

## Buckets of Diamonds

Clifford D. Simak

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The police picked up Uncle George walking west on Elm Street at 3 o'clock in the morning. He was shuffling along, muttering to himself, and his clothes were soaked, as if he'd been out in the rain - and Cottonwood County for the past three months had been suffering a drought, with the corn withering in the field and day after day not a cloud in sight. He was carrying a good-sized painting underneath one arm and in the other hand he carried a pail filled to the brim with diamonds. He was in his stockinged feet, he'd lost his shoes somewhere. When officer Alvin Saunders picked him up, he asked Uncle George what was going on, and George mumbled something that Alvin couldn't quite make out. He seemed to be befuddled.

So Alvin took him to the station, and it wasn't until then they saw that his pockets bulged. So they emptied his pockets and laid all the stuff out on a table, and when they'd had a good look at it, Sergeant Steve O'Donnell phoned Chief Chet Burnside to ask him what to do. The chief, sore at being hauled out of bed, said to throw George into pokey. So that is what they did. You couldn't really blame the chief, of course. Off and on, for years, Uncle George had given the police force of Willow Grove a fair amount of trouble.

But as soon as Uncle George had a chance to look around and realise where he was, he grabbed up a stool and beat upon the bars, yelling that the dirty fuzz had framed him once again and declaring very loudly that his constitutional rights as a free and upright citizen were being trampled on. "I know my rights," he yelled. "You owe me at least one phone call and when I get out of here I'm going to sue all of you on the grounds of false arrest."

So they unlocked the cell and let him make his call. As usual he made the call to me.

"Who is it?" Elsie asked, sitting up in bed.

"It's your Uncle George," I said.

"I knew it!" I said.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed. "Aunt Myrt is off to California to visit relatives. And he's running loose again."

"All right," I said to George, "what could it be this time?"

"You needn't take that tone of voice, John," he said. "It's only once or twice a year I call you. And what's the use of having a lawyer in the family ..."

"You can skip that part of it," I told him, "and get down to what is going on."

"This time," he said, triumphantly, "I got them dead to rights. This time you get paid off. I'll split the judgment with you. I wasn't doing nothing. I was walking down the street when the fuzz pulled up and hauled me in. I wasn't staggering and I wasn't singing. I was creating no disturbance. I tell you, John, a man has the right to walk the streets, no matter at what hour ..."

"I'll be right down," I said.

"Don't let them take my diamonds!" said Elsie. "You must get them back for me!"

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and hauled me in. I wasn't staggering and I wasn't singing. I was creating no disturbance. I tell you, John, a man has the right to walk the streets, no matter at what hour ..."

"I'll be right down," I said.

"Don't be too long," said Elsie, "You have a hard day coming up in the court."

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "With Uncle George, the day's already lost."

When I got down to the station, they all were waiting for me. George was sitting beside a table, and on the table stood the pail of diamonds with the junk they'd taken from his pockets and the painting was leaning up against it. The police chief had got there, just a few minutes ahead of me.

"Okay," I said, "let's get down to business. What's the charge?"

The chief still was pretty sore. "We don't need no charge right yet."

"I'll tell you, Chet," I said, "you'll need one badly before the day is over, so you better start to thinking."

"I'm going to wait," said Chet, "to see what Charley says."

He meant Charley Nevins, the county attorney.

"All right, then," I said, "if there is no charge as yet, what are the circumstances?"

"Well," said the chief, "George here was carrying a pail of diamonds. And you tell me just how he came by a pail of diamonds."

"Maybe they aren't diamonds," I suggested. "How come you're so sure that they are diamonds?"

"Soon as he opens up, we'll get Harry in to have a look at them."

Harry was the jeweller, who had a shop across the square.

I went over to the table and picked up some of the diamonds. They surely looked like diamonds, but I am no jeweller. They were cut and faceted and shot fire in the light. Some of them were bigger than my fist.

"Even if they should be diamonds," I demanded, "what has that to do with it? There's no law I know of says a man can't carry diamonds."

"That's telling them!" cheered George.

"You shut up," I told him, "and keep out of this. Let me handle it."

"But George here hasn't got no diamonds," said the chief. "These must be stolen diamonds."

"Are you charging him with theft?" I asked.

"Well, not right now," said the chief. "I ain't got no evidence as yet."

"And there's that painting, too," said Alvin Saunders. "It looks to me just like one of them old masters."

"There's one thing," I told them, "that puzzles me exceedingly. Would you tell me where, in Willow Grove, anyone bent on thievery could find an old master or a pail of diamonds?"

That stopped them, of course. There

isn't anyone in Willow Grove who has an honest-to-God painting except Banker Amos Stevens, who brought one back from a visit to Chicago; and knowing as little as he does about the world of art he was probably taken.

"You'll have to admit, though," said the chief, "there's something funny going on."

"Maybe so," I said, "but I doubt that that alone is sufficient ground to hold a man in jail."

"It ain't the diamonds or the painting so much as this other stuff," declared the chief, "that makes me think there are shenanigans afoot. Look at this will you!"

He picked up a gadget from the table

and held it out to me. "Watch out," he warned. "One end of it's hot, and the other end is cold."

It was about a foot in length and shaped something like an hourglass. The hourglass part of it was some sort of transparent plastic, pinched in at the middle and flaring at both ends, and the ends were open. Through the centre of it ran a rod that looked like metal. One end of the metal glowed redly, and when I held my hand down opposite the open end a blast of heat came out. The other end was white, covered by crystals. I turned it around to look.

"Keep away from it," warned the chief. "That end of it is colder than a witch's spit. Them's big ice crystals

hanging onto it."

I laid it back upon the table, carefully.

"Well," the chief demanded, "what do you make of it?"

"I don't know," I said.

I never took any more physics in school than had been necessary and I'd long since forgotten all I'd ever known about it. But I knew damn well that the gadget on the table was impossible. But impossible or not, there it was, one end of the rod glowing with its heat, the other frosted by its cold.

"And this," said the chief, picking up a little triangle formed by a thin rod of metal or of plastic. "What do you think of this?"

"What should I think of it?" I asked.

"It's just..."

"Stick your finger through it," said the police chief triumphantly.

I tried to stick my finger through it and I couldn't. There was nothing there to stop me. My finger didn't hit anything, there was no pressure on it and I couldn't feel a thing, but I couldn't put my finger through the centre of that triangle. It was as if I'd hit a solid wall that I couldn't see or feel.

"Let me see that thing," I said.

The chief handed it to me, and I held it up to the ceiling light and I twisted it and turned it, and so help me, there wasn't anything there. I could see right through it and I could see there was nothing there, but when I tried to put my finger

through the centre there was something there to stop it.

