

# "THE FLAME OF FREEDOM"

## THE BLACK SASH PROTEST AGAINST THE GENERAL LAW AMENDMENT BILL

(Pictures on Pages 16 and 17)

**T**HE BLACK SASH demonstration against the General Law Amendment Bill commenced at dusk on Wednesday, the 16th May, with the ceremonial lighting of the "Flame of Freedom" on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall, and the reading of the Black Sash Dedication. Relays of Black Sash women guarded the flame night and day, and a poster was displayed, reading: "Reject the Sabotage Bill — the Bill to End All Liberty".

The first night of our vigil passed without incident, except that at midnight two schoolboys ran up to the poster, pelted it with eggs and tomatoes, and then fled. The next day, too, was fairly uneventful — our demonstration was received with the usual mild interest, or the usual dull uncomprehending stare; evoked the occasional word of praise, or the occasional jeer.

During a citizens' mass protest meeting held in the City Hall on the Thursday night, there was a good deal of heckling and shouting by a pro-Government section of the crowd. Scuffles followed and stink-bombs were thrown, and finally a group of White youths erupted from the meeting, converged upon the Black Sash and extinguished the flame, which was promptly re-lighted. That was our last night of comparative peace. The hooligans had found us — a group of citizens who were daring to stage a lawful protest against a Government measure.



"It could be worse. Our daughter might be married to an egg and tomato pelted."

Throughout the next three days and nights, tension mounted as organized gangs of White thugs surrounded our demonstrators, screaming abuse and obscenities, pelting them with eggs, tomatoes, potatoes, small sandbags, fruit, and, lastly — and most disgusting of all! — with raw fish. Our women stood firm, composed and silent, offering no response and no resistance. The days were not bad — the thugs were not so much in evidence, except at "peak" hours, and at those times there were a good many law-abiding citizens around as well — but the nights were full of strain. Police protection was inadequate, to say the least, although individual police officers did their best in a difficult situation. From time to time one of the ring-leaders of the mob was removed in the police van, only to re-appear a short time afterwards, armed with fresh "ammunition".

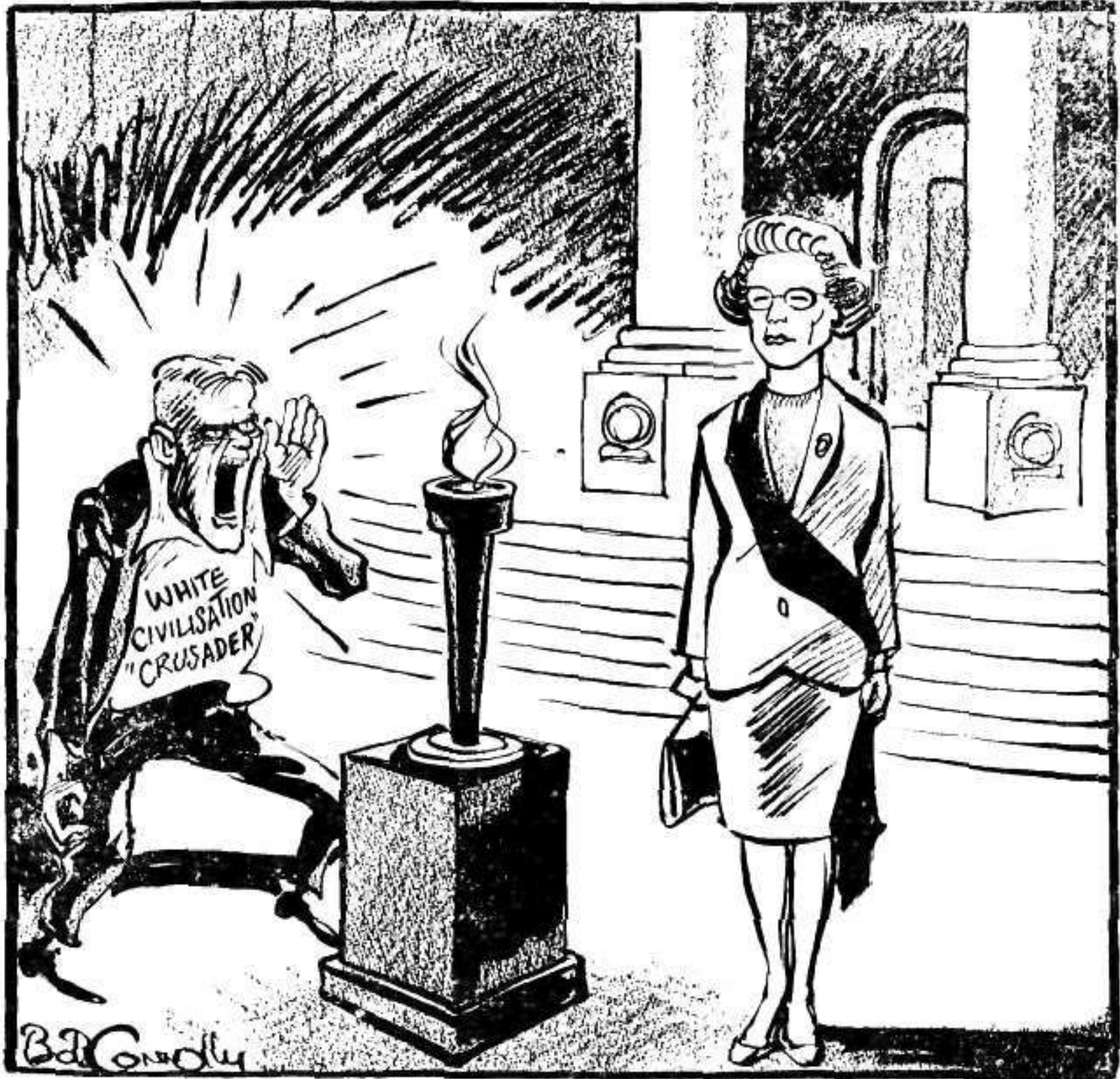
On the Saturday night, matters reached a climax. After hours of baiting and pelting, a group of hooligans rushed the Black Sash women — knocking some of them to the ground — put out the flame, and destroyed the poster. The police were summoned, and order was restored. The flame of freedom was relit, and the vigil went on. There was further trouble on the Sunday night, which was speedily controlled by decisive action on the part of one police officer.

