

# Looking for Mr. Green A Story

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.... H 'ARD work? No, it wasn't really so hard....by **Commentary Bk**

*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might. . . .*

Hard work? No, it wasn't really so hard. He wasn't used to walking and stair-climbing, but the physical difficulty of his new job was not what George Grebe felt most. He was delivering Relief checks in the Negro district, and although he was a native Chicagoan this was not a part of the city he knew much about—it needed a depression to introduce him to it. No, it wasn't literally hard work, not as reckoned in foot-pounds, but yet he was beginning to feel the strain of it, to grow aware of its peculiar difficulty. He could find the streets and numbers, but the clients were not where they were supposed to be, and he felt like a hunter inexperienced in the camouflage of his game. It was an unfavorable day, too—fall, and cold, dark weather, windy. But, anyway, instead of shells in his deep trench coat pocket he had the cardboard of checks, punctured for the spindles of the file, the holes reminding him of the holes in player-piano paper. And he didn't look much like a hunter, either; his was a city figure entirely, belted up in this Irish conspirator's coat He was slender without being tall, stiff in the back, his legs looking shabby in a pair of old tweed pants, gone through and fringy at the cuffs. With this stiffness, he kept his head forward, so that his face was red from the sharpness of the weather; and it was an indoors sort of face

with gray eyes that persisted in some kind of thought and yet seemed to avoid definiteness of conclusion. He wore sideburns that surprised you somewhat by the tough curl of the blond hair and the effect of assertion in their length. He was not so mild as he looked, nor so youthful; and nevertheless there was no effort on his part to seem what he was not. He was an educated man; he was a bachelor; he was in some ways simple; without lushing, he liked a drink; his luck had not been good. Nothing was deliberately hidden.

He felt that his luck was better than usual today. When he had reported for work that morning, he had expected to be shut up in the Relief office at a clerk's job, for he had been hired downtown as a clerk, and he was glad to have, instead, the freedom of the streets and welcomed, at least at first, the vigor of the cold and even the blowing of the hard wind. But on the other hand he was not getting on with the distribution of the checks. It was true that it was a city job; nobody expected you to push too hard at a city job. His supervisor, that young Mr. Raynor, had practically told him that Still, he wanted to do well at it. For one thing, when he knew how quickly he could deliver a batch of checks, he would know also how much time he could expect to clip for himself. And then, too, the clients would be waiting for their money. That was not the most important consideration, though it certainly mattered to him. No, but he wanted to do well, simply for doing-well's sake, to acquit himself decently of a job because he so rarely had a job to do that required just this sort of energy. Of this peculiar energy he now had a superabundance; once it had started to flow, it flowed all too heavily. And, for the time being anyway, he was balked. He could not find Mr. Green.

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So he stood in his big-skirted trench coat with a large envelope in his hand and papers showing from his pocket, wondering why people should be so hard to locate who were too feeble or sick to come to the station to collect their own checks. But Raynor had told him that tracking them down was not easy at first and had offered him some advice on how to proceed. “If you can see the postman, he’s your first man to ask, and your best bet. If you can’t connect with him, try the stores and tradespeople around. Then the janitor and the neighbors. But you’ll find the closer you come to your man the less people will tell you. They don’t want to tell you anything.”

“Because I’m a stranger.”

“Because you’re white. We ought to have a Negro doing this, but we don’t at the moment, and of course you’ve got to eat, too, and this is public employment Jobs have to be made. Oh, that holds for me too. Mind you, I’m not letting myself out. I’ve got three years of seniority on you, that’s all. And a law degree. Otherwise, you might be back of the desk and I might be going out into the field this cold day. The same dough pays us both and for the same, exact, identical reason. What’s my law degree got to do with it? But you have to pass out these checks, Mr. Grebe, and it’ll help if you’re stubborn, so I hope you are.”

“Yes, I’m fairly stubborn.”

Raynor sketched hard with an eraser in the old dirt of his desk, left-handed, and said, “Sure, what else can you answer to such a question. Anyhow, the trouble you’re going to have is that they don’t like to give information about anybody. They think you’re a

plain-clothes dick or an installment collector, or summons-server or something like that. Till you've been seen around the neighborhood for a few months and people know you're only from the Relief."

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It was dark, ground-freezing, pre-Thanksgiving weather, the wind played hob with the smoke, rushing it down, and Grebe missed his gloves, which he had left in Raynor's office. And no one would admit knowing Green. It was past three o'clock and the postman had made his last delivery. The nearest grocer, himself a Negro, had never heard the name Tulliver Green, or said he hadn't. Grebe was inclined to think that it was true, that he had in the end convinced the man that he only wanted to deliver a check. But he wasn't sure. He needed experience in interpreting looks and signs and, even more, the will not to be put off or denied and even the force to bully, if need be. If the grocer did know, he had got rid of him easily. But since most of his trade was with relievers, why should he prevent the delivery of a check? Maybe Green, or Mrs. Green, if there was a Mrs. Green, patronized another grocer. And was there a Mrs. Green? It was one of Grebe's great handicaps that he hadn't looked at any of the case records. Raynor should have let him read files for a few hours. But he apparently saw no need for that, probably considering the job unimportant. Why prepare systematically to deliver a few checks?