I laid it back on the table beside the hourglass thing.

"You want to see more?" asked the chief.

I shook my head. "I'll grant you, Chet, that I don't know what this is all about, but I don't see a thing here that justifies you in holding George."

"I'm holding him," said the chief, "until I can talk to Charley."

"You know, of course, that as soon as court opens, I'll be back here with an order for his release."

"I know that, John," said the chief. "You're a real good lawyer. But I can't let him go."

"If that's the case," I said, "I want a signed inventory of all this stuff you took off of him, and then I want you to lock it up."

"But . . ."

"Theoretically," I said, "it's George's property . . ."

"It couldn't be. You know it couldn't, John. Where would he have gotten ..."

"Until you can prove that he has stolen it from some specific person, I imagine the law would say that it was his. A man doesn't have to prove where he obtained such property."

"Oh, all right," said the chief. "I'll make out the inventory, but I don't know just what we'll call some of this stuff."

"And now," I said, "I'd like to have a

moment to confer with my client."

After balking and stalling around a bit, the chief opened up the city council chamber for us.

'Now, George," I said, "I want you to tell me exactly how it was. Tell me everything that happened and tell it from the start."

George knew I wasn't fooling, and he knew better than to lie to me. I always caught him in his lies.

"You know, of course," said George, "that Myrt is gone  
?»

"I know that," I said.

"And you know that every time she's gone, I go out and get drunk and get into some sort of trouble. But this time I

promised myself I wouldn't do any drinking and wouldn't get into any kind of trouble. Myrt's put up with a lot from me, and this time I was set to show her I could behave myself. So last night I was sitting in the living room, with my shoes off, in my stocking feet, with the TV turned on, watching a ball game. You know, John, if them Twins could get a shortstop they might stand a chance next year. A shortstop and a little better pitching and some left-handed batters and ..."

"Get on with it," I said.

"I was just sitting there," said George, "watching this here ball game and drinking beer. I had got a six-pack and I guess I was on the last bottle of it..."

"I thought you said you had promised yourself you would do no drinking."

"Ah, John, this was only beer. I can drink beer all day and never ..."

"All right, go on," I said.

"Well, I was just sitting there, drinking that last bottle of beer and the game was in the seventh inning and the Yanks had two men on and Mantle coming up ..."

"Damn it, not the game!" I yelled at him. "Tell me what happened to you. You're the one in trouble."

"That's about all there was to it," said George. "It was the seventh inning and Mantle coming up, and the next thing I knew I was walking on the street and a police car pulling up?"

"You mean you don't know what happened in between? You don't know where you got the pail of diamonds or the painting or all the other junk?"

George shook his head, "I'm telling you just the way it was. I don't remember anything. I wouldn't lie to you. It doesn't pay to lie to you. You always trip me up."

I sat there for a while, looking at him, and I knew it was no use to ask him any more. He probably had told me the truth, but perhaps not all of it, and it would take more time than I had right then to sweat it out of him.

"OK," I said, "we'll let it go at that. You go back and get into that cell and don't let out a whimper. Just behave

yourself. I'll be down by nine o'clock or so and get you out. Don't talk to anyone. Don't answer any questions. Volunteer no information. If anyone asks you anything, tell them I've told you not to talk."

"Do I get to keep the diamonds?"

"I don't know," I said. "They may not be diamonds."

"But you asked for an inventory."

"Sure I did," I said, "but I don't know if I can make it stick."

"One thing, John. I got an awful thirst ..."

"No," I said.

"Three or four bottles of beer. That couldn't hurt much. A man can't get drunk on only three or four. I wasn't drunk last

night. I swear to you I wasn't."

"Where would I get beer at this time in the morning?"

"You always have a few tucked away in your refrigerator. And that's only six blocks or so away."

"Oh, all right," I said. "I'll ask the chief about it."

The chief said yes, he guessed it would be all right, so I left to get the beer.

The moon was setting behind the courthouse cupola, and in the courthouse square the Soldier's Monument was alternately lighted and darkened by a street lamp swaying in a little breeze. I had a look at the sky, and it seemed entirely clear. There were no clouds in

sight and no chance of rain. The sun, in a few hours more, would blaze down again and the corn would dry a little more and the farmers would watch their wells anxiously as the pumps brought up lessening streams of water for their bawling cattle.

A pack of five or six dogs came running across the courthouse lawn. There was a dog-leashing ordinance, but everyone turned their dogs loose at night and hoped they would come home for breakfast before Virgil Thompson, the city dog catcher, could get wind of them.

I got into the car and drove home and found four bottles of beer in the refrigerator. I took it back to the station, then drove home again.

By this time it was 4.30, and I decided it wasn't worth my while to go back to bed, so I made some coffee and started to fry some eggs. Elsie heard me and came down, and I fried some eggs for her and we sat and talked.

Her Uncle George had been in a lot of scrapes, none of them serious, and I had always managed to get him out of them one way or another. He wasn't a vicious character and he was an honest man, liked by most everyone in town. He ran a junkyard out at the edge of town, charging people for dumping trash, most of which he used to fill in a swampy stretch of ground, salvaging some of the more usable junk and selling it cheap to people who might need it. It wasn't a

very elevating kind of business, but he made an honest living at it and in a little town like ours if you made an honest living it counts for quite a lot.

But this scrape was just a little different, and it bothered me. It wasn't exactly the kind of situation that was covered in a law book. The thing that bothered me the most was where George could have gotten the stuff they found on him.

"Do you think we should phone Aunt Myrt?" asked Elsie.

"Not right now," I told her. "Having her here wouldn't help at all. All she'd do would be to scream and wring her hands."

"What are you going to do first of

all?" she asked.

"First of all," I said, "I'm going to find Judge Benson and get a writ to spring him out of jail. Unless Charley Nivens can find some grounds for holding him and I don't think he can. Not right away, at least."

But I never got the writ. I was about to leave my office to go over to the courthouse to hunt up the judge when Dorothy Ingles, my old-maid secretary, told me I had a call from Charley.

I picked up the phone, and he didn't even wait for me to say hello. He just started shouting.

"All right," he yelled, "you can start explaining. Tell me how you did it."

"How I did what?" I asked.

"How George broke out of jail."

"But he isn't out of jail. When I left he was locked up and I was just now going over to the courthouse ..."

"He's not locked up now," yelled Charley. "The cell door still is locked, but he isn't there. All that's left is four empty beer bottles, standing in a row."

"Look, Charley," I said, "I don't know a thing about this. You know me well enough ..."

