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JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S
DEATH IN AN OFFICE (1928)

Leroy Robinson

Death in an Office was the first complete version of John Howard Lawson's Success Story, produced by the Group Theatre at the Maxine Elliott Theatre for 121 performances beginning September 26, 1932.

The purpose of this article is to provide historians of American drama the first detailed description of Death in an Office, based on a xerox copy of the Library of Congress manuscript copyrighted in 1928.

This description will enable historians of American drama to make critical comparisons between Lawson's early and late versions of his most successful play.* Further, historians of American drama will now be able to place Success Story (essentially similar to Death in an Office in spirit and form, though different in many details) in the context of Lawson's playwriting in the 1920's. This description will also enable drama historians more fully to relate Lawson's work to his life.

DEATH IN AN OFFICE

All the action of Death in an Office takes place between 1920 and 19281) in a mahogany-furnished skyscraper office whose three tall windows look out on blue sky.2) There are five characters: 3)

Sol Ginsburg, heavy, handsome, tough, uncouth, very sombre, bristles with East Side mannerisms he tries to cover up with unsatisfactory boorish seriousness.* Raymond Merritt, big, blond, good-natured, vigorous, with a square jaw and sharp eyes, represents the best qualities of Nordic charm.
Sarah Glassman, dark, handsome in an Oriental way, with sleek black hair and

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* Success Story was novelized as a serialization (New York Daily Mirror, November 1932) and "fictionized" (Screen Romances, April 1934). It was produced in London twice in early 1934, in Boston (The Majestic Theatre) in late 1934, and in Dallas (The Little Theatre) in January 1933. Lawson wrote its screenplay for RKO, Success at Any Price, shown in New York beginning May 1934. Success Story was revived in late 1980 and early 1981 by the Jewish Repertory Theatre, New York.
olive skin, is full-bodied and vigorous.\(^5\) Agnes Carter, beautiful, blonde, slightly artificial, expensively and charmingly dressed, has a creamy complexion, large melting eyes and a hard mouth. Dinah McCabe, a thin girl with a peaked face, thoroughly unprepossessing, tries to make up in willingness what she lacks in good sense.\(^6\)

* 

In 1920 from offstage comes the unintelligible murmur of male voices. Secretary Sarah Glassman explains to clerk Dinah McCabe: the men in the conference room, always fighting about money, are the big guns, the ones behind.\(^7\) A strong rich voice rings out: Raymond Merritt wants his Board of Directors to expand his public relations company.\(^8\)

Merritt enters. Those apes! He wants to talk to Sarah, someone human. He's worried: does he have business ability or does he just put over his personality? Sarah thinks pretty near everything is personality salesmanship.\(^9\)

Merritt, going out for a cocktail, orders clerk Sol Ginsburg to sort out the mess on his desk but not to snoop through the drawers.\(^10\) He's going to give Sol a big chance someday. Sol asks: "How about today?" Merritt adds: Jews are a funny lot.

To Sarah, Sol calls Merritt a high-hat who wheels Sol along like a feeble-minded infant. Sol's crabbing gives a headache to Sarah, who wangled him into his job: did he wanna go on being a waiter in that Kosher quick lunch?\(^11\) Sol says it's with his own kind at least.

Sol complains Merritt does little to earn his high salary. Sarah angrily praises Merritt's business ability. Sol says: "Go on, sleep with him!" Sarah asks why Sol likes to hurt her. She couldn't live without him. She'd die with him.

Sure, Sol remembers how they talked in her father's undertaking parlor -- a fine place for love -- where her father's going broke cause he keeps the old Jewish laws an' won't put No nails in coffins.\(^12\) Maybe the old man's right and they're wrong. Their work drags them apart. Sol's been waiting for a break. He's troubled workin' in a money-grubbin' God-forsaken Hell-hole watchin' other people rake it in.
Sarah's worried less about their money than their love. Sol's stickin' pins in her, all over. Sol says she's too soft. Sarah says he's soft too and "emotional as a woman."

Sure, Sol says, "Merritt'll undress you an' take you to bed, maybe he'll amuse himself." (Sarah calls Sol a vulgar beast.) Sol hates Merritt in the guts. No reason, the race maybe. Sometime Sol'll get his mitts on him an' when he comes up for air he'll be all bloody an' then Sol'll bust up the whole place, cause it smells a' money. Break up these little partitions that shut off one fool from another. The Hell with em. Yours for the Revolution.

Sarah knows there's crazy social injustice, but they should keep their sense of values and rise above the smelly brothel they work in: "Your spirit, Sol, your spirit."

Sol remembers his father's spirit. "Him an' me used to sit in his newstand under the El at Houston Street till his spirit went up one winter night an' he froze dead under my eyes." Sol exaggerates? Anyway the old man died an' he caught the cold in the stand, didn't he? A lot a' gab about social injustice won't bring the old boy back. Sol's sick a' the gab, sick of meetings and sour-faced people. He wishes he had the nerve to be a gunman like his brother. "All my life I'll be fillin' some call without knowin' what or why."

Sol then says Sarah's a fine speaker at meetings but in the office she licks Merritt's boots. "Why don't you ask him for money for the Party? You and me ain't even workers. We're white-collar slaves in a business built out a' smart lies."

Sarah. You make me sick. Forget yourself an' worry about other things. How can you be so small, snivel about your little twentytwo dollars when miners are starvin' in Pennsylvania, when Russia is standin' up against the world?

Sol. I'm for 'em but where's my payday?