But now it was time to look for the janitor. Grebe took in the building in the wind and gloom of the late November day—trampled, frost-hardened lots on one side; on the other, an automobile junk yard and then the infinite work of Elevated frames,

weak-looking, gaping with rubbish fires; two sets of leaning brick porches three stories high and a flight of cement stairs to the cellar. Descending, he entered the underground passage where he tried the doors until one opened and he found himself in the furnace room. There someone rose toward him and approached, scraping on the coal grit and bending under the canvas-jacketed pipes.

“Are you the janitor?”

“What do you want?”

“I’m looking for a man who’s supposed to be living here. Green.”

“What Green?”

“Oh, you maybe have more than one Green?” said Grebe with new, pleasant hope.

“This is Tulliver Green.”

“I don’t think I c’n help you, mister. I don’t know any.”

“A crippled man.”

The janitor stood bent before him. Could it be that he was crippled? Oh, God! what if he was. Grebe’s gray eyes sought with excited difficulty to see. But no, he was only very short and stooped. A head awakened from meditation, a strong-haired beard, low, wide shoulders. A staleness of sweat and coal rose from his black shirt and the burlap sack he wore as an apron.

“Crippled how?”

Grebe thought and then answered with the light voice of unmixed candor, “I don’t know. I’ve never seen him.” This was damaging, but his only other choice was to make a lying guess, and he was not up to it. “I’m delivering checks for the Relief to shut-in cases. If he weren’t crippled he’d come to collect himself. That’s why I said crippled. Bedridden, chair-ridden . . . is there anybody like that?”

This sort of frankness was one of Grebe’s oldest talents, going back to childhood. But it gained him nothing here.

“No suh. I’ve got four buildin’s same as this that I take care of. I don’ know all the tenants, leave alone the tenants’ tenants. The rooms turn over so fast, people movin’ in and out every day. I can’t tell you.”

“Then where should I ask?”

The janitor opened his grimy lips but Grebe did not hear him in the piping of the valves and the consuming pull of air to flame in the body of the furnace. He knew, however, what he had said.

“Well, all the same, thanks. Sorry I bothered you, I’ll prowl around upstairs again and see if I can turn up someone who knows him.”

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Once more in the cold air and early darkness, he made the short circle from the cellarway to the entrance crowded between the brickwork pillars and began to climb to the third floor. Pieces of plaster ground under his feet; strips of brass tape from which the carpeting had been torn away marked old boundaries at the sides. In the passage, the cold reached him worse than in the street; it touched him to the bone. The hall toilets ran like springs. He thought grimly as he heard the wind burning around the building with a sound like that of the furnace, that this was a great piece of constructed shelter. Then he struck a match in the gloom and searched for names and numbers among the writings and scribbles on the walls. He saw “WHOOODY-DOODY GO TO JESUS,” and zigzags, caricatures, sexual scrawls, and curses. So the sealed rooms of pyramids were also decorated, and the caves of human dawn.

The information on his card was, TULLIVER GREEN—APT 3D. There were no names, however, and no numbers. His shoulders drawn up, tears of cold in his eyes, breathing vapor, he went the length of the corridor and told himself that if he had been lucky enough to have the temperament for it he would bang on one of the doors and bawl out “Tulliver Green!” until he got results. But it wasn’t in him to make an uproar and he continued to burn matches, passing the light over the walls. At the rear, in a corner off the hall, he discovered a door he had not seen before and he thought it best to investigate. It sounded empty, when he knocked, but a young Negress answered, hardly more than a girl. She opened only a bit, to protect the warmth of the room.

“Yes suh?”

“I’m from the district Relief station on Prairie Avenue. I’m looking for a man named Tulliver Green to give him his check. Do you know him?”

No, she didn’t; but he thought she had not understood anything of what he had said. She had a dream-bound, dream-blind face, very soft and black, shut off. She wore a man’s jacket and pulled the ends together at her throat. Her hair was parted in three directions, at the sides and transversely, standing up at the front in a dull puff.

“Is there somebody around here who might know?”

“I jus’ taken this room las’ week.”

He observed that she shivered, but even her shiver was somnambulistic and there was no sharp consciousness of cold in the big smooth eyes of her handsome face.

“All right, miss, thank you. Thanks,” he said, and went to try another place.