"Yeah," yelled Charley, "I know you well enough. There isn't any dirty trick ..."

He strangled on his words, and it was only justice. Of all the tricky lawyers in the state, Charley is the trickiest.

"If you are thinking," I said, "of

swearing out a fugitive warrant for him, you might give a thought to the lack of grounds for his incarceration."

"Grounds!" yelled Charley. "There is that pail of diamonds."

"If they are really diamonds."

"They are diamonds, that's for sure. Harry Johnson had a look at them this morning and he says that they are diamonds. There is just one thing wrong. Harry says there are no diamonds in the world as big as those. And very few as perfect."

He paused for a moment and then he whispered, hoarsely, "Tell me John, what is going on? Let me in on it."

"I don't know," I said.

"But you talked with him and he told

the chief you had told him not to answer any questions."

"That's good legal procedure," I told him. "You can have no quarrel with that. And another thing, I'll hold you responsible for seeing that those diamonds don't disappear somehow. I have an inventory signed by Chet and there is no charge

"What about busting jail?"

"Not unless you can show cause for his being arrested in the first place."

He slammed down the receiver, and I hung up the phone and sat there trying to get the facts straight inside my mind. But they were too fantastic for me to make them spell out any sense.

"Dorothy," I yelled.

She poked her head around the door, her face prissy with her disapproval. Somehow, apparently, she had heard about what had been going on - as, no doubt, had everyone in town - and she was one of the few who held George in very ill-repute. She thought he was a slob. She resented my relationship to him and she often pointed out that he cost me over the years a lot of time and cash, with no money ever coming back. Which was true, of course, but you can't expect a junkyard operator to afford fancy legal fees and, in my case, he was Elsie's uncle.

"Put in a call to Calvin Ross," I told her, "at the Institute of Arts in Minneapolis. He is an old friend of mine

and ..."

Banker Amos Stevens came bursting through the door. He crossed the outer office and brushed past Dorothy as if she weren't there.

"John, do you know what you have got - what you've got down there?"

"No," I said. "Please tell me."

"You have got a Rembrandt."

"Oh, you mean the painting."

"Where do you think George found a Rembrandt? There aren't any Rembrandts except in museums and such."

"We'll soon find out more about it," I told Banker Stevens, Willow Grove's one and only expert in the arts. "I've got a call in now and . . ."

Dorothy stuck her head around the door. "Mr Ross is on the phone," she said.

I picked up the phone and I felt a little funny about it, because Cal Ross and I hadn't seen each other for a good 15 years or more, and I wasn't even sure he would remember me. But I told him who I was and acted as if we'd had lunch together just the day before, and he did the same to me.

Then I got down to business. "Cal, we have a painting out here that maybe you should have a look at. Some people think it might be old and perhaps by one of the old masters. I know that it sounds crazy ..."

"Where did you say this painting is?"

he asked.

"Here in Willow Grove."

"Have you had a look at it?"

"Well, yes," I said, "a glance, but I wouldn't know ..."

"Tell him," Stevens whispered, fiercely, "that it is a Rembrandt."

"Who owns it?"

"Not really anyone," I said. "It's down at the city jail."

"John, are you trying to suck me into something? As an expert witness, maybe."

"Nothing like that," I said, "but it does have a bearing on a case of mine and I suppose I could dig up a fee ..."

"Tell him," Stevens insisted, "that it is a Rembrandt."

"Did I hear someone talking about a Rembrandt?" Cal asked.

"No," I said. "No one knows what it is."

"Maybe I could get away," he said.

He was getting interested - well, maybe interested isn't the word; intrigued might be more like it.

"I could arrange a charter to fly you out," I said.

"It's that important, is it?"

"To tell you the truth, Cal, I don't know if it is or not. I'd just like your opinion."

"Fix up the charter, then," he said, "and call me back. I can be at the airport to be picked up within an hour."

"Thanks, Cal," I said. "I'll be seeing

you."

Elsie would be sore at me, I knew, and Dorothy would be furious. Chartering a plane for a small-town lawyer in a place like Willow Grove is downright extravagance. But if we could hang onto those diamonds, or even a part of them, the bill for the charter would be peanuts. If they were diamonds. I wasn't absolutely sure Harry Johnson would know a diamond if he saw one. He sold them in his store, of course, but I suspected that he just took some wholesaler's word that what he had were diamonds.

"Who was that you were talking to?" demanded Banker Stevens.

I told him who it was.

"Then why didn't you tell him it was a Rembrandt?" Stevens raged at me.

"Don't you think that I would know a Rembrandt?"

I almost told him no, that I didn't think he would, and then thought better of it. Some day I might have to ask him for a loan.

"Look, Amos," I said, "I didn't want to do anything that would prejudice his judgment. Nothing that would sway him one way or the other. Once he gets here he will no doubt see right away that it is a Rembrandt."

That mollified him a bit, and then I called in Dorothy and asked her to fix up arrangements for Cal to be flown out, and her mouth got grimmer and her face

more prissy at every word I said. If Amos hadn't been there, she'd have had something to say about throwing away my money.

Looking at her, I could understand the vast enjoyment she got out of the revival meetings that blossomed out in Willow Grove and other nearby towns each summer. She went to all of them, no matter what the sect, and sat on the hard benches in the summer heat and dropped in her quarter when the collection plate was passed and sucked out of the fire-and-brimstone preaching a vast amount of comfort. She was always urging me to go to them, but I never went. I always had the feeling she thought they might do me a world of good.

"You're going to be late in court," she told me curtly, "and the case this morning is one you've spent a lot of time on."

Which was her way of telling me I shouldn't be wasting any of my time on George.

So I went off to court.

At noon recess, I phoned the jail, and there'd been no sign of George. At three o'clock Dorothy came across the square to tell me Calvin Ross would be coming in at five. I asked her to phone Elsie to be expecting a guest for dinner and maybe one for overnight; and she didn't say anything, but from her face I knew she thought I was a brute and she'd not blame Elsie any if she up and left me.

Such inconsideration!

At five o'clock I picked Cal up at our little airport and a fair crowd was on hand. Somehow the word had got around that an art expert was flying out to have a look at the painting George Wetmore had picked up somewhere.

Cal was somewhat older than I had remembered him and age had served to emphasise and sharpen up the dignity that he'd had even in his youth. But he was kind and affable and as enthusiastic about his art as he had ever been. And I realised, with a start, that he was excited. The possibility of finding a long-lost painting of some significance must be, I realised, a dream that is dear to everyone in the field.

I drove him down to the square and we went into the station and I introduced him round. Chet told me there was no sign of George. After a little argument he got out the painting and laid it on the table underneath the ceiling light.