Sarah. That's cheap. I'm ready to give my life to the movement.

Sol. You're the cheap one. You get such a kick out a' your own ravin' you don't care for facts. I can't help seein' this revolution ain't gonna happen this week. I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't happen all summer.

Sarah thinks Sol "something like a poet" and suggests he look further
ahead. Sol compares time to hot sand: "That's the years I see, walkin' with blistered feet over them hot years, nuthin' but the sky ahead, till the pearly gates open in the sky, an' there isn't anymore."

Sol says someday he'll kill someone in that office, where he and Sarah are disliked because they're Jewish.

Merritt sends Sol on an errand. Merritt appraises Sarah: "I begin to value you highly." When he gets the value settled, he'll make his offer. Sarah says he'll have to bid pretty high.

Merritt startles Sarah with sudden intimate seriousness: What does she want in life? "Everybody's got some key they're after. That's the secret of advertising." He himself is pretty much at sea. If Sarah knew him, she'd like him, feel sorry for him. "Funny, the way we get caught together here way up in a tower, a lot of queer fish in the money net."

Merritt invites Sarah for cocktails, an invitation she was expecting but declines, for reasons. . .

Merritt. . . reasons don't count in these matters. I might be able to help you, make you happy a little.
Sarah. That's Christian of you, but I'm Jewish and miserable.
Merritt. I don't mind your being Jewish.
Sarah. Why on earth should you? But I do. I'm proud of it. I wouldn't get mixed up with a goy if he'd make me a queen.
Merritt. . . religious?
Sarah. No. You don't get me at all. It's not just race. . . It's kind of a medical fact. In the blood. I can't tell you what I mean.13)

Merritt apologizes for twisting human beings just a little. Sarah says his behavior is habitual: "You don't paw a girl, but you sure want to see the wheels work. Her soul, I mean."14) Merritt says now Sarah's sorry for him that's the beginning of something.

Merritt's girlfriend Agnes Oarter enters. Agnes, much too nice to be subtle, wants money. Merritt's got it, she doesn't. They're darling pals: she's fond of him, he's crazy about her.

Agnes suggests she'll squeal: "Suppose I sued you, wrote my story for the tabloids?" What's she so sore about? She's sore about money? She takes
Merritt's freely—that's what makes her so mad. Merritt points out she entered into their proper business arrangement with her eyes wide open. Agnes now wants marriage. Money is her chief consideration, but she might get to love him. Merritt says she doesn't have a soul. Neither does he. Agnes says that's why they're so well suited. Merritt says maybe he wants a soul. Agnes says talk about soul, her foot. He's just a nice good-natured pig doing a big business in slops.

Back to work, Merritt complains: He pays an efficiency expert to make this a model concern but what's the use of having any system when people are such fools? His drawer looks like Broadway after a parade, and in clearing the desk Sol manhandled $20,000 worth of materials: "Why didn't you just steal that much money from my safe?" Merritt fires Sol.

Sarah says Merritt's missing a chance to keep a first class man dirt cheap: "If you should take him back now, he'd be tied to you for life." Merritt bets Sarah and Sol are having an affair. Sarah says she does not have affairs: "You probably think I'm queer."

Sol deviously apologizes for making a fool of himself. Merritt says to admit one's a fool is the beginning of wisdom. He notes Sol's bitterness: "Think the times are out of joint?" All Sol needs is self-confidence. Suppose Sol found himself in a congenial job where he could use his head and look to an assured future?

Sol says he's a radical. Merritt: "Good. So am I." Merritt is glad Sol's a member of the Communist Party; it shows a lot of sense. "But don't worry about dead issues." For when Sol's paycheck gets bigger he'll think of somethg else. "Get in the white-collar class, get looking up, then you'll get almost rich, and you'll think everything's a joke."

Merritt asks Sol's reaction to advertising copy: Glamour Cream, the medical skin food, put it on at night, it penetrates the cells of the skin, it works while you sleep. Sol reacts: What is it, bed-bug powder? Most of the firm's copy is rotten. If Sol couldn't do better he'd hop out the window. Merritt tells Sol to write advertising copy for a gland cream that turns old woman into nymphs. Merritt says Sol, who uses words easy and fools himself with them, can now for the first time in his life use words to fool other people. Sol envisions dollar bills thrown around him like confetti.
Sarah, obscurely disturbed, tells Sol how Merritt flirted with her. Sol grunts: "If you told me an hour ago I would have punched his head in." Now nuthin' matters but get your hands on the cash. Sarah says: "Stop talkin' like you was possessed with the Devil." Sol: "I'm sold to the Devil."

Sol. Lay off about love, it's a lot of baloney.
Sarah. What makes us hurt each other?
Sol. I do. Me. See? Cause I'm not sure I wanna be mixed up with you, see? You know how they are up to the working people's camp on vacation? Like rabbitts. Me, I'm different. I take what I want, see?
Sarah. Your pride is something terrible.
Sol. You don't know the half of it. So don't come crawlin' to me sayin' love. I make up my mind in my own way, when I want you I tell you, see?

Sol pounds on the desk and curses Sarah for preventing him from thinking.

When Agnes enters, Sol introduces himself as office boy, assistant floor manager and bootblack.

Sol had seen Agnes before. He smelt her—her perfume. Lavender water certainly gets his nanny. Agnes may not use Fievre d'Amour all over her, but Sol visualizes her in a hot bath of the stuff. Sol never seen a girl had that shine on her. He means Glamour, see! "It's the thing makes poets cuckoo!" (Agnes thinks Sol is cuckoo.)