Here he was admitted. He was grateful, for the room was warm. It was full of people, and they were silent as he entered—ten people, or a dozen, perhaps more, sitting on benches like a parliament. There was no light, properly speaking, but a tempered darkness that the window gave, and everyone seemed to him enormous, the men padded out in heavy work clothes and winter coats, and the women huge, too, in their sweaters, hats and old furs. And, besides, bed and bedding, a black cooking range, a piano piled towering to the ceiling with paper, a dining-room table of the old style of prosperous Chicago. Among these people Grebe, with his cold-heightened fresh color and his smaller stature, entered like a school lad. Even though he was met with smiles

and good will, he felt that all the currents ran against him and that he would make no headway. Without having spoken a single word he knew that he was already outweighed and overborne. Nevertheless he began: "Does anybody here know how I can deliver a check to Mr. Tulliver Green?"

"Green?" It was the man that had let him in who answered. He was in shirt sleeves, in a checkered shirt, and had a queer, high head, profusely overgrown, long as a shako; the veins entered it strongly from his forehead. "I never heard mention of him. Is this where he live?"

"This is the address they gave me at the station. He's a sick man, and hell need his check. Can't anybody tell me where to find him?"

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He stood his ground and waited for a reply, his crimson wool scarf wound about his neck and drooping outside his trench coat, pockets weighted with the block of checks and official forms. They must have realized that he was not a college boy employed afternoons by a bill collector, trying foxily to pass for a Relief clerk, recognized that he was an older man who knew himself what need was, who had had more than an average seasoning in hardship. It was evident enough if you looked at the marks under his eyes and at the sides of his mouth.

"Anybody know this sick man?"

“No suh.” On all sides he saw heads shaken and smiles of denial. No one knew. And maybe it was true, he considered, standing silent in the earthen, musky human gloom of the place as the rumble continued. But he could never really be sure.

“What’s the matter with this man?” said shako-head.

“I’ve never seen him. All I can tell you is that he can’t come in person for his money. It’s my first day in this district.”

“Maybe they given you the wrong number?”

“I don’t believe so. But where else can I ask about him?” He felt that his persistence amused them deeply, and in a way he shared their amusement that he should stand up so tenaciously to them. Though smaller, though slight, he was his own man, he retracted nothing about himself, and he looked back at them, gray-eyed, with amusement and also with a sort of effrontery. On the bench, some man spoke in his throat, the words impossible to catch, and a woman answered with a wild, shrieking laugh, quickly cut off.

“Well, so nobody will tell me?”

“Ain’t nobody who knows.”

“At least, if he lives here, he pays rent to someone. Who manages the building?”

“Greatham Company. That’s on 39th Street.”

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Grebe wrote it in his pad. But, in the street again, a sheet of wind-driven paper clinging to his leg while he deliberated what direction to take next, it seemed a feeble lead to follow. Probably this Green didn't rent a flat, but a room. Sometimes there were as many as twenty people living in an apartment; the real estate agent would know only the lessee. And not even the latter could tell you who the renters were. In some places the beds were even used in shifts, watchmen, or jitney drivers or short-order cooks in night joints turning out after a day's sleep and surrendering their beds to a sister, a nephew, or perhaps a stranger, a transient who paid something for it. There were large numbers of these transients in this terrific, blight-bitten portion of the city between Cottage Grove and Ashland, wandering from house to house and room to room. When you saw them wander, how would you know? They didn't carry bundles on their backs or look picturesque. You simply saw a man, a Negro, walking in the street or riding in the car, like everyone else, with his thumb closed on a transfer. And therefore how were you supposed to tell? Grebe fancied the Greatham agent would only laugh at his question.

But how much it would simplify his task to be able to say that Green was old, or blind, or consumptive. An hour in the files, taking a few notes, and he need not have been at such a disadvantage. When Raynor gave him the block of checks, he had asked, "How much should I know about these people?" Then Raynor had looked as though he were preparing to accuse him of trying to make the job more important than it was. He smiled, because by then they were on fine terms, but nevertheless he had

been getting ready to say something like that when the confusion began in the station over Staika and her children.

Grebe had waited a long time for this job. It came to him through the pull of an old schoolmate in the Corporation Counsel's Office, never a close friend, but suddenly sympathetic and interested—pleased to show, moreover, how well he had done, how strongly he was coming through these miserable times. Well, he was coming through strongly, as strongly as the Democratic administration itself. Grebe had gone to see him in City Hall, and they had had a counter lunch or beers at least once a month for a year, and finally it had been possible to swing the job. He didn't mind being assigned the lowest clerical grade, nor even being a messenger, though Raynor thought he did.

This Raynor was an original sort. Grebe had immediately taken to him. As was proper on the first day, Grebe had come early, but he waited long, for Raynor was late. At last he darted into his cubicle of an office as though he had just jumped from one of those hurtling huge red Indiana Avenue cars. His thin, rough face was wind-stung and he was grinning and saying something breathlessly to himself. In his hat, a small fedora, and his coat, the velvet collar a neat fit about his neck, and his silk muffler that set off the nervous twist of his chin—he swayed and turned himself in his swivel chair, feet leaving the ground; so that he pranced a little as he sat. Meanwhile he took Grebe's measure out of his eyes, eyes of an unusual vertical length, a trace sardonic. So the two men sat for a while, saying nothing, while the supervisor raised his hat from his miscombed hair and put it in his lap. His cold-darkened hands were not clean. A steel beam passed through the little makeshift room from which machine belts once had hung. The building was an old factory.