Cal walked over to look down at it and suddenly he froze, like a bird dog on the point. For a long time he stood there, not moving, looking down at it, while the rest of us stood around and tried not to breathe too hard.

Then he took a folding magnifier out of his pocket and unfolded it. He bent above the painting and moved the glass from spot to spot, staring at each spot over which he held the glass for long seconds.

Finally he straightened up.

"John," he said, "would you please tilt it up for me."

I tilted it up on the table and he walked back a ways and had a long look at it from several angles and then came back and examined it with the glass again.

Finally he straightened up again and nodded to Chet.

"Thanks very much," he said. "If I were you, I'd guard that canvas very carefully."

Chet was dying to know what Cal might think, but I didn't give him a chance to ask. I doubt Cal would have told him anything even if he'd asked.

I hustled Cal out of there and got him

in the car and we sat there for a moment without either of them saying anything at all.

Then Cal said, "Unless my critical faculties and my knowledge of art have deserted me entirely, that canvas in there is Toulouse-Lautrec's Quadrille at the Moulin Rouge."

So it wasn't Rembrandt! I'd known damn well it wasn't. So much for Amos Stevens!

"I'd stake my life on it," said Cal. "I can't be mistaken. No one could copy the canvas as faithfully as that. There is only one thing wrong."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Quadrille at the Moulin Rouge is in Washington at the National Gallery of

Art."

I experienced a sinking feeling in my gizzard. If George somehow had managed to rifle the National Gallery both of us were sunk.

"It's possible the painting is missing," said Cal, "and the National Gallery people are keeping quiet about it for a day or two. Although ordinarily, they'd notify other large museums and some of the dealers."

He shook his head, perplexed. "But why anyone should steal it is more than I would know. There's always the possibility that it could be sold to some collector who would keep it hidden. But that would require prior negotiations, and few collectors would be so insane

as to buy a painting as famous as the Moulin Rouge."

I took some hope from that. "Then there isn't any possibility George could have stolen it."

He looked at me, funny. "From what you tell me," he said, "this George of yours wouldn't know one painting from another."

"I don't think he would."

"Well, that lets him out. He must have just picked it up somewhere. But where - that's the question."

I couldn't help him there.

"I think," said Cal, "I had better make a phone call."

We drove down to the office and climbed the stairs.

Dorothy was waiting for me to come back, and she still was sore at me.

"There is a Colonel Sheldon Reynolds in your office," she told me. "He is from the Air Force."

"I can phone out here," said Cal.

"Colonel Reynolds has been waiting for some time," said Dorothy, "and he strikes me as a most patient man."

I could see she didn't approve of me associating with people from the world of art and that she highly disapproved of me meeting with the Air Force and she still was sore at me for giving Elsie such short notice we were to have a dinner guest. She was very properly outraged, although she was too much of a lady and too loyal an employee to bawl me out in

front of Cal.

I went into my office, and sure enough, Colonel Reynolds was there, acting most impatient, sitting on the edge of a chair and drumming his fingers on its arms.

He quit his drumming and stood up as soon as I came in.

"Mr Page," he said.

"I'm sorry you had to wait," I said.

"What can I do for you?"

We shook hands, and he sat down in the chair and I perched uneasily on the edge of the desk, waiting.

"It has come to my attention," he told me, "that there have been some extraordinary occurrences in town and that there are certain artifacts involved.

I've spoken with the county attorney, and he says you are the man I have to talk with. It appears there is some question about the ownership of the artifacts."

"If you're talking about what I think you are," I told him, "there is no question whatsoever. All the articles in question are the property of my client."

"I understand your client has escaped from jail."

"Disappeared," I said. "And he was placed in custody originally in an illegal manner. The man was doing nothing except walking on the street."

"Mr Page," said the colonel, "you do not have to convince me I have no interest in the merits of the case. All the Air Force is concerned about are certain

gadgets found in the possession of your client."

"You have seen these gadgets?"

He shook his head. "No. The county attorney told me you'd probably crucify him in court if he let me see them. But he said you were a reasonable man and if properly appealed to ..."

"Colonel," I said, "I'm never a reasonable man where the welfare of my client could be jeopardised."

"You don't know where your client is?"

"I have no idea."

"He must have told you where he found the stuff."

"I don't think he knows himself," I said.

The colonel, I could see, didn't believe a word I told him, for which I couldn't very well blame him.

"Didn't your client tell you he'd contacted a UFO?"

I shook my head, bewildered. That was a new one on me. I'd never thought of it.

"Mr Page," the colonel said, "I don't mind telling you that these gadgets might mean a lot to us. Not to the Air Force alone, but to the entire nation. If the other side should get hold of some of them before we did and ..."

"Now wait a minute," I interrupted. "Are you trying to tell me there are such things as UFOs?"

He stiffened. "I'm not trying to tell you

anything at all," he said. "I am simply asking . . ."

The door opened, and Cal stuck in his head. "Sorry for breaking in like this," he said, "but I have to leave."

"You can't do that," I protested. "Elsie is expecting you for dinner."

"I have to go to Washington," he said. "Your secretary says she will run me to the airport. If the pilot can get me home within an hour or so, I can catch a plane."

"You talked with the National Gallery?"

"The painting is still there," he said. "There is a remote possibility there may have been a substitution, but with the tight security that seems impossible. I

don't suppose there would be any chance  
..."

"Not a ghost," I said. "The painting stays right here."

"But it belongs in Washington!"

"Not if there are two of them," I shouted.

"But there can't be."

"There appears to be," I told him. "I'd feel a whole lot better, John, if it were in a safer place."

"The police are guarding it."

"A bank vault would be a whole lot better."

"I'll look into it," I promised. "What did the National Gallery say about it?"

"Not much of anything," said Cal.

"They are flabbergasted. You may have

them out here."

"I might as well," I said. "I have the Pentagon."

We shook hands, and he left; I went back and perched upon the desk.

"You're a hard man to deal with," said the colonel. "How do I reach you? Patriotism, perhaps?"

"I'm not a patriotic man," I told him, "and I'll instruct my client not to be."

"Money?"

"If there were a lot of it."

"The public interest?"

"You've got to show me it's in the public interest."

We glared at one another. I didn't like this Colonel Sheldon Reynolds, and he reciprocated.

The phone banged at me.

It was Chet down at the police station. His words started tumbling over one another as soon as I picked up the phone.

"George is back!" he shouted. "This time he has got someone with him and he's driving something that looks like a car, but it hasn't got no wheels . . . !"