Inspired by Agnes, Sol writes copy: Shine, sheen, sheer shock a'your body. You stepped out of a little pot a'gold. Out of a grecian urn that contains the vitality that made the Greeks famous. Any woman can make herself into Venus risen out of a sea of Amour. (Agnes calls Sol a poet.)

Agnes promises to make Merritt push Sol along: "God knows you're crazy enough to be terribly clever."

Sol insults Agnee: "You're a rotter, a parasite, a white slave an' blood sister to a street walker." Agnes says any man so sore must be easy to get. Sol keeps her perfumed handkerchief: "If I had a million aollars I'd buy you cause your skin's all gold."

Agnes speaks the last lines of Act I: "Wild, aren't you? Crazy. You'd take me and smash me with one hand. You'll be sorry you ever..."
called me names. I'll crack the whip!"16)

**

Act II of Death in an Office takes place three years later in 1923 in Merritt's mahogany-furnished office.

Merritt reminds Sarah that when they broke off their friendship--"Don't laugh!"--she said she'd be there when he needed her. Now he's in trouble. Sarah is nervous: "I can't. It made me too unhappy."

Merritt tells Sarah he is in danger of going on the rocks in business. In a difficult situation he turns to her--maybe that's love. Sarah is scornful: "You don't know the meaning of love."

Sarah can't be anything but bitter. She'd like to be nice. She's sorry about Merritt's money trouble. She knows how important money is to him. She too has learned: "Money's about the only thing that counts in a crazy world."

Merritt's been made to see something he never believed in--the soul. Sarah says he's losing his money, so he wants a soul. Her soul is all twisted and dark. It's not for him. She's given in to him like giving a child candy; you don't want it to cry. If Merritt plunged down that deep well of her soul he'd be frightened stiff. (Merritt says Sarah's mysterious.)

Sarah says any psychologist would size her up as a highly emotional woman, so high strung it almost crosses the boundary line of common sense. Love to her is something burns you up, kills you. Their relationship was just a vulgar office intrigue. She had to sleep with him to keep her job.

Merritt. So help me God, I love you.
Sarah. . You'd freeze up like a clam if I asked you to marry me.
Merritt. I've considered that from all angles.
Sarah. Marry a Jewish stenographer?
Merritt. (slowly) I think I would.
Sarah. . . I wouldn't have you for a million dollars.17) You're weak. You've asked me, and I laugh at you. That's nice for my pride. (tears in her eyes) I'm so afraid of being soft to you I bawl you out like a madwoman. I am I gness.
Merritt. . . not so loud.
Sarah. Don't touch me. I'll scream. Don't ever speak sweet to me again. The Jewish soul is a craving deep well. Keep out. It's not for you.

Merritt goes to a meeting of the board.
Sol walks up and down nervously, angry Merritt had not seen him before the meeting now going on.

Sol wonders what'd happen if he gave those old men a piece a' his mind. Merritt will get his! Maybe Sol will be Sarah's new boss. Will she take his dictation too with love and kisses? "Wouldn't I dream and scheme to get this whole shebang in my hands. You think it's so solid this show? Merritt's put a barrel of the firm's money into Glamour Cream and got into a tangle and lied to the Directors. An' Glamour Cream's gonna fail."

Sol, out to wreck the business or steal it, says Sarah's crazy to talk about common decency. Sarah suggests he's crazy: Where's the feller she used to know? Sol: "That kid is dead."

Sol's in the stock market and advises Sarah to put her savings in, and he'll triple 'em for her. She's not too good a communist to triple her savings, is she? (She's not.)

Sarah asks why Sol is so hostile to Merritt. Sol says his pride, see! "To mould people like I want...you...him...mouth to my own will!"

Sarah whispers: "Or destroy."

Sol, sitting at Merritt's desk, does not rise as Merritt enters white-faced and bitterly angry.

Merritt. You're a callow fool to think you can go over my head...Sneak around...Sent in a report intended to break me...You're through...I'll make a bargain with you...a chance to save your face. Go in and apologize for unethical conduct.

Sol. (laughing harshly) Don't make me laugh....I'm givin' them a gilt-edged proposition to reorganize the business and make a pile of money.

Merritt. You don't know the first thing about financing.

Sol. I s'pose you do, puttin' blocks a' cash out a' this concern into manufacturin' little jars a' pink suet.

Merritt. I admit the recent manipulation of Glamour Cream has been unethical.

Sol. Oh, shut up about ethics. You went into the market to recoup an' you played like a crazy man, an' you got the almighty nerve to talk to me about ethics...You're a bad gambler...I'm sittin' at your desk now and I like it fine. If I get this dump in my hands,
I'll take you on at $22 a week an' let you work up.

Merritt says Sol's lust for power is driving Sol crazy. Sol says it would if he didn't satisfy it. Merritt curses: "You damned ungrateful little kike!" Sol says just for that he'll own this dump. If he doesn't break Merritt with his brains, he'll do it with his hands.

Sol admits there's a good deal of gangster in his makeup, thank God. His brother One-Eyed Izzy got his on Second Avenue. The first bullet caught his good eye an' he staggered blind around the street. Nobody on the East Side will forget that blind gunman for the two minutes before he died. They buried him in a solid silver coffin with gold cupids. Twenty grand, with twelve thousand worth a' flowers. Izzy was a great guy. An' when Sol goes in an' talks to those Wall street eggs, Izzy's spirit will be right with him. When Sol gets through, Merritt'll be no better than that blind gunman dodging trucks.

