

BOOKS:

Beyond Cleaver

A Review by Suzannah Lessard

Soledad Brother

The Prison Letters of George Jackson

Coward-McCann \$5.95

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George Jackson is a product of that most prolific breeding ground of black revolutionaries, the California prison system. Ten years ago, when he was 18, he was accused of conspiracy in the armed robbery of \$70 from a gas station. His lawyer told him that since he had a record—the usual ghetto youth's history of petty crime—nothing could be done and, though there was evidence of his innocence, he should plead guilty and throw himself upon the mercy of the court. He did, and received a sentence of one year to life. He has served 10 years now. Last February he came into the public eye when he was accused, with two other black inmates, Fleeta Drumgo and John Cluchette, of the murder of a Soledad guard.

He emerges from obscurity transformed from a precipitous, despair-ridden adolescent into a man of knowledge, passion, and control, into a demon energy of absolute commitment, into a terrible prophet. His recently published letters of the last six years are his testament. They range in tone from icy

clarity to anxious confusion, from love to anger, from intractable bitterness to generous and compelling warmth, documenting both the processes of the revolutionary mind and the full spectrum of feelings and awareness of a sensitive intelligent man who has been driven into a revolutionary position. Whatever the fallacies of the militant black movement, whatever the outcome, it is clear from Jackson's letters that in pitting himself against a society which branded him as a condemned man from the start he found salvation; that his strength, his refinement, even his capacity for growth are all the result of his adoption of, in his word, "antithesis."

Jackson went to prison in 1960: "I fell into this garbage can in a narcotic stupor and they just closed the lid for good." At that point the rigorous transformation began. Early on he met the new breed of black cons, the militants and the Muslims. He began to read—history, economics, Mao, Malcolm X, and later Cleaver. Though he did not become a Muslim (he didn't believe in prayer or submission) he learned from their code of pride and discipline, turned his powers, squandered up to now, to a

Suzannah Lessard is an assistant editor of The Washington Monthly.

purpose and quickly became a leader in his own right. A strict regimen of exercise—from three to five hours a day—and study consumed his time: he learned to manage on three hours of sleep a night. He tackled Swahili, Arabic, and Chinese. And he thought. He became a formidable physical specimen—six feet two inches and 215 pounds of solid muscle—and developed a tough spiritual fiber, became a man who did not lower his eyes, did not even pretend to inferiority or guilt, the symptoms of rehabilitation. The new George Jackson became a legend in the California prison system—a black convict who refused to grovel. All these things got him into worse trouble than he had ever incurred on the streets.

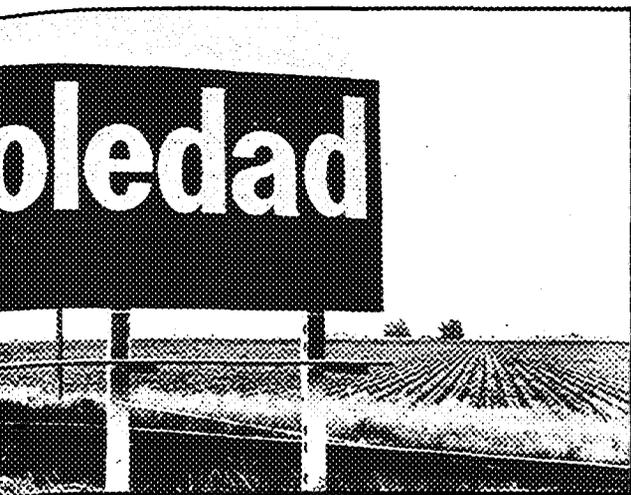
Something should be said here about the institutions where Jackson served his time. Forty per cent of the inmates in the California prison system are black (although black people comprise only 13 per cent of the population). According to the testimony of countless inmates, and an official report* compiled by Senator Mervyn Dymally—chairman of the California Senate Democratic Caucus, who made a personal investigation at Soledad—the prison guards, greatly outnumbered by the inmates, divert hostility from themselves by encouraging the racist tendencies of the white and Chicano inmates and playing them off against the blacks. For instance, according to the report, “cell doors in the maximum security wing are intentionally opened by guards to allow interracial fights at three-to-one and six-to-one ratios, and guards smuggled weapons to favored inmates on that wing.” Another custom is, in Jackson’s words (and corroborated by the report), for “the more perverse. . . [to] save their excretions to throw in our cells as they walk back and forth to their shower and exercise. The

**Black Caucus Report*, “Treatment of Prisoners at California Training Facility at Soledad Central,” presented to the California Legislature in July 1970. A copy can be obtained by writing to Senator Dymally, Legislative Office, State Capitol, Sacramento, California 95814.



shit literally flies at us almost every day.” Or for officials to assign particularly vicious racists to serve meals to the blacks, and in these instances the food comes mixed with cleanser powder, ground glass, feces, spit, and urine.

