streets my name,

And I looked at the gallows soaring tall
And thought: "There is no one left at all

For hanging, and so he calls to me
To help him pull down the gallows-tree."
And 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 the hempen strand.

And he whistled his tune as he tried the trap
And it sprang down with a ready snap—
And 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 no henchman of yours," I cried.
"You lied to me, Hangman, foully lied!"

Then a twinkle grew in the 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 me more faithfully
Than you with your coward's hope?" said he,
"And where are the others that might have stood
Side by your side in the common good?"

"Dead," I whispered: and amiably,
"Murdered," the Hangman corrected me;
"First the alien, 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—
And the Hangman strapped me, and no voice there
Cried "Stay!" for me in the empty square.¹

¹ Maurice Ogden, "The Hangman" (Regina Publications), 1951.

Connection Questions

1. In the poem, what choices are open to the townspeople when the Hangman arrives? What choices are left by the time he has finished his work in the town? Was there a way to stop the Hangman? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. How does the poem relate to Germany and the world of the 1930s? How does it relate to society today? What does it suggest about the challenges of speaking out and taking action in the face of complacency and uncertainty?
3. What is the meaning of the Hangman's riddle: "'He who serves me best,' said he, 'shall earn the rope on the gallows-tree'"?
4. In 1933, Martin Niemöller, a leader of the Confessing Church, voted for the Nazi Party. By 1938, he was in a concentration camp. After the war, he is believed to have said, "In Germany, the Nazis came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak for me." How is the point Niemöller makes similar to the one that the poet Maurice Ogden makes in "The Hangman"?