I slammed down the phone and ran for the door. Out of the tail of my eye I saw that Reynolds had jumped up and was running after me.

Chet had been right. It looked like a car, but it had no wheels. It was standing in front of the police station, hanging there about two feet off the ground and a gentle thrumming indicated there was some mechanism somewhere inside of it

that was running smoothly.

Quite a crowd had gathered and I forced my way through it and got up beside the car.

George was sitting in what appeared to be the driver's seat and sitting beside him was a scarecrow of a fellow with the sourest face I've ever seen on any man.

He wore a black robe that buttoned up the front and up close around his throat and a black skullcap that came down hard against his ears and across his forehead; his hands and face, all of him that showed, were fishbelly white.

"What happened to you?" I demanded of George. "What are you sitting here for?"

"I tell you, John," he said, "I am somewhat apprehensive that Chet will try to throw me into the pokey once again. If he makes a move I'm all ready to go shooting out of here. This here vehicle is the slickest thing there is.

"It'll go along the ground or it will shoot up in the air and make just like a plane. I ain't rightly got the hang of it yet, having hardly driven it, but it handles smooth and easy and it ain't no trick at all to drive it."

"You can tell him," said Charley Nevins, "that he need not fear arrest. There is something most peculiar going on here, but-I'm not sure at all there is violation of the law involved."

I looked around in some surprise. I

hadn't noticed Charley standing there when I'd pushed through the crowd.

Reynolds shoved in ahead of me and reached up to grab George by the arm.

"I am Colonel Reynolds," he said, "and I am from the Air

Force and it's terribly important that I know what this is all about. Where did you get this car?"

"Why," George said, "it was standing there with a pile of other junk, so I took it. Someone threw it away and didn't seem to want it. There were a lot of people there throwing things away that they didn't want."

"And I suppose," yelled Chet, "that someone threw away the painting and the pail of diamonds."

"I wouldn't know about that," George told him. "I don't seem to remember much about that other trip. Except there was this big pile of stuff and that it was raining ..."

"Shut up, George," I said. He hadn't told me anything about a pile of stuff. Either his memory was improving or he had lied to me.

"I think," said Charley, getting edgy, "that we all better sit down together and see if we can make some sense out of these proceedings."

"That's all right with me," I said, "always remembering that this machine remains technically the property of my client."

"It seems to me," Charley said to me,

"that you're being somewhat unreasonable and high-handed in this whole affair."

"Charley," I said, "you know I have to be. If I let down my guard a minute, you and Chet and the Pentagon will tramp all over me."

"Let's get on with it," said Charley. "George, you put that machine down on the ground and come along with us. Chet will stand guard over it and see no one touches it."

"And while you're doing that," I said, "don't take your eyes off the painting and the diamonds. The painting just might be worth an awful lot of money."

"Right now," said Chet, disgusted, "would be a swell time for someone to

rob the bank. I'd have the entire force tied up watching all this junk of George's."

"I think, too," said Charley, "we better include this passenger of George's in our little talk. He might be able to add some enlightenment."

George's passenger didn't pay any attention. He'd been paying no attention all along. He had just been sitting there, bolt upright in his seat, with his face pointing straight ahead.

Chet walked officiously around the car. The passenger said something, at some length, in a high chittering voice. I didn't recognise a word of it but crazy as it sounds, I knew exactly what he said.

"Don't touch me!" he said. "Get away

from me. Don't interfere with me."

And, having said this, he opened the door and let himself to the ground. Chet stepped back from him and so did all the others. Silence fell upon the gathering which had been buzzing up until this moment. As he advanced down the street, the crowd parted and pressed back to make way for him. Charley and the colonel stepped backward, bumping into me, pinning me against the car, to get out of his way. He passed not more than 10ft from me and I got a good look at his face. There was no expression on it and it was set in a natural grimness - the way, I imagined, that a judge of the Inquisition might have looked. And there was something else that is very hard to

say, an impression that translated itself into a sense of smell, although I was sure there was no actual odour. The odour of sanctity is as close as I can come to it, I guess. Some sort of vibration radiating from the man that impinged upon the senses in the same manner, perhaps, as ultrasonics will impinge without actual hearing upon the senses of a dog.

And then he was past me and gone, walking down the street through the lane of human bodies that stepped aside for him, walking slowly, unconcernedly, almost strolling - walking as if he might have been all alone, apparently unaware of a single one of us.

All of us watched him until he was free of the crowd and had turned a

corner into another street. And even for a moment after that we stood uncertain and unmoving until finally someone spoke a whisper and someone answered him and the buzz of the crowd took up again, although now a quieter buzz.

Someone's fingers were digging hard into the muscles of my upper arm and when I looked around, I saw that it was Charley who had fastened onto me.

Ahead of me, the colonel turned his head to look at me. His face was white and tight and little drops of perspiration stood out along his hairline.

"John," said Charley, quietly, "I think it is important that we all sit down together."

I turned around toward the car and

saw that it was now resting on the ground and that George was getting out of it.

"Come along," I said to George.

Charley led, pushing his way through the crowd, with the colonel following and George and me bringing up the rear. We went down the street, without a word among us, to the square and walked across the lawn to the courthouse steps.

When we got in Charley's office, Charley shut the door and dug down into a desk drawer and come up with a jug. He got out four paper cups and poured them almost full.

"No ice," he said, "but what the hell, it's the liquor that we need."

Each of us took a cup and found a place to sit and worked on the booze a while without saying anything.

"Colonel," Charley finally asked, "what do you make of it?"

"It might be a help," the colonel said, "if we could talk with the passenger. I assume some attempt will be made to apprehend the man."

"I suppose we should," said Charley. "Although how one apprehends a bird like that, I don't really know."

"He caught us by surprise," the colonel pointed out. "Next time we'll be ready for him. Plug your ears with cotton, so you cannot hear him ..."

"It may take more than that," said Charley. "Did anyone actually hear him

speak?"

"He spoke, all right," I said. "He uttered words, but there was none I recognised. Just a sort of chirping gibberish."

"But we knew what he meant," said Charley. "Every single one of us knew that. Telepathy, perhaps?"

"I doubt it," the colonel said. "Telepathy is not the simple thing so many people think."

"A new language," I suggested. "A language scientifically constructed. Sounds that are designed to trigger certain understandings. If one dug deep enough into semantics ..."

Charley interrupted me; apparently he took no stock in my semantics talk.

"George," he asked, "what do you know of him?"

George was sunk back deep into a chair, with his shoeless feet stuck out in front of him. He had his big mitt wrapped around the paper cup and was wriggling his toes and he was content. It did not take an awful lot to make George content.