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“I’m younger than you; I hope you won’t find it hard taking orders from me,” said Raynor. “But I don’t make them up, either. You’re how old, about?”

“Thirty-five.”

“And you thought you’d be inside doing paper-work. But it so happens I have to send you out.”

“I don’t mind.”

“And it’s mostly a Negro load we have in this district.”

“So I thought it would be.”

“Fine. You’ll get along. *C’est un bon boulot*. Do you know French?”

“Some.”

“I thought you’d be a university man.”

“Have you been in France?” said Grebe.

“No, that’s the French of the Berlitz School. I’ve been at it for more than a year, just as I’m sure people have been, all over the world, office boys in China and braves in

Tanganyika. In fact, I damn well know it Such is the attractive power of civilization. It's overrated, but what do you want? *Que voulez vous?* I get *Le Rire* and all the spicy papers, just like in Tanganyika. It must be mystifying, out there. But my reason is that I'm aiming at the diplomatic service. I have a cousin who's a courier, and the way he describes it is awfully attractive. He rides in the *wagons-Iks* and reads books. While we . . . What did you do before?"

"I sold."

"Where?"

"Canned meat at Stop and Shop. In the basement."

"And before that?"

"Window shades, at Goldblatt's."

"Steady work?"

"No, Thursdays and Saturdays. I also sold shoes."

"You've been a shoe-dog, too. Well. And prior to that? Here it is in your folder." He opened the record. "St. Olaf's College, instructor in classical languages. Fellow, University of Chicago, 1926-27. I've had Latin, too. Let's trade quotations—*Dum spiro spero.*"

*“Da dextram misero.”*

*“Alea jacta est.”*

*“Excelsior.”*

Raynor shouted with laughter, and other workers came to look at him over the partition. Grebe also laughed, feeling pleased and easy. The luxury of fun on a nervous morning.

When they were done and no one was watching or listening, Raynor said rather seriously, “What made you study Latin in the first place. Was it for the priesthood?”

“No.”

“Just for the hell of it? As a luxury? Oh, the things people think they can pull!” He made his cry hilarious and tragic. “I ran my pants off so I could study for the bar, and I’ve passed the bar, so I get twelve dollars a week more than you as a bonus for having seen life straight and whole. I’ll tell you, as a man of culture, that even though nothing looks to be real, and everything stands for something else, and that thing for another thing, and that thing for a still further one—there ain’t any comparison between twenty-five and thirty-seven dollars a week, regardless of the last reality.

Don't you think that was clear to your Greeks? They were a thoughtful people, but they didn't part with their slaves."

This was a great deal more than Grebe had looked for in his first interview with his supervisor. He was too shy to show all the astonishment he felt. He laughed a little, aroused, and brushed at the sunbeam that covered his head with its dust. "Do you think my mistake was so terrible?"

"Damn right it was terrible, and you know it now that you've had the whip of hard times laid on your back. You should have been preparing yourself for trouble. Your people must have been well off to send you to the university. Stop me, if I'm stepping on your toes. Did your mother pamper you? Did your father give in to you? Were you brought up tenderly, with permission to go out and find out what were the last things that everything else stands for while everybody else labored in the fallen world of appearances?"

"Well, no, it wasn't exactly like that." Grebe smiled. *The fallen world of appearances!* no less. But now it was his turn to deliver a surprise. "We weren't rich. My father was the last genuine English butler in Chicago. . . ."

"Are you kidding?"

"Why should I be?"

"In a livery."

“In livery. Up on the Gold Coast.”

“And he wanted you to be educated like a gentleman?”

“He did not. He sent me to the Armour Institute to study chemical engineering. But when he died I changed schools.”

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He stopped himself, and considered how quickly Raynor had reached him. In no time he had your valise on the table and your things unpacked. And afterwards, in the streets, he was still reviewing how far he might have gone, and how much he might have been led to tell if they had not been interrupted by Mrs. Staika's great noise.

But just then a young woman, one of Raynor's workers, ran into the cubicle exclaiming, “Haven't you heard all the fuss?”

“We haven't heard anything.”

“It's Staika, giving out with all her might. Reporters are coming. She said she phoned the papers, and you know she did.”

“But what is she up to?” said Raynor.

“She brought her wash and she's ironing it here, with our current, because the Relief won't pay her electric bill. She has her ironing board set up by the admitting desk, and

her kids are with her, all six. They never are in school more than once a week. She's always dragging them around with her because of her reputation."

