

# *The Headsman's Tale*

*A strange and terrible account of sloth, indifference, greed and revenge.*

*By Jack Ketch*

## **Act I – The Unblinking Eye**

*In which the inexorable march of technology runs afoul of cloistered bureaucracy in the medieval dungeons of Mabel Lee Wilson.*

On or about the penultimate decade of a the Old Millennium in a small cottage near the northern shores of Lake Whatcom, a humble lecturer dwelt in penury. His name was Perry Mills and he labored among the ivy-covered halls and moss-covered scholars of the University of Western Washington, a vast edifice of scholarship that still towers at the summit of Sehome Hill looking over the now-abandoned slag heaps, toxic sludge ponds and decaying pulp factory of the little town of Bellingham which itself was widely known as a nice liberal town with the highest population of serial killers per capita in the continental United States of America. Mills was a large, shambling, irascible hulk of a man who limped about in a fog of malevolent cigar smoke. He had a piratical beard, hands the size of Easter hams, a metal brace on his leg, a head whose size was the despair of haberdashers and one terrible eye that was rumored to see around corners. He also possessed a great fondness for his companion, Linda, the many cats who shared their home with him, home-brewed beer of ferocious power, the literature written in beams of light across the silver screen, large-caliber handguns, dramatic irony, good food, sharp knives and extremely fast motorcycles, though not necessarily always in that particular order. At the University, he abided amongst the denizens of the Theatre Department and at first lectured and later professed film studies, functional literacy (a great rarity in those parts), play writing, interdisciplinary liberal arts, popular culture and a great loathing for dogs, timidity, self-promotion, arrogant clerks, most of the white race, all politicians and any technology more complex and arcane than fire or a sharp stick of which the chief evil was the Unblinking Eye of Television; a remorseless chattering god who was worshipped on glass-fronted altars in homes throughout the land.

As Fate, historical necessity, preterition and the aggregate character – or lack thereof – of the persons and institutions involved would have it, the Unblinking Eye of Television played a pivotal and determinative role in the tragicomedy of Classical proportions that was about to enfold Perry Mills in a struggle comparable to the Labors of Hercules or the Punic wars between Rome and Carthage. One of the courses that Perry first lectured and later professed was titled “Introduction to Cinema” and it was concealed in the University catalog under the course number of TH201 amidst the offerings of the Theatre department. It was a writing-intensive course; one of a series of courses required for

graduation that were intended to teach, develop or demonstrate the students' basic ability – or lack thereof – to read and write the English language.

The course TH201 consisted of a series of motion pictures presented as lectures. The students would see a film and then write interpretive essays to demonstrate their functional literacy – or in most cases, their sad and utter lack of the same – and take a series of rather baroque tests to gauge their critical and analytic thinking – or in most cases, their sad and utter lack of the same. The institutional purpose for the course was to provide some minimum cover for the university's rather grandiose claim to produce graduates who could at least read and write the English language.

The films comprising the texts of TH201 were originally presented as moving pictures – which really did not move – projected by beams of light passing through a transparent medium on which were recorded the images which passed in front of a camera and – in the more contemporary texts – also the sounds gathered by microphones. The recording medium, known as the “film” engraved these pictures and sounds on salts of the precious metal silver as varying shades of blackness, sometimes colored with dyes derived from the tar extracted from coal in process of making coke to smelt pig iron or more exotic colors produced by arcane alchemical processes from the black oil that flowed from the sands of Araby. The images, themselves, did not move but were presented as a rapid series of motionless shadows projected onto a white screen composed of minute beads of glass affixed to strong fabric by an ingenious and transparent glue. The rapid substitution of one image for another produces an illusion of motion that is startlingly lifelike and real.

The creation of these illusionary texts for the education of students required vast quantities of precious silver to be consumed. The students paid a tithe on their tuition to the University Budget Office to offset the cost of University's acquisition of the silver stored on the reels of film which, in turn, were stored in the warrens of the Media Services Department in the northern reaches of the old and hallowed halls of the Miller building on the eastern reaches of the majestic Red Square. This tithe was referred to, initially, as a “lab fee”; meaning that it derived from the ancient practice of making the students pay a sum beyond their tuition for the purpose of offsetting the cost of the glassware and chemicals which slipped from their clumsy fingers and turned the floor of the alchemical laboratories into a deplorable mess. The TH201 lab fee – which in the penultimate decade of the Old Millennium was renamed as a “student course fee” and then shortened to the phrase “student fee” thereby denominating the source of the monies rather than the purpose for which they would be gathered and expended – was collected by the Budget Office and sequestered in their accounts recorded in majestic ledger books consulted by the officials who administered the business of the University. It was a strict rule of the University that these fees only be collected for a demonstrated need and disbursed only to satisfy that designated need; in the case of TH201, this need was the acquisition of films bearing precious silver and embellished with dyes derived from the oils of Araby, these films being shown to the students as illusory flickering shadows from which they would derive training in critical and analytic thought and enhance their command of the written English language so that the University could continue the

pretense of producing graduates who possessed these skills and thereby make themselves more valuable to the commerce, glory and renown of the nation.