Sol says Sarah's worried stiff 'cause her lover Merritt's getting his.

Sarah. (with passionate earnestness) "Whatever I've done, you made me do it You broke me down. Every word you said cut me like a knife. Some rotten thing in you had to destroy me, destroy your faith in me." Sarah never took money from Merritt. There was no happiness with him. Besides, it's over. She says Sol did that too. His will working through her. Nothing matters to Sol, she says, except he gets what he wants!

Sol. "Made love to you here, did he? Pat you an' kiss you all the time? You'll answer to God: the Lord thy God is a jealous God, an' he hates a goy just as much as I do." Sol is not a good Jew anymore. but he remembers that rot sometimes when it suits him. He's not a radical anymore, either. He's nothing but a man with an idea he'd do murder for.

Agnes enters. She notices the cruel way Sol disposes of Sarah: "You act like you thought you were God." Agnes shows a delicate diamond bracelet which she has just charged to Merritt. It's all off with Merritt, but is that any reason she shouldn't borrow from him? Sol damns her bitterly: "Are you a woman or a devil? You stick me with a knife right in the pride!"

Sol thinks Agnes is crazy over rhings, little jewels an' step-ins an'
knick-knacks an' perfumes an' chiffons.

Agnes nods: "That's all there is, there isn't anymore." What does Sol want to do—make an honest woman of her? She wants things but she don't get 'em. She's too honest. She's sick of working in shows. She's sick of being a nightclub hostess.

Sol admits Agnes has been pretty nice to him, but what's it got him? If he ever gets his arms around her, he'll never let her go.

Sol. "Wait. I'll give you stuff. Jewels the size of an egg. Stones that'll make you sweat to carry 'em on a hot day." He admits he's short on poetry, but he's long on love, if she'd give him a chance. (He shows a little soiled rumpled handkerchief—hers—which he has perfumed with Fievre d'Amour.)

Agnes says Sol chases her like a pet dog asking for something ("you're always howling for more"), but she's got nothing to give him. Herself? No, for Sol wants it too much. It's more fun for her to have him all in a fever wanting something that's just a joke to her. Everytime she steps out with him it's a free for all. "You Jews are so romantic you get my nerves all raw."

Sol. "Got no feelings? A mechanical doll, huh? Well, there's someway I'll wind you up and make you go." She's only a doll he's ready to steal, crawl, lie for. Not even a person but a thing. The thing he wants.

Agnes sniffles it's not healthy the way Sol goes on. He better lay off. Or he'll kill her. Or she him.

Sol says Agnes has a warm heart. She'd warm up to love. Him telling her sweet things would be like a fire warmin' her. Sweet fire. Try it. He'll make it legal: "I'll marry you an' buy you the world for a present. Make you wild with love. I can make poems about you. Weave words around you." Words are better than diamonds and gold.

Merritt calls Sol to meet the Board.

When Sarah enters, Agnes refers to all the big money deals going on in the board room all the time: "Yet any woman with a little sex appeal can turn it all upside down. It's all a fake." Sarah thinks Agnes is useless. All useless people ought to be shot.
Thanks. But I work just as hard as hard as you do for a living. Harder.


So do you. Get on to yourself. All this bunk about women in business makes me sick. They use the same old tricks. I mean you. You’re so smug. You think you’re good and I’m bad. It’s just the other way around.

(solemnly) I didn’t mean to be smug. I’m not good. I’m serious, that’s all.

I’m not, thank God.

Agnes walks around aimlessly: “Hell, I don’t know what to do.”
Sarah stares: “Neither do I.”

Agnes laughs. People oughtn’t to have feelings. She’s in a mess. “My whole future is in show business, and I’m no good at it.” There are always men. Too many. It’s too confusing. She doesn’t like men. She doesn’t like work. She’s not the kind can get comfort out of a real good book. Agnes begins to cry.

Sarah is called out to the board room.

Shortly, Merritt enters, trembling with rage: “Damn him. He’s dragged Sarah in there and made her talk. Personal stuff. What a beastly trick.”

Sarah enters, hanging her head. What the Devil did she answer the Board for? She had to. Somehow Sol made her do it.

Sol enters, dejected. (The Board threw him out.)

Merritt says Sol handled himself like a gangster. The Board won’t listen to a young Jew with nothing but his nerve in his pocket. “You ought to be thrashed.”

Sarah steps between them: “I’m Jewish too.” Merritt: “You’ve got all the good qualities. He’s got all the bad ones.” Merritt returns to the board room.

Sarah demands how Sol could do that to her. Stood her up like tearing the clothes off her. Sarah adds: “I’m as good as naked now. You buried a curse in me like a sword. You’re cursed too. You want money. You’ll get it To curse you like a sword in you.”
Sol says he did it for Agnes.

Merritt returns. He's received a vote of confidence. If Sol had stuck to facts he might have hurt Merrick, but dragging Sarah in was the act of a man with a crazy idea. But Sol's useful, and the Board told Merritt to handle him as he pleased. A man that fights Merritt like Sol does and will go on doing it tooth and nail is worth money to the firm.

Agnes thinks it sad cause Sol's all twisted an' funny an' wants to be a great man an' wants to be sweet. "Gee, I like Jews. They're all poets or sugar daddies or both."

Merritt doesn't like Jews: "They're violent and unreliable."

Agnes: "Yes, it makes me sick sometimes too, but you've got to hand it to them."