As Jackson has pointed out (in an open letter published in the *Village Voice*, September 17, 1970), every guard knows he is one of 40 men who must control thousands against their will. He knows that a large number of the inmates are probably schizophrenic-reaction cases and has been told that schizophrenics react principally to the uniform, not to the individual, so that, whatever his own policies may be, he incurs the hatred inspired by the behavior of all the other guards: “Although he can bring into play a superior arm, any one of the thousands streaming past him could be armed with a crude but lethal knife, club, zipgun with silencer . . . Although he controls the greater violence he can never relax. . . Fear begets fear. And we come out with two groups of schizoids, one guarding the other.” By conspiring with the white against the blacks, the guards develop a more flexible relationship with the whites, which enables them to exercise control by other means than sheer terror. But with the black inmate the guard has no bond. There is no leeway in their relationship; it is enmity from start to finish, the one containing the other



Camilla Smith

through force alone, with no exit for either. Any sign of recalcitrance, any break in the submissive demeanor therefore is terrifying to the guards and must be crushed instantly. Inevitably there are blacks who refuse to submit, and so inevitably the guards must be prepared to use ultimate tactics. If it comes to the crunch, every black inmate knows that all a guard need do is incite a white con to attack him, and then the guard, whose duty it is to break up fights, will have an excuse to shoot the black man through the heart.

Jackson looked the guards in the eye, failed to reassure them that he was afraid, and refused to be manipulated—refused to get involved in the brawls and set-ups out of which the guards made such capital. He stayed alive by exercising extreme and unwavering caution: he never allowed anyone to approach him unless he could see both their hands, avoided open spaces, and when he couldn't avoid them, kept close to cover in case the guards should try to use their guns. Unable to lure him into the customary traps, the guards could exercise control only by putting him in solitary—he spent seven of the ten years in isolation—and by seeing that year after year he was denied parole. (Parole boards make judgments largely on the basis of conduct reports filed by the guards without any supervision.) “No black will leave this place if he has any

violence in his past until they see that thing in his eyes—you can't fake it—resignation, defeat—it must be clearly stamped across his face.” Strangely enough, year after year, he continued to hope.

There are many aspects of Jackson's letters which explain his position and express the depth of feeling from which it springs, but his letters to his parents, particularly to his father, reveal especially vividly why he evolved this way and why he persisted in his behavior, why he could not even feign guilt and defeat in order to strengthen his chances of getting out. He had rejected entirely the politic submissiveness of his father, because he knew it was that very policy and the state of mind it engendered which allowed a system of racial oppression like that at Soledad to persist. Black acquiescence was, he knew, a major obstacle in the way of black liberation.

Those letters encapsulate the struggle between two generations of black Americans—those who would cast their lot with the system despite its abuses and the spiritual cost, and those who find the black role in the society intolerable—worse than imprisonment, worse than death. It is clear from the letters that Jackson's parents resisted any suggestion that they had been treated unjustly or that their life had not been rewarding, and they communicated to him their fundamental assumption that George continued to be punished because he continued to do wrong. The son retaliates with patience and exasperation, careful argument and bitter outburst. Cruelly he reminds his father of the dark, garbage-strewn alley they lived on in Chicago, of the labor his wife had to endure—“all of us hungry, if not for food—the other things that make life bearable”—and asks him where is the “good life” and the freedom he is always talking about: “I know you have never been free. . . . How do you think I felt when I saw you look around and see your best efforts go for nothing—nothing. I can count the times on my

hands you managed to work up a smile.”