And but for the inexorable advance of technology, this situation would have prevailed for all time and this story would not be told.

In the penultimate decade of the Old Millennium, the Unblinking Eye of Television had so captured the hearts, minds and souls of the nation that the people were no longer content to worship the glass-fronted altars in the customary manner. Instead, they began to demand that they be able to choose the time and ceremony for their worship. This greatly vexed the wizards and lords of the Unblinking Eye, for they were used to strictly controlling the choice of ceremony as well as the time of worship. The upshot was the introduction of a new means of recording and displaying flickering images on the glass-fronted altars of the Unblinking Eye, this being known as *video recording on tape*, or *video tape* or even *videos* in the abbreviated parlance of the times. The video tape process substituted films coated with the base metal iron for the films coated with precious silver and instead of relying on flickering beams of light; it substituted fluxions of the invisible fields of Gilbert whose pull orients the compasses' needles so they point to the magnetic poles of the earth and thus guide mariners – be they lusty and fearless pirates or mere craven honest men—across the vasty deeps of the wine-red sea.

The advancement of technological progress produced a machine called the Talaria – being the same name as the winged sandals of Hermes – that replaced the kerosene-lit and steam-powered film projector. The introduction of this new machine reacted on the classes of Perry Mills in the following ways: first of all, the crisp sharp shadows cast by passing through transparent films bearing precious silver were replaced by somewhat muddy and indistinct images derived from the magnetic fluxions of the base metal iron; secondly, the cost of iron being much less than the cost of silver, the student fees could now acquire videos in much larger numbers than the meager collection of films stored in the Department of Media Services; and thirdly, the students could see the films at the time and place of their own choosing and thus make more detailed scholarly analyses of the texts presented to them in class. All that was needed was a depository for the videos. This was discovered in a single small cabinet in the Special Collections division on the fifth floor of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library, the gothic-modern hybrid building which occupies the northwest corner of Red Square. Slowly, the special collection of cinema texts engraved in magnetic fluxions grew in size and variety. And Mills lectured, and the students studied and wrote and all was more or less well in the ivy-covered halls and among the moss-covered scholars of the University of Western Washington.

Then, in the final years of the Old Millennium, the foundations of Western Civilization trembled and seemed like they might collapse. The humble lecturer Perry Mills had bestowed upon him the impressive honor and privilege of rising to the rank of assistant professor and was granted tenure at the University of Western Washington. Many saw this as a harbinger of the Apocalypse and the sounding of the Trumpets of Doom, the immanentizing of the Eschaton and the impending Rapturous bodily flight up to heaven of the worthy elect, leaving behind only neatly folded piles of clothing and numerous

ships, vehicles and aerial machines bereft of their pilots, captains and steersmen suddenly called to Glory and careening wildly without a hand at the tiller or wheel to crash in horrid carnage all over the shores and landscape. Others evinced great joy and threw parties. For Perry, the main change was that where he had previously lectured, he now professed.

The march of technology and commerce continued unabated and slowly, the price of videos for TH201 began to fall. The newly-created Professor Mills greeted this development with approval, since now the special collection of texts for his students could be expanded to their benefit and scholarly profit. Accordingly, he and Kay, the Theatre department's scribe, factotum and scullion, labored for many months to prepare lists of films on video to purchase for the students from the monies the students had been assessed and which they paid to the Budget Office, who in turn recorded these funds in majestic ledgers in the hallowed and ivy-covered halls of Old Main, and from which ledgers they recorded the transfer of the funds to the Bursar, who in turn transmitted approximately four thousand dollars to the merchants, who packed the videos in a great box originally devoted to the storage and transportation of toilet paper, which they gave to messengers who raced across the country in great 18-wheeled carts drawn by snorting engines of Diesel and delivered them to the Theater department offices in the Performing Arts compound perched on the cliffs of Sehome Hill overlooking the toxic waste dumps, sludge pits and pulp manufactories of the nice liberal town of Bellingham with its serial killers, citizens and officials – both honest and corrupt – going about their various errands and toils.

At this juncture in our story a most curious thing happened, an event pivotal in the future events which enmeshed Professor Mills in the labors of Hercules and a struggle as colossal as the war between Rome and Carthage that ended with the mighty City of Carthage which had shone brightly upon its hill tumbled into ruins and its fields and granaries laid waste and the very ground plowed with salt so that nothing would ever grow or prosper there again.