Merritt and Agnes agree they've both been scorched a little by Jewish passion. The strain of the Orient. Fascinating. Queer.

Agnes says she's ashamed of herself. Thank God, Merritt's so nice and simple. She offers to return the diamond bracelet and cancel the charge. Merritt pockets the bracelet. Agnes: "God, I want to be a white woman, but I just can't."

Merritt says she's as straight as a die, in her own way.

Agnes says she and Sol were just a tempest in a teapot, but she's sorry for him. She likes him. Anything's simple give and take with Merritt. But Sol's burning up. He asks her to marry him almost everyday. She doesn't know why she doesn't; it's been almost but not quite with her. There's a danger sign on Sol.

Merritt says Sol's not even a real go-getter. Too emotional. He's got a genius for money. But no control. The only person who's got any influence on Sol is Agnes. She should use it. Make something of him.

Agnes flares up. Don't talk about Sol. Don't talk about money. If she married Sol she'd probably get so sore at him in a week she'd come around and have an affair with Merritt. (Merritt: "I'd be ready." Agnes: "You've got a nasty mind.") Agnes says: "We're worse than them." At least Sol and Sarah are lousy with feeling.({22}

Merritt says he gave Sol the chance of a lifetime but Sol spit in his face.
Sol smiles benignly: if Merritt’s still sore, that’s good; they can still talk business. “If you were gonna be kind I’d punch your jaw. You been breaking me for three years with your kindness. I hate you an’ you hate me. Let’s get together and make money.”

Sol says even if Merritt doesn’t have Sol’s facility for forgetting insults there’s no harm in figgerin’ out a business proposition.

Merritt laughs: “Your brother’s friends, the gangsters.” Merritt says nothing doing: “You’re butting your head against a stone wall. You’re a smirking hypocrite. I don’t want East Side money. I don’t want you around.”

To Agnes, Sol says: “Oh, he’s too genteeel.”

To Merritt, Sol says: “You can’t get on without me. And if you turn me down, you lost your head.” Merritt tells Sol to go to the Devil and then he calls Sol a coward.

Sol’s face is a mask of subtle controlled feeling. “You call me that ’cause I bide my time. It’s you that’s afraid ’cause I beat at this game or die. I go to the Devil ’cause that’s what I choose. He’ll help me too ’cause I give him my heart’s blood for money... Two years, five years, ten years, this little shop of yours will be a drop in the ocean. I’ll just spit in the ocean an’ you won’t be anymore.”

Agnes guesses she’ll tag along with Sol because he’s so romantic and impossible.

Merritt sees how it is. He’ll accept Sol’s offer. “The two of yon, that’s different. There’s a balance in that.” As the two men discuss the amount of money Sol will provide in their partnership (Sol bargains for less and less), the act ends.

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Act III of Death in an Office takes place on a winter afternoon in 1928 in the same setting, now the office of Sol Ginsburg of Merritt and Ginsburg. There are a few changes: a richer carpet, a new desk of Louis XVth design, heavy curtains. Sol, now immaculately dressed, heavier, with considerable solidity, looks older than thirty-three.

Sol recalls to Agnes the first time he laid eyes on her: “You saw the future...”
Most everything Agnes tells him is true, but what she leaves out is truer. "If the whole facts about us were spoken, it's fit to make anyone jump out the window." But money keeps Sol from doing that. He always did like the idea of money. She may think he's tight, but he lets her spend a fortune.

Agnes says: "You can't stop me. You've got all you want and you worry about pennies. It's just to keep your mind off other things." At this, Sol shakes a finger: "There can never be community of feeling between a Jew and a Christian." Agnes is belligerent: "The soul's not important. You just cover your own lack: you're not a man...'cause all you've got is sensuality and greed and imagination." Agnes suggests Sol lacks courage "to throw one thing away to get the other."

Sol thinks Agnes is not a woman: "We're both halfways." Agnes says he can't blame that on the Jews -- "your everlasting race" --: "You're yourself." Sol says he's taking revenge for his people. Not on Agnes, because she doesn't have any feelings. But he expects to hurt her yet: "Christ is between us and the whole parade of his saints. A cold bunch like you. A man is a bundle of passions. I've got 'em. You're a cold proposition."

Agnes insists it's all Sol's fault. For a whole year after they were married, she tried to make a go of it. Sol seemed to want her to throw their marriage away: "It's been Hell, and you sit there rubbing your hands as if you liked it." Sol says he'll never let Agnes get away.

Agnes. Would you feel a lot better if I was dead?
Sol. No, I'd feel better if you were alive.
Agnes. I can't be.
Sol. You'd be a beautiful thing if you had a heart. But without it you'll never grow old, and that's a big comfort.
Agnes. I'll never be old in your eyes. In spite of it all, in your own mean way, you're crazy in love with me.
Sol. Crazy is right. Got to love something.
Agnes. Then, why won't you try, for the love of Pete.
Sol. Is he one of the fellows you meet afternoons?
Agnes. . . . twisting me all up in knots. Why do you create this mess?
Sol. 'Cause the love I got is a dream, see! 'Cause for all I know you, you're a strange woman.
Sol. Sure, I just after strange women and strange Gods. To you, I bring offerings of jewels and hatred... It's like the places in the ads— Deauville, Riviera, Lido. They're Heaven in your mind. But when
you get there they're a lot of noise and a dollar for a twenty-cent cigar. Hell, it's all dust.25)
A woman that buys articles without pricing them and cheats her marriage bed with practically strangers because it's a habit she contracted in youth. Call me a liar and I'll strike you down. I know what I know. I've got what I wanted. The only way I can console myself is that I haven't got it.