"I don't want to miss any of this," said Raynor jumping up. Grebe, as he followed with the secretary, said, "Who is this Staika?"

"They call her the 'Blood Mother of Federal Street' She's a professional donor at the hospitals. I think they pay ten dollars a pint. Of course it's no joke, but she makes a very big thing out of it and she and the kids are in the papers all the time."

Scores of people, staff and clients divided by a plywood barrier, stood in the narrow space of the entrance, and Staika was shouting in a gruff, mannish voice, plunging the iron on the board and slamming it on the metal rest.

"My father and mother came in a steerage, and I was born in our own house, Robey by Huron. I'm no dirty immigrant. I'm a US citizen. My husband is a gassed veteran from France with lungs weaker'n paper, that hardly can he go to the toilet by himself. These six children of mine, I have to buy the shoes for their feet with my own blood. Even a lousy little white communion necktie, that's a couple of drops of blood; a little piece of mosquito veil for my Vadja so she won't be ashamed in church for the other girls, they take my blood for it by Goldblatt That's how I keep goin'. A fine thing if I had to depend on the Relief. And there's plenty of people on the rolls—fakes! There's nothin' *they* can't get, that can go and wrap bacon at Swift and Armour any time. They're lookin' for them by the Yards. They never have to be out of work. Only they

rather lay in their lousy beds and eat the taxpayers' money." She was not afraid, in a predominantly Negro station, to shout this way about Negroes.

Grebe pressed himself forward to get a nearer view of the woman. She was flaming with anger and with pleasure at herself, broad and huge, a golden-headed woman who wore a cotton cap laced with pink ribbon. She was barelegged and had on black gym-shoes, her Hoover apron was open and her great breasts, not much restrained by a man's undershirt, hampered her arms as she worked at the kid's dress on the ironing board. And the children, silent and white, with a kind of locked obstinacy, in sheepskins and lumberjackets, stood behind her. She had captured the station, and the pleasure it gave her was enormous. Yet her grievances were true grievances, if wrongly aimed, and she put the whole force of her spirit into them. But she attacked with her voice. Her small eyes she kept averted, and her look was hidden, so that she seemed to be spinning and planning as she raged.

"They send me out college case-workers in silk panties to talk me out of what I got comin'. Are they better 'n me? Who told them? Fire them. Let 'em go and get married, and then you won't have to cut electric from folks' budget."

The chief supervisor, Mr. Ewing, could not silence her and he stood with folded arms at the head of his staff, bald, trying to appear mocking, saying to his subordinates like the ex-school principal he was, "Pretty soon she'll be tired and go."

"Nothing doing," said Raynor to Grebe. "She'll get what she wants. She knows more about the Relief even than Ewing. She's been on the rolls for years, and she always

gets what she wants because she puts on a noisy show. Ewing knows it. He'll give in soon. He's only saving face. If he gets bad publicity, the Commissioner'll have him on the carpet, downtown. She's got him submerged; she'll submerge everybody in time, and that includes nations and governments." Grebe replied with his characteristic smile, disagreeing completely. Who would ever take Staika's orders, and what changes could her yelling bring about?

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No, what Grebe saw in her, the power that made her a real center of attention, and made obedient and attracted people listen, was that her cry expressed the war of flesh and blood, made a little crazy and intensely ugly, on place and condition. And at first, when he went out, she somehow presided over the whole district for him, and it took color from her; literally her color, in the spotty curb-fires, and the fires under the El, the straight alley of flamey gloom. Later too, when he went into a tavern for a shot of rye, the sweat of beer, by way of West Side Polish streets, led him to think of her again.

He wiped the corners of his mouth with his muffler, his handkerchief being too deep in his pocket to reach for, and went out again to get on with the delivery of his checks. The air bit cold and hard and a few flakes of snow formed near him. A train struck by and left a quiver in the frames and a bristling icy hiss over the rails.

Crossing the street, he descended a flight of board steps into a basement grocery, setting off a little bell. It was a dark, long store and it caught you with its stinks of

smoked meat, soap, dried peaches, and fish. There was a fire wrinkling and flapping in the little stove, and the proprietor was waiting, an Italian with a long, hollow face and stubborn bristles. He kept his hands warm under his apron.

No, he didn't know Green. You knew people, but not names. The same man might not have the same name twice. The police didn't know, either, and mostly didn't care. When somebody was shot or knifed they took the body away and didn't look for the murderer. In the first place, nobody would tell them anything. So they made up a name for the coroner and called it quits. And in the second place, they didn't give a goddam anyhow. But they couldn't get to the bottom of a thing even if they wanted to. Nobody would get to know even a tenth of what went on among these people. They stabbed and stole, they did every corrupt thing you ever heard of, men and men, women and women, parents and children, worse than the animals. They carried on their own way, and the crimes passed off like a smoke. There was never anything like it in the history of the world.