The videos were given to the porters of the University of Western Washington who trundled them from the Theatre Department to Mabel Zoe Wilson Library and then they vanished without a trace from human sight and knowledge. And Professor Perry Mills' wrath and anger were great. For over a year, he clanked and limped through the hallowed halls of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library, demanding of the staff, scribes, factotums, scullions and clerks what had happened to the videos his students' monies had purchased and were delivered into the care of the staff, scribes, factotums, scullions and clerks from which they vanished without a trace. The wrath of Professor Mills is a terrible thing to behold and the staff, scribes, factotums, scullions and clerks of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library had far more opportunity than they might wish to behold this wrath and they quailed and trembled and hid themselves behind pile of books and locked themselves in their offices and ran like deer when they saw the horrible Professor Mills limping and clanking through the hallowed halls of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library when they saw him coming with his leg in a metal brace and his ham-like hands, head whose size was the despair of haberdashers and his one terrible glaring eye that could see around corners.

At first they pleaded that it wasn't their fault that the students' video had gone missing. This did not mollify Professor Mills because he did not want their sorrow, he wanted the videos. Then they declared that it wasn't their job to find the students' videos. This only increased the terrible wrath and anger of Professor Mills and he lashed them with his tongue and scorned them and described all of their failings, shortcomings, inadequacies and infirmities to them in such eloquent and detailed prose that they trembled and wailed and ultimately ceased to argue that it was neither their fault nor their job that the four thousand dollars of videos purchased with the students' monies had vanished without a trace. And then they addressed complaints to others at the University of Western Washington who labored outside the hallowed halls of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library and dwelt within other hallowed halls elsewhere on the campus that it wasn't their fault and it wasn't their job and Professor Mills was a horrible person. But this availed them little; for there was an understanding, long enshrined in usage and hallowed by custom, among the scholars, clerks and minions of the University that no one would ever come to aid, assistance, support or succor of another; except for the administrators, a large and arrogant clan who began as clerks who assisted the scholars but over time ruled over them, just as the hypocritically humble but dangerously malignant Uriah Heep came to dominate the household of Mr. Wickford, for the administrators would always support one another but would never help anyone else.

And so thing went on for over a year, as the terrible Professor Mills limped and clanked and the staff, scribes, factotums, scullions and clerks of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library pleaded, declared and plained when they weren't running or hiding or trembling under the lashing tongue and single glaring eye of Professor Mills. Finally, Marian, one of the most astute and revered librarians, discerned that the terrible and fearsome Professor Mills did not want the trembling obeisance of the denizens of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library – they being trained by the administrators that trembling obeisance is the correct and proper behavior for all but the administrators of the University of Western Washington; Professor Mills wanted the videos neatly arranged in serried ranks on the shelves of the Special Collection and little cards engraved with the names of the movies recorded on the base metal iron because the human eye cannot read the fluxions stored in the iron and must have little written texts describing the name of the movie and the number assigned to it which determined their place in the serried ranks on the shelves of the Special Collection. And so she set about doing something about it.

Marian looked for the videos. She looked for them in the piles of books. She looked for them under the tables. She looked in the attic. She looked in the basement. And in a small, dark closet in the farthest corner of the deepest part of the darkest basement, she found the videos! Not only did she find the videos hidden in the small dark closet in the deepest part of the basement, Marian Alexander also found how they came to be there; because Marian was one of the smartest, pluckiest and most diligent librarians who ever glided silently through the hallowed halls of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library with her finger pressed to her lips.

And when Marian had discovered the hiding place of the videos in the small, dark closet in the farthest corner of the deepest part of the darkest basement, she took them and had

them neatly arranged in serried ranks on the shelves of the Special Collection and little cards engraved with the names of the movies. She also wrote a wonderful letter describing her discovery and sent it by University messenger to Professor Mills so that he might cease his limping and clanking about in the hallowed halls of Mabel Zoe Wilson Library, terrorizing her staff, scribes, factotums, scullions and clerks in his terrible and relentless quest to determine what had become of the videos hidden in the small, dark closet in the farthest corner of the deepest part of the darkest basement after being purchased with the tithes and mites of the students of TH201.

## **Act II – The Treasure of Sequestered Monies**

*In which avarice, cowardice, sloth and self-promotion plunder their unsuspecting charges of their mites and tithes and thwart justice by concocting foul and infamous fictions of finance.*

## **Act III – The Prisoner of Wendy**

*In which a terrible retribution is visited upon the innocent by the guilty and confidence is betrayed.*

## **Act IV – Twelve Angry Pens**

*In which the unworthy defy their betters and unsheathe Blind Justice's terrible unswift sword.*

## **Act V – The Headsman Cometh**

*To be continued...*