Agnes. Jewish riddles.
Sol. It's a joke to you
Agnes. Thank God, I've got a sense of humor.
Sol. You laugh at it all--me, Jews, money, politics. It's all one big circus to you.
Agnes. Yes, except we're in the ring. We're the act... Someone should crack the whip.
Sol. I wouldn't kill you, because I love you, but I might horsewhip you.

Agnes concludes that in five years this is the most affectionate conversation they've ever had.

Merritt enters and notices Agnes is wearing the diamond bracelet he gave back to her after her marriage to Sol. Agnes says the bracelet weighs like lead. She fears Sol knows about Merritt and her.

Sol gives Agnes $200 so that she can go shopping: "Do you ever think people sweat for this? Die for it?" Agnes feels humiliated at Sol's solemnity.

Sol says everyday all day Agnes shops from store to store. It's crazy. Sol is tired. Is he a horse? He goes after business like a thoroughbred because he's got to, for Agnes buys and buys and buys and never even asks the price. (Merritt: "It's all in the game.") Sol says Agnes buys stuff to fill the house to get a bigger house to hold more stuff.26) (Merritt: "That's America.")

Sol recalls his being a radical as a boy, a fool of a boy he murdered--"and he's waiting round every corner to murder me now." Sol wouldn't feel safe if he had enough money to control the world. "Hell, that wouldn't be enough. I'd want God's Heaven too."

Sol rejects the idea that his kind of pride is a disease: "Don't talk that psychoanalysis stuff. Good Lord, I know more than the doctors." Mental doctors undermine a man, telling him everything that's wrong in his head. Desires. Dreams. That destroys self-confidence. What we all need is reassurance.
Sol’s pride is not satisfied. He and Merritt are failures despite their high incomes. There’s dumber men than them pulling down ten times more. These days a million a year is nothing. Does Sol have a Napoleon streak? Yes, that little feller was like Sol.

Sol proposes a business scheme “looks like a million.” Count Merritt out; Merritt has no imagination. Sol agrees he is crazy: “Even if I lie down on a piece of toast and tell you I’m a poached egg, my money mind keeps on going! When I get violent, put me in a straitjacket.”

Sol has been studying aeroplane stocks. The big advertising field of the future is in the aeronautical industry. Cash in on it. Form a bureau. Call it research, industrial propaganda. It will cost a fortune but when the time comes he and Merritt will be masters of promotion in that field.

Merritt argues with Sol: “We’re on a paying basis. Branches snapping into line. And you want to open up a new field on three times our present scale.” Sol threatens to force Merritt out of the company. Sol nurses a secret unreasonable grievance against Merritt, who is too smooth and too chicken-livered. God, how Sol hates a gentleman! Merritt’s sorry for Sol, clever but unbalanced. Without Merritt, the ballast, Sol wouldn’t last a month. If Sol drank a little more, he’d be better balanced. Sol’s worried he’s an old man; he has too many worries; he deserves a little sympathy.

Sarah, also worried, wants an accounting of the money she gave to Sol to invest for her. Sol thinks Sarah crazy to get so excited. “Money makes bitterness for old friends.” Sol thinks Merritt’s put Sarah up to make trouble. Sarah wants to get out. Their situation is just rotten. She’s not a brave little communist; she’s not anything. She and Solare unworthy of the idea of revolution. Other hands carry it on, The old comrades. For Sol this is craziness: “They still sweat at those crowded wordy meetings? And we here, high up where the air is clear, we never hear a whisper.” Sol tells Sarah to come back later that night when it’s quiet and they can talk like old times.

Sarah says the whole office is talking about Agnes, who rides Sol like a horse: “She cheats the life out of you.” Sarah tells Sol about the affair between Agnes and Merritt.

Agnes wants money for a darling colonial six-piece bedroom set, the wood like sat in.
Sol. Things! Things! Pile up things! Rosewood and teakwood and mahogany. Diamonds. Rubies. Gold. For them you’d make an ape of me. When he first knew her it was clothes, satin things, shimmer things. Then she got the jewellry bug. Now it’s antiques. The next thing she sends home he’ll break into a hundred pieces, and her too! Carry on with his partner. He’ll break them both.

Agnes thinks Sol’s always known about her affair with Merritt. She asks Merritt to take her away. Merritt says Sol will cool down: “We’re all civilized people.” Sarah says Sol’s not civilized when his pride’s hurt. Merritt says to Hell with Sol’s pride and he and Agnes go out for a drink.

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The second scene of Act III of Death in an Office takes place in the same setting early the next morning. Any icy winter dawn is brightening outside. Sarah waits.

Sol enters after having been walking in the cold all night. He tosses a pearl-handled revolver on his desk. Sol’s glad to see Sarah: “You can advise me like a mother.” It’s not an insult for a young woman to remind him of his mother. “You are of my race. I come back to you.” A strange woman (Agnes) has made a monkey of him. He faked being sore about Agnes and Merritt. In fact, he made them do it. “I’ve got a demon in me that makes me twist and turn people.” Sol has everything he wants, but he doesn’t want it.

Sol says the gun is another dirty trick with which he can twist Agnes and Merritt. Finish with her. Scare him out of the business. Sweep them both aside with a scene he learned from the tabloids. Sol wants to turn their little emotions into dollars and cents.