Implicit in the struggle of the militant son with the submissive father is an indictment, a sense of betrayal, of having been failed by the parent, and occasionally over the years George lashes out in bitter anger. After his father has written the authorities that his son is “bent on self destruction”—a letter which the officials triumphantly showed George and used as an excuse to put him in a cell with the lock welded closed—he calls the father an Uncle Tom outright: “All my life you have betrayed me. . . . I will never forgive you. . . . never trust you again. . . . Father against son, and brother against brother. This is truly detestable. You are a sick man.” To a friend he writes: “You see some one failed before me, trembled and failed, my father, his father, leaving Campbell (the judge at the pretrial hearing in the murder case) in a position to rule me out.”

The tug of war between Jackson and his parents must be one that is going on all over the country—wherever there is a Black Panther Party, wherever black militancy has taken root. No doubt many just cut themselves off from their parents, and many more probably don’t even have a father with whom to contend. But there is something classic about the struggle. It has implications far beyond these two individuals, and something necessary about it, too, for George persists after raging at his father, persists after telling his mother he has nothing more to say to her, begging them both, after his most vituperative outburst, for their sanction. “The same obligation you felt towards us I feel towards History” he wrote to his father. “I must follow my call. It is of great importance to me that you understand this and give me your blessings. I don’t care about anybody else. I don’t feel I must explain myself or be understood by anyone else on earth.” It is a relationship based on conflict: loyalty to the very person you feel is your worst traitor, love for the embodiment of your worst enemy; the son instructing the father, berating him

for not having instructed him, hating the father for releasing him into a vicious world without warning, bending all his strength towards redeeming the father from his condition. At the bottom the conflict is reduced to unanswerable anguish: “What is it that really destroyed my father’s comfort, that doomed his entire generation to a life without content? What is it that has been working against my generation from the day we were born through every day to this one?”

Robert Lester Jackson exists in his son’s letters only as a ghost without the power to reply, but he becomes vivid nevertheless, a weary downcast figure, worried, but like his son persistent in their relationship, writing back despite his fear of George’s insistent demands, despite the rebukes, driving long nights from Los Angeles to visit.

Georgia, Jackson’s mother, failed her son during the long years until the murder charge in much the same way as his father did. But she comes through not nearly as inadequate—perhaps because her son demanded less of her, perhaps because the role of the black woman is less debilitating than that of the male. It’s in Robert Jackson anyway that one gets a fleeting but shocking glimpse of what has driven the younger blacks to

Answers to October Political Puzzle:

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| O | O | S | R | V | S | E | O | | | | | | |
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rage—his weakness, his acquiescence, his worthiness cast away without a murmur on a life of slavish toil for which he received little more than abuse.

There is another recurring conflict in the letters—between Jackson’s cerebral approach to the situation and his irrepressible emotional response. Early on he perceives that his fate had not been determined by his bad luck, by his personal disposition, but has been the consequence of a general condition—a crucial step towards a revolutionary position. It follows from this realization that the individual ego must be subjugated to the cause of changing the condition, and through the years he develops a frightening objectivity about himself, as though he is perfecting an instrument. Out of this comes the cold, perfected resolution, unnegotiable because the subject has written off his personal self, including his life. His goals are paradoxical: to be saint-like in his self-abnegating austerity and diabolical in his ruthless determination, at once supremely arrogant and perfectly humble, to make himself into superman, yet consider himself perfectly expendable.

But on the other hand is Jackson’s regard for the people close to him: “This significant feature. . .redeems the revolution, alters the sanguine coloring of war and gives revolution its love motive.” Jackson’s affection for his parents, siblings, and friends—some white—comes through in his most bitter invective, a steady ground swell. He cannot repress it. It attaches itself to the tiniest concern and the largest. He wants more than anything to take care of his parents, to comfort them. Jonathan on the other hand, his younger brother by 11 years, he tries to instruct, tries to give what his father failed to give him. He calls him his “older brother,” his “free self,” his “manchild.” As the years go by, these relationships become more intense rather than flagging, despite the constricting conditions under which they progress. They save George, they keep him human, and at the same time they are his greatest stimulus. They are utterly un-

ideological, but they illumine what lies at the core of his political direction.

There is an abrupt change in the quality of Jackson’s letters after he was charged with murder. It’s not that he becomes harder or more extreme, but rather that he becomes a much larger version of himself. As a white liberal you can deal with the old Jackson; with the the new man there just isn’t anything to say. He draws you in like a whirlpool and you either go or you don’t.