"I don't know a thing," said George.

"But he was riding with you. He must have told you something."

"He never told me a thing," said George. "He never said a word. I was just driving off and he came running up and jumped into the seat and then ..."

"You were driving off from where?"

"Well," said George, "there was this

big pile of stuff. It must have covered several acres and it was piled up high. It seemed to be in a sort of square, like the courthouse and no lawn, but just a sort of paving that might have been concrete and all around it, everywhere you looked, but quite a distance off, there were big high buildings."

Charley asked, exasperated, "Did you recognise the place?"

"I never saw the place before," said George, "nor no pictures of it, even."

"Perhaps it would be best," suggested Charley, "if you told it from the start."

So George told it the way he had told it to me.

"That first time it was raining pretty hard," he said, "and it was sort of dark,

as if evening might be coming on, and all I saw was this pile of junk. I didn't see no buildings."

He hadn't told me he'd seen anything at all. He had claimed he hadn't known a thing until he was back in Willow Grove, walking on the street, with the police car pulling up. But I let it go and kept on listening.

"Then," said George, "after Chet threw me into pokey . . ."

"Now, wait a minute there," said Charley. "I think you skipped a bit. Where did you get the diamonds and the painting and all the other stuff?"

"Why, off the pile of junk," said George. "There was a lot of other stuff and if I'd had the time I might have done

some better. But something seemed to warn me that I didn't have much time and it was raining and the rain was cold and the place was sort of spooky. So I grabbed what I could and put it in my pockets and I took the pail of diamonds, although I wasn't sure they were really diamonds, and then I took the painting because Myrt has been yelling that she wants a high-class picture to hang in the dining room ..."

"And then you were back home again?"

"That is it," said George, "and I am walking down the street, minding my own business and not doing anything illegal ..."

"And how about the second time?"

"You mean going back again?"

"That's what I mean," said Charley.

"That first time," said George, "it was unintentional. I was just sitting in the living room with my shoes off and a can of beer, watching television and in the seventh inning the Yankees had two on and Mantle coming up to bat - say, I never did find out what Mantle did. Did he hit a homer?"

"He struck out," said Charley.

George nodded sadly; Mickey is his hero.

"The second time," said George, "I sort of worked at it. I don't mind a cell so much, you understand, as the injustice of being there when you ain't done nothing wrong. So I talked John into

bringing me some beer and I sat down and started drinking it. There wasn't any television, but I imagined television. I imagined it real hard and I put two men on bases and had Mantle coming up - all in my mind, of course - and I guess it must have worked. I was back again, in the place where there was this pile of junk.

Only you must understand it wasn't really junk. It was all good stuff. Some of it didn't make any sense at all, but a good part of it did; and it was just setting there and no one touching it and every now and then someone would come walking out from some of those tall buildings - and it was quite a walk, I tell you, for those buildings were a long

ways off - and they'd be carrying something and they'd throw it on the pile of junk and go walking back."

"I take it," said the colonel, "that you spent more time there on your second trip."

"It was daytime," George explained, "and it wasn't raining and it didn't seem so spooky, although it did seem lonesome. There weren't any people - just the few who came walking to throw something on the pile, and they didn't pay much attention to me; they acted almost as if they didn't see me. You understand, I didn't know if I'd ever get back there again and there was a limit to how much I could carry, so this time I figured I'd do a job of it. I'd look over

the pile and figure exactly what I wanted. Maybe I should say that a little differently. There was a lot of it I wanted, but I had to decide what I wanted most. So I started walking around the pile, picking up stuff I thought I wanted until I saw something I took a special liking to then I'd decide between it and something else I had picked up. Sometimes I'd discard the new thing I had picked up and sometimes I'd keep it and drop something else. Because, you see, I could carry just so much, and by this time I was loaded with about all that I could carry. There was a lot of nice items up on the sides of the pile, and once I tried climbing the pile to get a funny-looking sort of gadget, but that

stuff was piled loose, just tossed up there, you know; and when I started to climb, the stuff started to shift and I was afraid it might all come down on top of me. So I climbed down again, real careful. After that I had to satisfy myself with whatever I could pick up at the bottom of the pile."

The colonel had become greatly interested, leaning forward in his chair so he wouldn't miss a word. "Some of this junk," he asked. "Could you tell what it was?"

"There was a pair of spectacles," said George, "with some sort of gadget on them and I tried them on and I got so happy that it scared me, so I took them off and I quit being happy; then I put

them on again and I was happy right away ..."

"Happy?" asked Charley. "Do you mean they made you drunk?"

"Not drunk, happy," said George. "Just plain happy, that is all. No troubles and no worries and the world looked good and a man enjoyed living. Then there was another thing, a big square piece of glass. I suppose you'd call it a cube of glass. Like these fortune tellers have, but it was square instead of round. It was a pretty thing, all by itself, but when you looked into it - well, it didn't reflect your face, like a mirror does, but there seemed to be some sort of picture in it, deep inside of it. It looked to me, that first time, like maybe it was a tree

and when I looked closer I could see it was a tree. A big, high elm tree like the one that used to stand in my grandfather's yard, the one that had the bobolink's nest way up at the top, and this one, too, I saw, had a bobolink's nest and there was the bobolink, himself, sitting on a limb beside the nest. And then I saw it was the very tree that I remembered, for there was my grandfather's house and the picket fence and the old man sitting in the battered lawn swing, smoking his corncob pipe. You see, that piece of glass showed you anything that you wanted to see. First there was just the tree, then I thought about the nest and the nest was there and then the house showed up and the picket fence and I

was all right until I saw the old man himself - and him dead for twenty years or more. I looked at him for a while and then I made myself look away, because I had thought a lot of the old man and seeing him there made me remember too much, so I looked away. By then I thought I knew what this glass was all about so I thought of a pumpkin and the pie was there, with gobs of whipped cream piled on it and then I thought of a stein of beer and the beer was there ..."

"I don't believe," said Charley, "a single word of this." "Go on," urged the colonel. "Tell us the rest of it." "Well," said George, "I guess I must have walked almost all the way around that pile, picking one thing up and throwing

another away and I was loaded, I can tell you. I had my arms full and my pockets full and stuff hung around my neck. And suddenly, driving out from those tall buildings came this car, floating about three feet off the ground ..."

"You mean the vehicle that you have out there?"