Maybe Sol can’t do it, it’s so complicated. He must contrive. He lives in a series of contrivances, like one of those funny cartoons. Has he given himself to the wrong things? He has given nothing—he has taken. But not enough. He wants to be a king, but he’s only a little businessman. None of it’s worth it.

Money’s nothing, Sol says. A home? He used to dream of it with a lawn stretching all the way to the sea. He got it. Blocks of it out on Long Island. But he can’t go there. He hates it! No children. He said wait until he made his first million. His brats were going to be Princes. Now he’s got a million;
but he'll never have those brats—they'd be hard little gentiles like Agnes. He'll never have anything.

Race? "Jewish is a catchword. Like Pyorrhea or Constipation. Just an easy way of telling what's wrong with you." Sol is not a true Jew. There's a taint in his blood. All history behind him? "Bah, it's all hurt pride and foolishness. A missing link, that's what I am." The history of the Jews goes back a long ways; but how far ahead? "They're getting wiped out like me."27)

Does he want to deny Jews because he loves them so much? He loves nothing. Maybe money, but it don't get him much, except a little more flesh, a slower brain. He's young, yet he's not. The fellers that paint and write have got the goods on him.

Then Sol says there's these fellers make these revolutions in back rooms, all they want is the cash, Sarah cries out that's a lie! That dream of a clean world—Sol can't get away from the man he was a few years before. Sol jokes when he gets two million he'll give half of it to the CP.28) Good joke, huh? Sol Ginsburg has built. Now he tears down.

Sol says he's been fighting with Sarah over money. so they can get back something they lost, so he could keep alive a little spark. Sarah: "If you got any pity left, don't play on me like this."

Sol has no pity. He nursed money and loved it. He made up a dream about it. He saw himself a great man leading armies, plotting for the earth. "This feller Christ took me up to a high mountain and showed me the earth."29) That's where the miracle happened. Suddenly there were two Christs, The right one was dressed in a rainbow. Not for you. Christ says; you're not one of my people; my people are plotting in cellars.

Sol smiles: "Life can catch you right in the pit of the stomach". His stomach is getting fat. All he's got between him and death is good food. "Somewhere there's an abundance of life." He thinks Sarah's got it but doesn't have the sense to know it.

In a lifeless voice, Sarah repeats: What does he want of her? Sol wants love, the old love, maybe. Does she think he wants to be tied to things all his life? American women want things—cosmetics, player pianos, radios, antiques, dresses—and they make Sol a fortune for whisperin' to them about things. And all the time Sarah was there, not givin' a damn about things, 'cause she believes
in something—Psychology, communism, Marx, Freud, Save the World. Sol urges Sarah: “Begin with me. Give me something to hold on to”

Sarah says it’s too late; Sol’s deliberately ruined their love; he doesn’t want her now, he’s just sick in his pride. Sol drags Sarah to the window: forty stories down the cold pavement waits for them. “Show me a rainbow where I know there’s concrete and I’ll go with you.” Sarah pleads that Sol not use his power over her in this way.

Sol wants to see the end of it—the end of the world they know. But what then? A wilderness? With a few Jews wandering around? Make him believe that a few Jews can make it new. Make him believe it before he dies.

Sarah doesn’t know anything except Sol hurts her. She’s been his slave. Once she tried to get away and he made her suffer for years. Now, it’s too late. Don’t talk to her about love. It’s bitter. It cuts into her. Makes her flesh sore. (Sarah throws herself against Sol, head against his chest; he holds her tightly) Tighter! Tighter! “Crown me with thorns. Burn me with kisses. Tear me down, limb from limb. Tear my body. Trample me. Make me a wilderness” She and Sol have been in darkness; now they see the light.

Sarah kneels on the floor. she clings to Sol ecstatically. Sol says: “You open up the light. But I’m too blind; it hurts me.” Is this love like the poets tell it? Or is it craziness?

Sarah asks Sol to take her away, but Sol refuses to give up what he’d battled years to get. He raises clenched hands. His face is scarred with rage. Damn Sarah. Damn money.

“I tear down the place around my head right now. I bring the sky down. But I won’t give in to such foolishness.” Is the curse of pride on him? Let him play his little comedy then. Shake a revolver at Agnes and take her back. He’ll play with her little mean soul. And Sarah’s too.

Is it money Sarah wants? He’ll give her thousands. As long as he’s master. He can’t laugh at her love? Money counts in Sarah’s pretty emotions. She’d run off to Timbuctoo or Palestine with him and spend a million. “No, Ma’am, it don’t come so easy.” Is he trying to kill Sarah? Well, If she dies so easy...

Money. Sarah’s not so different. Money can twist her and turn her. Her eyes shine when she thinks of things, don’t they? No? All right, she get’s nothing. It hurts, huh? Money hurts? Good, I hate you all.
Did Merritt take Sarah here in the office? Did he lay his hands on her? Big dills in his hands pawing her? “You think I touch you after that? You think I buy your love?” What’s Sarah’s face so white for? “Did he tear your clothes off with his hands? Did he hurt you? Say pretty things...love...sweetness...delight?”

Sarah, backed up against the desk, overcome by Sol’s words, suddenly brings the pistol against him and fires. Sol stands very straight. His hands unclasp, and the bills fall around him. He speaks slowly in a hushed voice: “An end then! I made you do this.” He crumples against the desk.

Sarah, frightened, lays the revolver on the desk, picks it up again, goes to the window, throws the gun out, hesitates, then exits, locking the door behind her.