The next day, there was some unpleasantness, especially at the lunch hour, and towards evening an ominous-looking crowd began to assemble. Just as the Black Sash "night shift" came on duty, the Chairman of the Management Committee of the City Council appealed to Mrs. Sinclair, National President of the Black Sash, to withdraw her women for the night, for their own protection.

She agreed, after consultation with other members, and the flame was carried proudly away, to the great disappointment of the assembled thugs, who complained that they had been done out of an evening's fun.

And so, after five days and nights, the Johannesburg vigil was interrupted, but, to our great joy, our Cape Town members commenced their round-the-clock vigil that same evening, to mark the beginning of the Second Reading debate in the House of Assembly. As the *Rand Daily Mail* said, "a flame died, but another flared." The Cape Town Black Sash lit their flame of freedom outside the gates of Parliament, and their posters read, "Vorster's Bill Stifles Legitimate Opposition." Up to the time of writing, no full reports have reached us, but we understand that during the week their vigil lasted they came in for some attention from local hooligans, but nothing like that experienced in Johannesburg. Presumably the milder political climate Cape Town is said to enjoy extends even to the hooligans!

## THE DIFFERENCE



For the next two days, the Johannesburg vigil was held from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. Cheated of their evening sport, the hooligans, who seemed to be non-workers, now turned their attention to us during the daylight hours, particularly lunch-hour, when the presence of large numbers of onlookers gave rise to ugly incidents.

A large contingent of police arrived and kept order on the Tuesday, but on Wednesday, when another organization lined up below the Black Sash women in a multi-racial demonstration against the Bill, shocking scenes of violence ensued, and for some time the police seemed unable to control the crowd of some hundreds. The Black Sash women retreated with their flame towards the back of the steps, where they resumed their vigil, the target for a shower of

eggs, fish and fruit flung at them over the heads of the crowd. (The hooligans had passed a hat around for contributions to buy fish and eggs.) Order was restored, and for the rest of the afternoon crowds of jeering men stood in front of the women, hurling filthy abuse at them.

After this, it was felt that it would be irresponsible to continue to hold the vigil on the City Hall steps. Apart from concern about the safety of our women, our experience after last year's march had shown us that it was the innocent bystander, particularly the African, who was likely to be hurt in any disturbances that might take place. It was agreed that the vigil should cease at the City Hall at 11 a.m. the following day, but continue at various unspecified

*Continued overleaf*

## THE FLAME OF FREEDOM— (Contd.)

points in the city. At 11 a.m. the next day, therefore, a large group of Black Sash women surrounded the flame of freedom and as the last chimes of the Post Office clock died away, the flame was carried ceremoniously off the City Hall steps by Mrs. Sinclair.