This is how the murder charge came about.* O-wing is a maximum security section. For two months prior to the opening of a new O-wing exercise yard, the inmates of the wing had not been allowed to exercise together because of extreme racial tension. But on January 13, 1970, the day the yard opened, a group of 17 inmates, seven black and 10 virulently anti-black (there is some discrepancy about the numbers, but the ratio is roughly accurate by all accounts) were skin-searched for weapons and let out into the yard. A guard who was known as an expert marksman was stationed in a tower about 13 feet above the yard with a loaded carbine.

Predictably, someone yelled a racial slur (it is unclear from which side). Nolen, a black inmate, started toward the white side and a fist fight broke out involving about seven inmates. A whistle blew and then four shots were fired, about seven seconds apart. The shots hit Nolen first, then Cleveland Edwards and Alvin Miller (both black), and then a white inmate, Harris, who was shot in the groin as he ran away from the scuffle. Then the shooting stopped.

Miller was dead, but at least one of the other two blacks was still moving. A black inmate attempted to take one of the wounded to the hospital, but every time he leaned down to pick him up the guard shook his rifle. The hospital was right next to the yard, but about 15 min-

*This version of the story is based on the testimony of black witnesses. However, a fairly complicated series of events are involved, and there is very little variation in the accounts.

utes passed until permission was given to carry the wounded inside. By that time both men had bled to death.

Before the shooting, the white guards and inmates had regularly taunted the blacks about the opening of the yard. At the time of the shooting, several white guards who had no real business there gathered on the catwalk. Furthermore, shortly before the opening of the yard, Miller wrote his mother a farewell letter and Nolen told his father that he expected to die soon. In other words, the shooting did not come as a complete surprise.

Four days later the District Attorney announced over the prison radio that a Grand Jury (no black inmates were allowed to testify at the hearing) had found the guard's action to be "justifiable homicide." One-half hour later a white guard, not the one who had done the shooting, was found dead in Y-wing, George Jackson's wing. Immediately everyone in the wing was put in solitary, and an investigation ensued. At the end of a week George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Cluchette were singled out and kept in isolation for about a month, and at the end of that time they were formally accused.

They are, in my view, unlikely suspects. John Cluchette had a parole date for April. Fleeta Drumgo, according to those who know him, is a delicate, gentle person, psychologically incapable of the brutal act. And Jackson, the most militant of the three, seems for that very reason the least likely. I think it is clear from his letters that his ambitions are much too serious for him to have shot his bolt on this limited and fairly useless act of revenge—he is interested in change, not vengeance—that he still hoped to get out of prison in the near future, that he knew the guards were not the real villains, but sick men almost as much the victims of circumstances as the inmates. Finally, because they have technical "life" sentences under California law, both Cluchette and Jackson face mandatory death sentences if they are convicted.

During the period before the formal charge was made, the three were not allowed to communicate with their families and appeared in court twice without counsel and without their families' knowledge. Finally John Cluchette managed to get a note smuggled out to his mother, who managed to get in touch with Fay Stender, a lawyer, and she was present with John Thorne, Richard Silvers, and Floyd Silliman at the next hearing. They remain defense counsel for the Soledad brothers.

It has not, however, been smooth going since then. Before counsel had been obtained, a list of witnesses which John Cluchette had prepared to give to his mother was confiscated from him on the grounds that he could give written material only to an attorney—he didn't have one at the time. The list was later returned but the inmates on it had been transferred, and the prison for a long time refused to divulge where they had been transferred to. When the defense finally, by court order, was given the locations of the witnesses and went to interview them, they found them very reluctant to talk—it seemed obvious that they had been put under pressure. The defense was also not allowed to inspect the scene of the crime until an additional staircase had been built, making it very difficult to evaluate the testimony of eye witnesses. And finally, the defense was denied access to prison records, particularly those relating to the shooting of January 13th, although the prosecution had full access. Nor were they allowed to see the transcript of the preliminary hearing at which the accused had been indicted. The prosecution reasoned that such information in the hands of the defense might lead to retaliation against the inmates who had testified, and the judge sustained the objection. The transcript has since been procured and it turns out that the testimony of the witnesses is seriously conflicting, particularly with regard to who performed what function in the killing of the white guard.