After a moment, there is a frantic rattling of the door. One window of the partition is broken. Dinah climbs over, bends over Sol, who speaks in a slow unnatural voice: “Hold on to me. Hold me back from that golden gate.” Dinah dares not move. She tries to sing, but her voice chokes: “Rockabye Baby...”

Merritt and Agnes enter, then Sarah, stiff and lifeless as a corpse. Sol claims he shot himself. Agnes says Sol will get well, will rest in a villa in Florida, a lot of palm trees and swell people. Sol says Agnes will be a rich widow: “Be a snappy widow.” Florida, Venice, Monte Carlo. Don’t spend too fast. Change your name.

Sarah brings water, but Sol can’t drink it, and says to her: “You close to me. There’s ways of getting to the light.” With sudden passion, a grim tone in his voice: “Put me in a solid silver coffin with gold cupids on it.” The Jews will lead people to the light. Sol stiffens, dies.

Agnes claims all the money on the floor. She screams hysterically. She’ll be miserable at the swell places Sol told her to go to. “That’ll give him a big laugh wherever he is.”

Merritt calls a doctor. Sarah calls the police. Dinah, who had seen it all, promises not to tell. Sarah speaks the last, incomplete line of the play to the police: “I want to report...” The curtain falls on Death in an Office.
FOOTNOTES

1) *Success Story* begins in the summer of 1928, near the height of the economic boom, and ends in the early 1930s, after the economic depression.

2) This blue sky suggests space, nature, even heaven, an absolute against which the business machinations in the office may be evaluated. In *Success Story* the action takes place on the 40th floor; 40, e.g., 40 days in the desert, appears in several Lawson plays as a submerged Biblical metaphor.

3) In *Success Story* the cast is enlarged to include (among others) banker Sonnenberg (who is to Wall Street what Einstein is to mathematics), a more dignified version of banker Holz in *Nirvana* (1926); both characters were based on banker Otto Kahn.

4) Sol Ginsburg is the prototype of a character prominent in American films in the 1930s, e.g., characters played by John Garfield.

5) Sarah is handsome in an Oriental way because Lawson did not shake off his attachment to his two earliest heroines, Savitri (1908) and Damayanti in *A Hindoo Love Drama* (1914). In *Thunder Morning* (1953) the dark heroine reappears as a young black radical woman.

6) In *Success Story* Dinah mothers a child who offers hope for the future; similarly symbolical children appear in *Processional* (1925) and *Gentlewoman* (1934).

7) Lawson dealt with "the ones behind" as international financiers in *Standards* (1916) and *The International* (1928).

8) Lawson used the theme of business expansion in *Roger Bloomer* (1923) and *The International*, expressing an awareness of the necessity for big business to expand in order to survive.

9) Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was still in the future.

10) The theme of snooping also appeared in *Loud Speaker* (1927) when reporter Johnnie Dunne snoops through politician Harry Collins' personal papers.

11) In *Success Story* Sol is a statistician whose previous employment record is not given.

12) In *Success Story* Sarah's family background is omitted, as is Sol's except for his reference to his gangster brother.

13) Sarah's sense of her Jewishness is not expressed in this way ("race", "in the blood") in *Success Story*. In his unpublished autobiography Lawson says that he was not raised as a Jew (he was raised as a Christian Scientist) but that he had a mystical sense of being Jewish.

14) In *Roger Bloomer* (1923) Roger says he wants women's souls. John Howard Lawson's first play in modern idiom was *Souls* (1915), whose main character, a psychogist, probes people's souls.
15) In *The Spice of Life* (1916, 1919) a clerk steals negotiable bonds from a banker's safe, as does Louise in Roger Bloomer.

16) In *The International* a whip-cracking scene takes place in a bordello.

17) In *Roger Bloomer* clerk Louise Chamberlain similarly rejects banker Rumsey's similar marriage proposal.

18) In *Atmosphere* (1914), one of Lawson's first drafts of *Souls* (1915), wealthy Milborn admits deliberately destroying his wife's faith in him.

19) In *Nirvana* poet Bill Weed thinks his will controls his sweetheart's mind (as does his predecessor poet Tommy Weed in *The Mad Moon* (1917)).

20) *Standards, The Spice of Life* and *The Pure in Heart*--each has a main character who is a showgirl. In *Thunder Morning* a young black woman is denied an opportunity to be one by a racist nightclub owner.


22) In *The Mad Moon* Tommy Weed, a "mad" poet, says something similar to his sweetheart.

23) The contrast between those who feel and those who do not is often found in Lawson's plays.

24) This idea was omitted in *Success Story*'s final version for production.

25) The symbol of dust as nihilism appears in many of Lawson's plays.

26) Ironically (?), by the mid-1930s, Lawson, beginning to make "big money" as a screenwriter, and his second wife found themselves in a somewhat similar situation.

27) In 1928 this idea was prophetic. The element of social prophecy in Lawson's plays needs to be studied.

28) In *Success Story* direct references to the "C. P." were omitted. (In 1928 Lawson's connection with the Communist Party of the United States of America was not quite that of "fellow traveller", although among his associates in the New Playwrights Theater Michael Gold was a well-known Communist. Lawson did not associate himself directly with the CPUSA until mid-1934.

29) Lawson was a fervent Christian Scientist from the age of 12 to the age of 16, 1906-1910, when he entered Williams College.

30) Many of Lawson's plays have "open" endings. This one is marred by Sarah's earlier throwing of the murder weapon out of the window, thus making a claim of suicide problematic.

(September 20, 1982)