"The very one," said George. "There was a sad-looking old geezer driving it, and he ran it up alongside the pile and set it down, then got out of it and started walking back, sort of hobbling. So I went up to it and I dumped all the stuff I had been carrying into the back seat and it occurred to me that with it I could carry away more than I could in my

arms. But I thought that first, perhaps, I had ought to see if I could operate it, so I climbed in the driver's seat and there was no trick to it at all. I started it up and began to drive it, slow, around the pile, trying to remember where I had discarded some of the stuff I had picked up earlier - intending to go back and get it and put it in the back seat. I heard the sound of running feet behind me and when I looked around there was this gent all dressed in black. He reached the car and put one hand upon it and vaulted into the seat beside me. The next instant we were in Willow Grove."

"You mean to tell us," cried the colonel, leaping to his feet, "that you have the back seat of that car loaded

with some of these things you have been telling us about?"

"Colonel, please sit down," said Charley. "You can't possibly believe any of the things he has been telling us. On the face of them, they are all impossible and ..."

"Charley," I said, "let me cite a few more impossibilities, like a painting being in the National Gallery of Art and also in Willow Grove, like that car out there without any wheels, like a gadget that is hot at one end and cold at the other."

"God, I don't know," said Charley, desperately. "And I am the guy that has it in his lap."

"Charley," I said, "I don't believe you

have anything in your lap at all. I don't think there is a single legal question involved in this whole mess. Taking a car you might say, being of the particular turn of legal mind you are, without the permission of the owner, only it is not a car

?»

"It's a vehicle!" Charley yelled.

"But the owner had junked it. He'd junked it and walked away and ..."

"What I want to know," the colonel said, "is where this place is and why the people were discarding their possessions."

"And you'd also," I said, "love to get your hands on some of those possessions."

"You're damned right I would" said the colonel, grimly. "And I'm going to. Do you realise what some of them might mean to this nation of ours? Why, they might spell the margin of difference between us and the other side and I don't intend ..."

"Colonel," I said, "haul down the flag. There is no use of screaming. I am sure that George would be willing to discuss terms with you."

Feet came pounding up the stairs and down the hall. The door flew open and a deputy sheriff came skidding to a halt.

"Charley," he panted, "I don't know what to do. There's been a crazy-looking coot preaching to a crowd out by the Soldier's Monument. The sheriff, I am

told, went out to stop it, him not having any licence to be preaching anywhere, let alone the courthouse square, and then came charging back. I came in the back way, without knowing anything about what was going on, and I found the sheriff collecting up the guns and ammunition and when I asked him what was going on, he wouldn't talk to me, but went walking out the front door and he threw all of them guns and all that ammunition down at the base of the monument. And there are a lot of other people bringing other things and throwing them there, too ..."

I didn't wait to hear the rest of it. I dodged past the deputy and through the door and down the stairs, heading for the

building's front.

The pile had grown to a size that was big enough to cover the base of the monument; and there were, I saw, such things as bicycles, radios, typewriters and 5 sewing machines, electric razors and lawn mowers; and there was a car or two, jammed up against the monument. Dusk had fallen and the farmers were coming into town to trade and people were coming across the square, dark, muffled figures, lugging stuff to throw upon the pile.

There was no sign of the passenger. He had done his dirty work and gone. Standing there in the courthouse square, with the street lamps swinging in the tiny breeze and all those dark-enshrouded

figures toiling up the lawn toward the monument, I had the vision of many other towns throughout the country with growing piles of discarded objects bearing testimony to the gullibility of the human race.

My God, I thought, they never understood a word of what he said, not a single syllable of that clacking tongue of his. But the message, as had been the case which we'd pushed back to clear the path for him, had been plain and clear. Thinking about it, I knew I'd been right up there in Charley's office when I'd said it was a matter of semantics.

We had words, of course, lots of words, perhaps more than an ordinary man would ever need, but intellectual

words, tailored for their precise statement of one peculiar piece of understanding; and we'd become so accustomed to them, to their endless ebb and flow, that many of them - perhaps most of them - had lost the depth and the precision of their meaning. There had been a time when great orators could catch and hold the public ear with the pure poetry of their speech and men such as these had at times turned the tide of national opinion. Now, however, in large part, spoken words had lost their power to move. But the laugh, I thought, would never lose its meaning. The merry laugh that, even if one were not included in it, could lift the human spirits; the belly laugh that spelled out unthinking

fellowship; the quiet laugh of superior, supercilious intellect that could cut the ground beneath one.

Sounds, I thought - sounds, not words - sounds that could trigger basic human reaction. Was it something such as this that the passenger had used? Sounds so laboriously put together, probing so deeply into the human psyche, that they said almost as much as the most carefully constructed sentence of intellectual speech, but with the one advantage that they were convincing as words could never be. Far back in man's prehistory there had been the grunt of warning, the cry of rage, the food-call, the little clucking recognition signals.

Was this strange language of the

passenger's no more than a sophisticated extension of these primal sounds?

Old Con Weatherby came tramping stolidly across the lawn to fling his portable television set upon the pile, and behind him came a young housewife I didn't recognise who threw a toaster and a blender and a vacuum cleaner beside Con's television set.

My heart cried out to them in my pity of what was happening and I suppose I should have hurried forth and spoken to them - Old Con at least - trying to stop them, to show them this was all damn foolishness. I knew Old Con had saved dollars here and there, going without the drinks he wanted, smoking only three cigars a day instead of his usual five, so

that he and his old lady could have that television set. But, somehow, I knew how useless it would be to stop them, to do anything about it.

I went down across the lawn feeling beat and all played out. Coming up the lawn toward me, staggering under a heavy load, came a familiar figure.

"Dorothy!" I yelled.

Dorothy stopped and some of the books that she was carrying up toward the monument came unstuck from the load and went thumping to the ground. In a flash I knew exactly what they were - my law books.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Take those back, Hey, what is going on!"

I didn't need to ask, of course. Of all

the people in Willow Grove, she would have been the one most certain to be on hand to listen to the passenger and the most avid to believe. She could smell out an evangelist 20 miles away and the high moments of her life were those spent with her scrawny little bottom planted on the hardness of a bench in the suffocating air of a tent meeting and listening to some jackleg preacher spout about his hellfire and brimstone. She'd believe anything at all and subscribe to it whole-heartedly so long as it was evangelistic.

I started down the lawn toward her but was distracted.

From the other side of the square came a snarling, yipping sound; out of

the dusk came a running figure, with a pack of dogs snapping at his heels. The man had shucked up his robe to give him extra leg room, and he was making exceptionally good time. Every once in a while one of the dogs would get a mouthful of the robe that flowed out behind him, snapping in the wind of his rapid movement, but it didn't slow him down.

It was the passenger, of course, and while he'd done right well with humans, it was quite evident he was doing not so well with dogs. They had just been let loose with the dusk, after being tied up for the day, and they were spoiling for a bit of fun. They didn't understand the talk of the passenger perhaps, or there was

something so different about him that they immediately had pegged him as some sort of outlander to be hunted down.