Two small victories have been

achieved: one when the defense demanded that Judge Campbell remove himself from the case because of blatant racial prejudice, and another when they asked for a change of venue to San Francisco. The latter was cancelled out, however, when on August 7 Jonathan Jackson attempted to kidnap a San Rafael judge.*

The *prosecution* then moved for a change of venue to San Diego on the grounds that the incident gave the defendants such bad publicity that a fair trial would be impossible. The defense asked instead for a continuance, contending that the San Rafael courthouse affair had received national front-page coverage and that effects would be just as strong in San Diego as in San Francisco, but they lost. It is one of the few times the prosecution has ever moved for a change of venue, but it's clear why they did: sympathy for the Soledad brothers is concentrated in San Francisco. San Diego, on the other hand, was described by Kevin Phillips in *The Emerging Republican Majority* as another Mississippi.

As though to preserve his identity against the threat of immediate annihilation, Jackson writes from the midst of this fresh onslaught more powerfully, and more humanly, than ever—as though to protect his sense of self in a treacherous and ambiguous situation he has had to redefine himself to match the

*On August 7, 17-year-old Jonathan Jackson entered the San Rafael courthouse where James McClain, a black prisoner, was being tried for assaulting a guard. He took a collapsible carbine out from under his jacket and said, "This is it, everybody line up." He then took some small guns from a flight bag and threw them to McClain and two black convict witnesses, Ruckell Magee and Bill Christmas. They took the D.A., three women jurors, and Judge Haley hostage, taping a sawed-off shotgun to the judge so that it pointed at his neck. Jonathan said, "Free the Soledad brothers before 12:30," and they left. Meanwhile a bailiff had slipped out to a phone. As they tried to drive away in a van they met a barrage of fire. Judge Haley was killed by the sawed-off shotgun, and Christmas, Jackson, and Magee were shot dead.

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NIXON AGONISTES

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odds. The letters dating from February to August 9, 1970 (about a third of the book) to Fay Stender, Angela Davis, and several other unidentified friends are without a doubt the cream of the collection and establish Jackson's superiority as writer-spokesman. There is a certain amount of Cleaver-like rhetoric in these which does not appear in the earlier letters, but while he is rather better than Cleaver at rhetoric—which I find boring in any event—it is the personal passages, those where he speaks for himself, which are most compelling and which express a whole new dimension of the black dilemma which has not until now been articulated. Jackson picks up where Cleaver left off.

Soul on Ice is essentially a bloody good rant, enlightening more in its shock value—the cultural turnabout and iconoclasm—than in its depth of analysis or revelation. Cleaver's energetic negativism about the society and his pounding unqualified assertion of the black perspective make for a basically political book, a credo which is by nature limited and exclusive. Jackson is inclusive. He goes way beyond the circumstances—a black man persecuted by a white system—to the broader human predicament. Where Cleaver throws you back on yourself because you are not black, not oppressed—and that has its value—Jackson draws you in through your shared humanity—and that, I think, has a far greater value. Cleaver gives you no time to breathe, drives you to the wall. Jackson breathes you in.

His range is extraordinary: hard-wrought sentences of anger, long unfolding sentences, short dense ones; the anxiety, the bewilderment, the knotty struggle with self, and the sad, reflective moments where everything else is suspended, when the long years of suffering flood back upon him, swamping his forward motion. "Last week, when I mentioned that I felt older than I am, I wasn't referring to my knees or elbows, back or hands, nor did I mean that I felt in any way wise. I feel old, Joan, in the sense that a paper target is old after