The women then dispersed, and many of them took part later in the day in the mass Citizens' Protest March from the Scottish War Memorial to the Cenotaph. The numbers taking part in this march have been variously estimated, but as all reports agree that the column extended for about half a mile and the marchers walked seven or eight abreast, 5,000 seems a very conservative estimate.

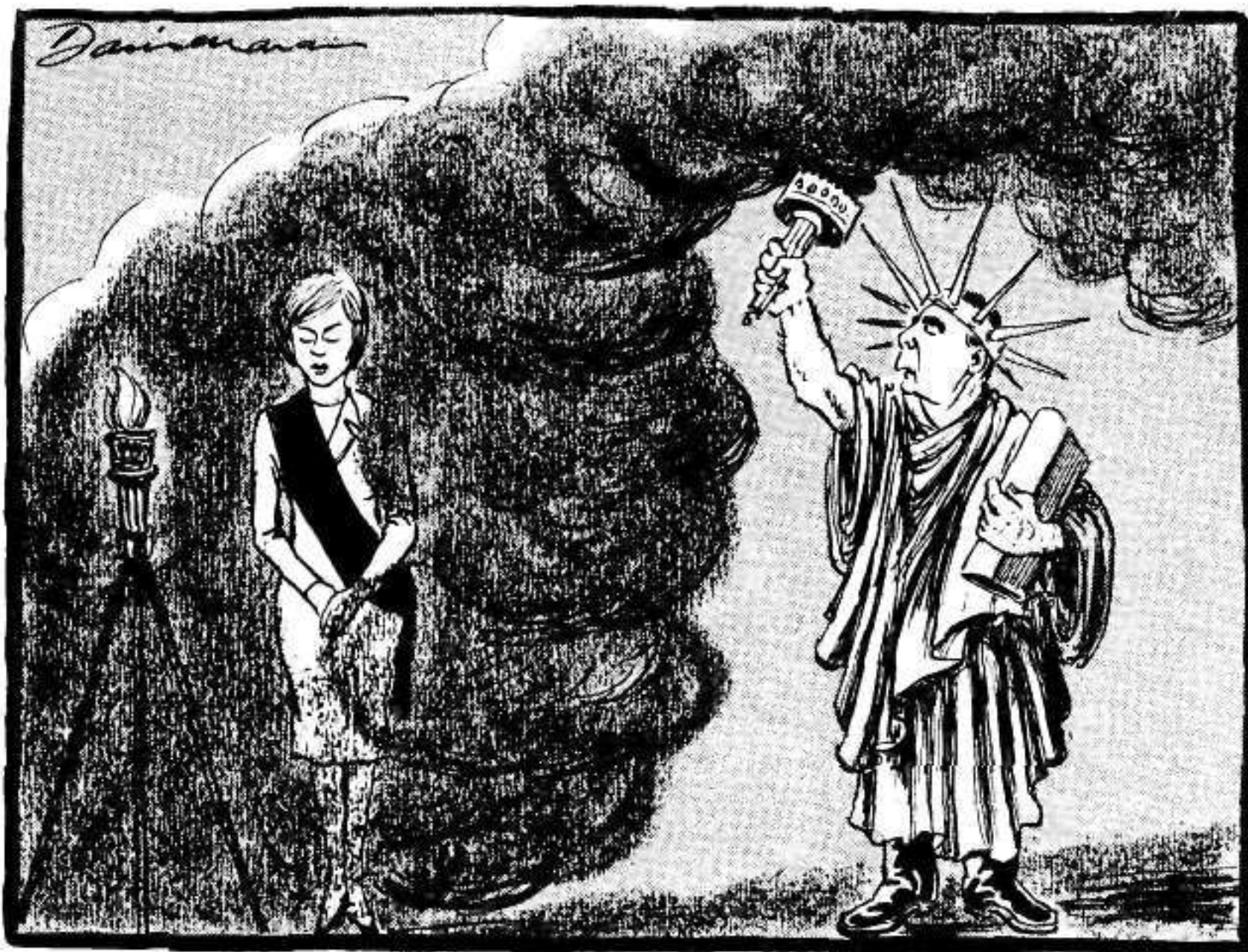
Disappointed, no doubt, at the non-appearance of the Black Sash on the City Hall steps, groups of our hooligan tormentors, armed with eggs and other produce, lined the route of the march, which had been widely advertised, and bespattered the marchers. Even at the Cenotaph, while a Minister of the Church was offering up a prayer for the Government and people of South Africa, these privileged White citizens of a Christian country continued to shout obscenities and hurl their missiles, even at the Minister himself. Sadder still was the spectacle of a

group of young office workers, obviously not of the hooligan class, who stood on the roof of a nearby building, posturing, jeering and cat-calling during the service, and while the National Anthem was being sung.