He went across the lawn below me in a rush with the dogs very close behind, and out into the street, and it wasn't until then that I realised where he would be heading.

I let out a whoop and set out after him. He was heading for that car to make his getaway and I couldn't let him do it. That car belonged to George.

I knew I could never catch him, but I pinned my hopes on Chet. Chet would have a man or two guarding the car; and while the passenger would probably talk them out of it, they might slow him a bit,

enough for me to catch up with him before he had taken off. He might try, of course, to talk me out of it as well with his chattering gibberish, but I told myself I'd have to do my best to resist whatever he might tell me.

We went whipping down the street, the passenger with the dogs close to his heels, and me close to the dogs; and there, up ahead, stood the car out in front of the station. There still was a fair-sized crowd around it, but the passenger yelled some outlandish sounds at them and they began to scatter.

He didn't even break his stride, and I'll say this much for him - he was quite an athlete. Ten feet or so from the car, he jumped and sailed up through the air and

landed in the driver's seat. He was plenty scared of those mutts, of course, and that may have helped him some; under certain crisis circumstances a man can accomplish feats that ordinarily would be impossible. But even so, he had to be fairly athletic to manage what he did.

As he landed in the driver's seat the car immediately took off upward at a slant, and in a couple of seconds had soared above the buildings and was out of sight. The two cops that Chet had detailed to guard the car just stood there with their jaws hanging down, looking up to where the car had gone. The crowd that had been there and scattered when the passenger yelled his gibberish at

them now turned about and stared as vacantly, while the dogs circled around, puzzled, sniffing at the ground and every now and then pointing up a nose to bay.

I was standing there like the rest of them when someone came running up behind me and grabbed my arm. It was Colonel Sheldon Reynolds.

"What happened?"

I told him, somewhat bitterly and profanely, exactly what had happened.

"He's gone futureward," the colonel said. "We'll never see him or the car again."

"Futureward?" I asked stupidly.

"That must be it," the colonel said.

"There's no other was to explain it.

George wasn't in contact with any UFO,

as I had thought to be the case. He must have travelled futureward. You probably were right about the way the passenger talked. That was a new semantics. A sort of speech shorthand, made up of basic sounds. I suppose it would be possible, but it would take a long time to develop. Maybe it developed, or was borrowed, when the race went to the stars - a sort of universal language, a vocal version of the sign language used by the Great Plains Indians . . ."

"But that would be time travel," I protested. "Hell, George doesn't know enough . . ."

"Look," said the colonel, "you maybe don't need to know anything to travel in time. You maybe have to feel something;

you may have to be in tune. There might be only one man in the entire world today who can feel that way ..."

"But, colonel," I said, "it makes no sense at all. Let's say George did go into the future - just for the sake of argument, let us say he did. Why should people up in the future be throwing away their things, why should there be the big pile of junk?"

"I don't know," the colonel said. "That is, I couldn't say for sure, but I have a theory."

He waited for me to ask about his theory, but when I didn't ask, he went ahead and told me.

"We've talked a lot," he said, "about contact with other intelligences that live

on other stars and we've done some listening in the hope of picking up some signals sent out by peoples many light years distant. We haven't heard any signals yet and we may never hear any because the time span during which any race is technologically oriented may be very short."

I shook my head. "I don't see what you're driving at," I told him. "What has all that had happened here got to do with signals from the stars?"

"Perhaps not very much," he admitted, "except that if contact is ever made it must be made with a technological race very much like ours. And there are sociologists who tell us that the technological phase of any society finds

ways and means of destroying itself or it creates stresses and pressures against which the people rebel or it becomes interested in something other than technology and . . ."

"Now hold up a minute," I said. "You are trying to tell me that this junk heap of George's is the result of the human race, in some future day, rejecting a technological society - throwing away technological items? It wouldn't work that way. It would be a gradual rejection, a gradual dying out of technology. People wouldn't just decide they wanted no more of it and go out and throw all their beautiful, comfortable gadgets ..."

"That could happen," the colonel

argued. "It could happen if the rejection was the result of a religious or evangelistic movement. The passenger may have been one of their evangelists. Look at what he did right here in a few minutes' time. Typewriters, radios, television sets, vacuum cleaners in that pile on the courthouse lawn - all technological items."

"But a painting isn't technological," I protested. "A pail of diamonds isn't."

Both of us stopped talking and looked at one another in the deepening dusk. Both of us realised, I guess, that there wasn't too much sense of us standing there and arguing over a speculation.

The colonel shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "It was only an idea. The car is

lost for good, of course, and all the stuff George had thrown into the back seat. But we have the other stuff..."

One of the cops who had been set to guard the car had been standing close and listening to us and now he broke in on us.

"I am sorry sir," he said gulping a little, "but we ain't got none of it. All of it is gone."

"All of it!" I yelled. "The painting and the diamonds. I told Chet . . ."

"Chet, he couldn't do nothing else," said the man. "He had two of us here and he had two inside guarding that other stuff and when the ruckus started up at the courthouse, he needed men and he didn't have them . . ."

"And so he brought the painting and the diamonds and the other stuff out here and put them in the car," I yelled. I knew Chet, I knew how he would think.

"That way he figured we could guard them all," said the man. "And we could have, but . . ."

I turned and started to walk away. I didn't want to hear another word. If Chet had been there, I would have strangled him.

I was walking down the sidewalk, clear of the crowd, and there was someone walking close beside me, just a little way behind. I looked around; it was the colonel.

His mouth shaped a single word as I looked around at him, "George," he said.

We both of us must have had the same idea.

"Are the Yankees and Twins on TV tonight?" I asked.

He nodded.

"For the love of God," I said, "let us get some beer."

We made it in record time, each of us lugging a couple of six-packs.

George had beaten us to it.

He was sitting in front of the TV set, in his stockinged feet, watching the ball game with a can of beer in hand.

We didn't say a word. We just put the beer down beside him so there'd be no danger of his running out of it and went into the dining room and waited in the dark, keeping very quiet.

In the sixth, the Yanks had two men on and Mantle up to bat and Mantle hit a double. But nothing happened. George just went on drinking beer, wriggling his toes and watching television.

"Maybe," said the colonel, "it has to be the seventh."

"And maybe," I said, "a double doesn't count. It may take a strike-out."

We keep on trying, of course, but our hopes are fading. There are only four more Twin and Yankee games on television before the season ends. And someone wrote the other day that next year, for sure, Mantle will retire.