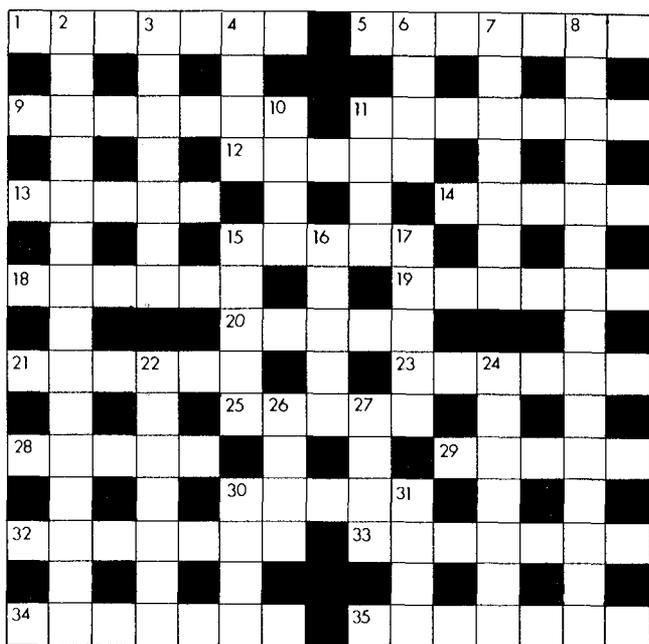
about an hour on the Police Academy practice range. Used."

Because he is so intelligent, so personally sympathetic, and such a good writer, it is tempting to see Jackson as an extraordinary person who through flukes of fate has suffered incredible injustice but who, once free, will be just that—a wonderful talented person. It is tempting to try to make him acceptable. But though there is a minimum of fire and brimstone in his letters, one cannot mistake his message: he is in no way, to society as it now stands, acceptable, because he in no way accepts it. He does not see his fate as a fluke but as the inevitable consequence of a society committed to the violent oppression of an entire class against which non-violent resistance is useless. To Angela Davis he writes: "The shit is starting to thicken. Six in Georgia, two in Jackson, Hard Hats, counter-demonstrations, much like Germany in the thirties. That thing in Georgia and the one in Jackson were like turkey shoots. We die altogether too easy." And of the raid on the Chicago Panther headquarters during which Hampton and Clark were killed: "Do you have any idea what would have happened to those 15 pigs if they had run into as many Viet Cong as there were Panthers in that building?"

The situation has become not unlike the pernicious cycle which exists in the prisons, violence in response to violence, a progression without end. The particular chain reaction Jackson has become involved in is typical: first the shooting of the three inmates in the prison yard and the court's sanction triggering the murder of the white guard; the accusation of Jackson and the unjust treatment of him as an accused man, spurring Jonathan's attempt to kidnap the judge; the resulting death of Jonathan and his two colleagues, and of the judge as well; and in response to that the arrest of Angela Davis. The progression has hardly come to an end. The next stage is, of course, the trial of George Jackson, John Cluchette, and Fleeta Drumgo. The prospects look very grim. ■

The Political Puzzle

by John Barclay



Across

1. Ike and Abe had one at Gettysburg. (7)
5. Taylor, Anderson, and Kramer, for example. (7)
9. Watch P. caress in close situations. (7)
11. This place is remarkable. (7)
12. Pests in front of Lincoln Memorial. (5)
13. Western and Soviet bond. (5)
14. Put you in the police for takeovers. (5)
15. Why should cherubs not be in crowd. (5)
18. A mature conqueror. (6)
19. Gets bids from no icy officers. (6)

20. This route goes to the limits. (5)
21. How this country opts to select leaders. (6)
23. Rotten way to put missing P in cites back. (6)
25. Organized way to steal election. (5)
28. I would make Alven's act forgivable. (5)
29. Pretend? Nope, this is real movement. (5)
30. You won't take off for the blue? Not I either. (5)
32. Key part of Southeast scene. (7)
33. Sea-sent diets. (7)
34. JFK follower demands little. (4,3)
35. Does this also mean poison-pen letter? (7)

Down

2. Big 1970 event disproves ZPG. (9,6)
3. Way to get rid of our date. (4,3)
4. Uses court to win point. (4)
6. Running these laps would exhaust anyone. (4)
7. Early feature of campaign or game. (4,3)
8. After 2 down, caught motor in paper net. (15)
10. Leader in cinematic arts. (4)
11. Pass time in resorts. (4)
15. Angry alone, helpful when red or blue. (5)
16. High frequency liberal. (5)
17. Stick with this to far shore, we are told. (5)
22. His support was stronger than Carswell's. (7)
24. Does it relate? If so, repaint. (7)
26. Descriptive tale of Mr. Apley. (4)
27. Politicians never forget old home site. (4)
30. A choice is better, we heard more than once. (4)
31. Where Nero got rid of his wife. (4)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to this month's puzzle will appear in the next issue. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 60.