On Monday, 28th May, following the passing of the second reading of the Sabotage Bill and its virtual acceptance in principle, our Cape Town members doused their flame and ended their week-long vigil. In Johannesburg, where vigils had been held as arranged at different points in the city, our regular demonstrations came to an end at the Jan Smuts Airport on the Tuesday.

During our long vigil on the City Hall steps, we were greatly encouraged by the many kindnesses shown us. Nearby cafes sent us refreshments, passers-by offered assistance and protection. On the whole, we felt it advisable to persuade our husbands and male supporters to keep away, lest their presence precipitate trouble with the young thugs, but one young man constituted himself our bodyguard, and insisted on staying with us through all five nights, helping us tend the flame, plying us with coffee.

A great many non-Black Sash women begged to be allowed to stand with us, and proudly donned the Black Sash. A young woman news-



Vorster: "I keep telling you — I'll take over now!"

## THE FLAME OF FREEDOM (Contd.)

paper reporter took her turn to guard the flame, and afterwards wrote about "the experience she would never forget". Although the vigil was for *women only, many men stood beside us, silently registering their protest against the Bill, and signifying their support of the Black Sash.*

Many were the comments we overheard, some irritating, some amusing, some touching. Perhaps the most telling, the most uplifting, was the remark one man made to his little son: "Stand closer, my boy, and have a good look — for this is history!"

### Overheard

"Ag, pleeez, deddy, won't you take us to the Vigil? We want to chuck tomatoes at the Bleck Sesh girls!"

"Constable, arrest that man behind the lamp-post—he's got an egg in his hand!"

"I can't arrest a man because he has an egg in his hand—it might be his lunch!"

"Don't give up until you're Vorster, ladies!"

"The only sign of decency they've shown is to use fresh eggs!"

### SUNDAY NIGHT

Young man, having used all his ammunition:

"Come on, chaps! We've got to go to Church now!"

## Cigarette Lighter



## Why We Have Protested

ON the 12th May, the General Laws Amendment Bill, commonly known as the "Sabotage" Bill, was published, and for a day or two the country considered the implications of its drastic and far-reaching provisions. Then the protests began. In the weeks that have followed, protests have swelled; newspapermen, politicians, businessmen, churchmen, lawyers and laymen—all have combined to condemn the wide terms and definitions and the harsh penalties of this Bill, and have pointed out the dangers of placing comprehensive and arbitrary powers in the hands of one Minister and his unknown successors.

The Minister of Justice has claimed that this is a measure to preserve democracy, and that the principle of the Bill is to combat sabotage and curb Communism; and he has asked the country to accept his assurance that it will be used only against those who are guilty of these offences. Lawyers have pointed out, however, that many of the clauses of the Bill violate the Rule of Law, and that the definition of sabotage is so wide as to endanger persons who are anything but saboteurs in the real sense of the word. Also, the fact that the Suppression of Communism Act has already been used against declared anti-Communists, and the manner in which the Minister himself replied to the Second Reading debate on this Bill by decrying many of his critics and opponents as Communists or Communist-inspired, must detract from his assurance in this respect.

The Black Sash has repeatedly declared its opposition to the creed of Communism, and, as a law-abiding organization, it accepts that it is the duty of a responsible government to deal severely with any person proved guilty of sabotage or violence. Nevertheless, in our opinion this Bill constitutes a threat to fundamental democratic freedoms and principles, including one of the basic principles of parliamentary democracy: that all citizens have the right to oppose and criticize government policy, and to work for a change of government.

For these reasons, Black Sash Headquarters in Johannesburg decided to hold a continuous vigil to demonstrate total rejection of this Bill, and Regions and Branches in other parts of the country followed suit.

"I'll be judge, I'll be jury",

Said cunning old Fury,

"I'll try the whole case

And condemn you to death!"

LEWIS CARROLL—"Alice in Wonderland"