It was a long speech, deepening with every word in its fantasy and passion and becoming increasingly senseless and terrible: a swarm amassed by suggestion and by steady invention, a huge, hugging, despairing knot, a human wheel rolling through his shop.

Grebe felt that he must interrupt him. He said, sharply, "What are you talking about! All I asked was whether you knew this man."

“That isn’t even the half of it. I been here six years. You probably don’t want to believe this. But suppose it’s true?”

“All the same,” said Grebe, “there must be a way to find a person.”

The Italian’s close-spaced eyes had been queerly concentrated, as were his muscles, while he leaned across the counter trying to convince Grebe. Now he gave up the effort and sat down on his stool. “Oh . . . I suppose. Once in a while. But I been telling you, even the cops don’t get anywhere.”

“They’re always after somebody. It’s not the same thing.”

“Well, keep trying if you want I can’t help you.”

But he didn’t keep trying. He had no more time to spend on Green. He slipped Green’s check to the back of the block. The next name on the list was FIELD,  
WINSTON.

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He found the back-yard bungalow without the least trouble; it shared a lot with another house, a few feet of yard between. Grebe knew these two-shack arrangements. They had been built in vast numbers in the days before the swamps were filled and the streets raised, and they were all the same—a boardwalk along the fence, well under street level, three or four ball-headed posts for clotheslines, greening wood, dead shingles, and a long, long flight of stairs to the rear door.

A twelve-year-old boy let him into the kitchen, and there the old man was sitting by the table in a wheel chair.

“Oh, it’s d’ government man,” he said to the boy when Grebe drew out his checks.

“Go bring me my box of papers.” He cleared a space on the table.

“Oh, you don’t have to go to all that trouble,” said Grebe. But Field laid out his papers: Social Security card, Relief certification, letters from the state hospital in Manteno and a naval discharge dated San Diego, 1920.

“That’s plenty,” Grebe said. “Just sign.”

“You got to know who I am,” the old man said. “You’re from the government. It’s not your check, it’s a government check and you got no business to hand it over till everything is proved.”

He loved the ceremony of it, and Grebe made no more objections. Field emptied his box and finished out the circle of cards and letters.

“There’s everything I done and been. Just the death certificate and they can close book on me.” He said this with a certain happy pride and magnificence. Still he did not sign; he merely held the little pen upright on the golden green corduroy of his thigh. Grebe did not hurry him. He felt the old man’s hunger for conversation.

“I got to get better coal,” he said. “I send my little gran’son to the yard with my order and they fill his wagon with screening. The stove ain’t made for it. It fall through the grate. The order says Franklin County eggsize coal.”

“I’ll report it and see what can be done.” “Nothing can be done, I expect You know and I know. There ain’t no little ways to make things better, and the only big thing is money. That’s the only sunbeams, money. Nothing is black where it shines, and the only place you see black is where it ain’t shining. What we colored have to have is our own rich. There ain’t no other way.”

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Grebe sat, his reddened forehead bridged levelly by his close-cut hair and his cheeks lowered in the wings of his collar—the caked fire shone hard within the isinglass and iron frames but the room was not comfortable—sat and listened while the old man unfolded his scheme. This was to create one Negro millionaire a month by subscription. One clever, good-hearted young fellow elected every month would sign a contract to use the money to start a business employing Negroes. This would be advertised by chain-letters and word of mouth, and every Negro wage-earner would contribute a dollar a month. Within five years there would be sixty millionaires.

“That’ll fetch respect,” he said with a throat-stopped sound that came out like a foreign syllable. “You got to take and organize all the money that gets thrown away on the policy wheel and horse race. As long as they can take it away from you, they got no respect for you. Money, that’s d’ sun of human kind!” Field was a Negro of

mixed blood, perhaps Cherokee, or Natchez; his skin was reddish. And he sounded, speaking about a golden sun in this dark room, and looked, shaggy and slab-headed, with the mingled blood of his face and broad lips, the little pen still upright in his hand, like one of the underground kings of mythology, the old judging Minos himself.

And now he accepted the check and signed. Not to soil the slip, he held it down with his knuckles. The table budged and creaked, the center of the gloomy, heathen midden of the kitchen covered with bread, meat, and cans, and the scramble of papers.

“Don’t you think my scheme’d work?”

“It’s worth thinking about. Something ought to be done, I agree.”

“It’ll work if people will do it. That’s all. That’s the only thing, anytime. When they understand it in the same way, all of them.”

“That’s true,” said Grebe, rising. His glance met the old man’s.

“I know you got to go,” he said. “Well, God bless you, boy, you ain’t been sly with me. I can tell it in a minute.”

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He went back through the buried yard. Someone nursed a candle in a shed, where a man unloaded kindling wood from a sprawl-wheeled baby buggy and two voices carried on a high conversation. As he came up the sheltered passage he heard the hard

boost of the wind in the branches and against the house fronts, and then, reaching the sidewalk, he saw the needle-eye red of cable towers in the open icy height hundreds of feet above the river and the factories: those keen points. From here, his view was unobstructed all the way to the South Branch and its timber banks, and the cranes beside the water. Rebuilt after the Great Fire, this part of the city was, not fifty years later, in ruins again, factories boarded up, buildings deserted or fallen, gaps of prairie between. But it wasn't desolation that this made you feel, but rather a faltering of organization that set free a huge energy, an escaped, unattached, unregulated power from the giant raw place. Not only must people feel it but, it seemed to Grebe, they were compelled to match it in their very bodies. He no less than others, he realized. Say that (his parents had been servants in their time, whereas he was not supposed to be one. He thought that they had never owed any service like this, which no one visible asked and probably flesh and blood could not even perform. Nor could anyone show why it should be performed; or see what the performance would lead to. That did not mean that he wanted to be released from it, he realized with a grimly pensive face. On the contrary. He had something to do. To be compelled to feel this energy and yet have nothing to do—that was horrible; that was suffering; he knew what that was. It was now quitting time. Six o'clock. He could go home if he liked, to his room, that is, to wash in hot water, to pour a drink, lie down on his quilt, read the paper, eat some liver paste on crackers before going out to dinner. But to think of this actually made him feel a little sick, as though he had swallowed hard air. He had six checks left, and he was determined to deliver at least one of these: Mr. Green's check.

So he started. He had four or five dark blocks to go, past open lots, condemned houses, old foundations, closed schools, black churches, mounds, and he reflected that

there must be many people alive who had once seen the neighborhood rebuilt and new. Now there was a second layer of ruins; centuries of history accomplished through human massing. Numbers had given the place forced growth; enormous numbers had also broken it down. Objects once so new, so concrete that it could never have occurred to anyone they stood for other things, had crumbled. Therefore, reflected Grebe, the secret of them was out. It was that they stood for themselves by agreement, and were natural and not unnatural by agreement, and when the things themselves collapsed the agreement became visible. What was it, otherwise, that kept cities from looking peculiar? Rome, that was almost permanent, did not give rise to thoughts like these. And was it abidingly real? But in Chicago, where the cycles were so fast and the familiar died, and rose changed, and died again in thirty years, you saw the common agreement or covenant, and you were forced to think about appearances and realities.—He remembered Raynor and he smiled; that was a clever boy—. Once you saw that a great many things became intelligible. For instance, why Mr. Field should conceive such a scheme. Of course, if people were to agree to create a millionaire, a real millionaire would come into existence. And if you wanted to know how Mr. Field was inspired to think of this, why, he had within sight of his kitchen window the chart, the very bones of a successful scheme—the El with its blue and green confetti of signals. People consenting to pay dimes and ride the crash-box cars, it was a success. Yet how absurd it looked; how little real to start with. And yet Yerkes, the great financier who built it, had known that he could get people to agree to its reality. Viewed as itself, what a scheme of a scheme it seemed, how close to an appearance. Then why wonder at Mr. Field's idea? He had grasped a principle. And then Grebe remembered, too, that Mr. Yerkes had established the Yerkes Observatory and endowed it with millions. Now why did the notion reach him in his New York

museum of a palace or his Aegean-bound yacht to give money to astronomers? Was he awed perhaps by the success of his bizarre enterprise and therefore ready to spend money to find out where in the universe being and seeming were identical? Yes, he wanted to know what abides; and is flesh Bible-grass; and offered money to be burned in the fire of suns. Okay, then, Grebe thought further, these things exist because people consent to exist with them—we have got so far—and also there is a reality which doesn't depend on consent but within which consent is a game. But what about need, the need that keeps so many vast thousands in position? You tell me that, you private little gentleman and *decent* soul—he used these words against himself scornfully. Why is the consent given to misery? And why so painfully ugly? Because there *is something* that is dismal and permanently ugly? Here he sighed and gave it up, and thought it was enough for the present moment that he had a real check in his pocket for a Mr. Green who could be real beyond question. If only his neighbors didn't think they had to conceal him.

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This time he stopped at the second floor. He struck a match and found a door. Presently a man answered his knock and Grebe had the check ready and showed it even before he began. “Does Tulliver Green live here? I'm from the Relief.”

The man narrowed the opening and spoke to someone at his back.

“Does he live here?”

“Uh-unh. No.”

“Or anywhere in this building? He’s a sick man and he can’t come for his dough.” He held the check up into the light, which was smoky and smelled of charred lard, and the man held off the brim of his cap to study it.

“Uh-unh. Never seen the name.”

“There’s nobody around here that uses crutches?”

He seemed to think, but it was Grebe’s impression that he was simply waiting for a decent interval to pass.

“No, suh. Nobody I ever see.”

“I’ve been looking for this man all afternoon,” Grebe spoke out with sudden force, “and I’m going to have to carry this check back to the station. It seems strange not to be able to find a person to *give* him something when you’re looking for him for a good reason. I suppose if I had bad news for him I’d find him quick enough.”

There was a responsive motion in the other man’s face. “That’s right, I reckon.”

“It almost doesn’t do any good to have a name if you can’t be found by it. It doesn’t stand for anything. He might as well not have any,” he went on, smiling. It was as much of a concession as he could make to his great desire to laugh.

“Well, now, there’s a little old knot-back man I see once in a while. He might be the one you lookin’ for. Downstairs.”

“Where? Right side or left? Which door?”

“I don’t know which. Thin face little knot-back with a stick.”

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But no one answered at any of the doors on the first floor. He went to the end of the corridor, searching by matchlight, and found only a stairless exit to the yard, a drop of about six feet. But there was a bungalow near the alley, an old house like Mr. Field’s.

To jump was unsafe. He ran from the front door, through the underground passage and into the yard. The place was occupied. There was a light through the curtains, upstairs. The name on the ticket under the broken, scoop-shaped mailbox was Green! He exultantly rang the bell and pressed against the locked door. Then the lock clicked faintly and a long staircase opened before him. Someone was slowly coming down—a woman. He had the impression in the weak light that she was shaping her hair as she came, making herself presentable, for he saw her arms raised. But it was for support that they were raised; she was feeling her way downward, down the walls, stumbling. Next he wondered about the pressure of her feet on the treads; she did not seem to be wearing shoes. And it was a freezing stairway. His ring had got her out of bed, perhaps, and she had forgotten to put them on. And then he saw that she was not only shoeless but naked; she was entirely naked, blundering down and talking to herself, a heavy woman, naked and drunk. The contact of her breasts on his coat made him go back against the door with a blind, rousing shock. See what he had tracked down, in his hunting game! He hadn’t reckoned with such prey. The woman was saying to herself, furious with insult, “So I cain’t—, huh? I’ll show that—kin’ I, cain’t I.”

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What should he do now? Why, he should go. He should turn and go. He could not talk to this woman. He could not keep her standing naked in the cold. However, he could not go. He could not acknowledge that what he had found was too much for him.

He said, "Is this where Mr. Green lives?"

But she was still talking to herself and did not hear him.

"Is this Mr. Green's house?"

At last she turned her furious drunken glance on him. "What do you want?"

Again her eyes wandered from him, a dark wink of blood in their enraged brilliance.

He wondered that she didn't feel the cold.

"I'm from the Relief."

"Awright, what?"

"I've got a check for Tulliver Green."

This time she heard him and put out her hand.

“No, no, for *Mister* Green. He’s got to sign,” he said ridiculously. How was he going to get Green’s signature tonight!

“I’ll take it.”

He desperately shook his head, thinking of Mr. Field’s precautions about identification. “I can’t let you have it It’s for him. Is he upstairs?”

“Awright. Take it up yourself, you goddam fool.”

Yes, he was a goddamned fool. Of course he could not go up. Green would be drunk and naked, too. And perhaps he would appear on the landing soon. He looked eagerly up to the narrow height of the green wall. Empty! It remained empty!

“Hell with you, then!” he heard her cry and suddenly saw, with burning self-ridicule, how far his desire had carried him. Then why didn’t he leave? He made ready to go.

“Ill come tomorrow, tell him.”

“Ah, hell with you. Don’ never come. What you doin’ here in the night-time. Don’ come back.” She yelled so that he saw the breadth of her tongue. She stood astride in the long cold box of the hall and held on to the bannister and the wall. The bungalow itself was shaped something like a box, an immense sentry box pointing into the freezing air and sharp, wintry lights.

“If you are Mrs. Green, I’ll give you the check,” he said, changing his mind.

“Give here, then.” She took it, took the pen offered with it in her left hand, and tried to write on the wall. He looked around, almost as though to see whether his madness was being observed, and came near believing that someone was standing on a mountain of used tires in the auto-junking shop next door.

“But are you Mrs. Green?” he now thought to ask. But she was already climbing the stairs with the check, and it was too late, if he had made an error, if he was now in trouble, to undo the thing. However, a moment came, illuminated from the greatest height, when you could not refuse to yield a check, a municipal check, and therefore his worry stung him only superficially. Besides, though she might not be Mrs. Green, he was convinced that Mr. Green was upstairs. Whoever she was, the woman stood for Green whom this time he was not to see. “Well, you silly bastard,” he said to himself, “so you found him. So what?” But it was important that there was a real Mr. Green whom they could not keep him from reaching because he seemed to come as an emissary from hostile appearances. And though the self-ridicule was slow to diminish, and his face, throat and chest, arms, his whole body blazed with it, he had, nevertheless, a reason for elation, too. “For after all,” he said, “I *did* get to him.”

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