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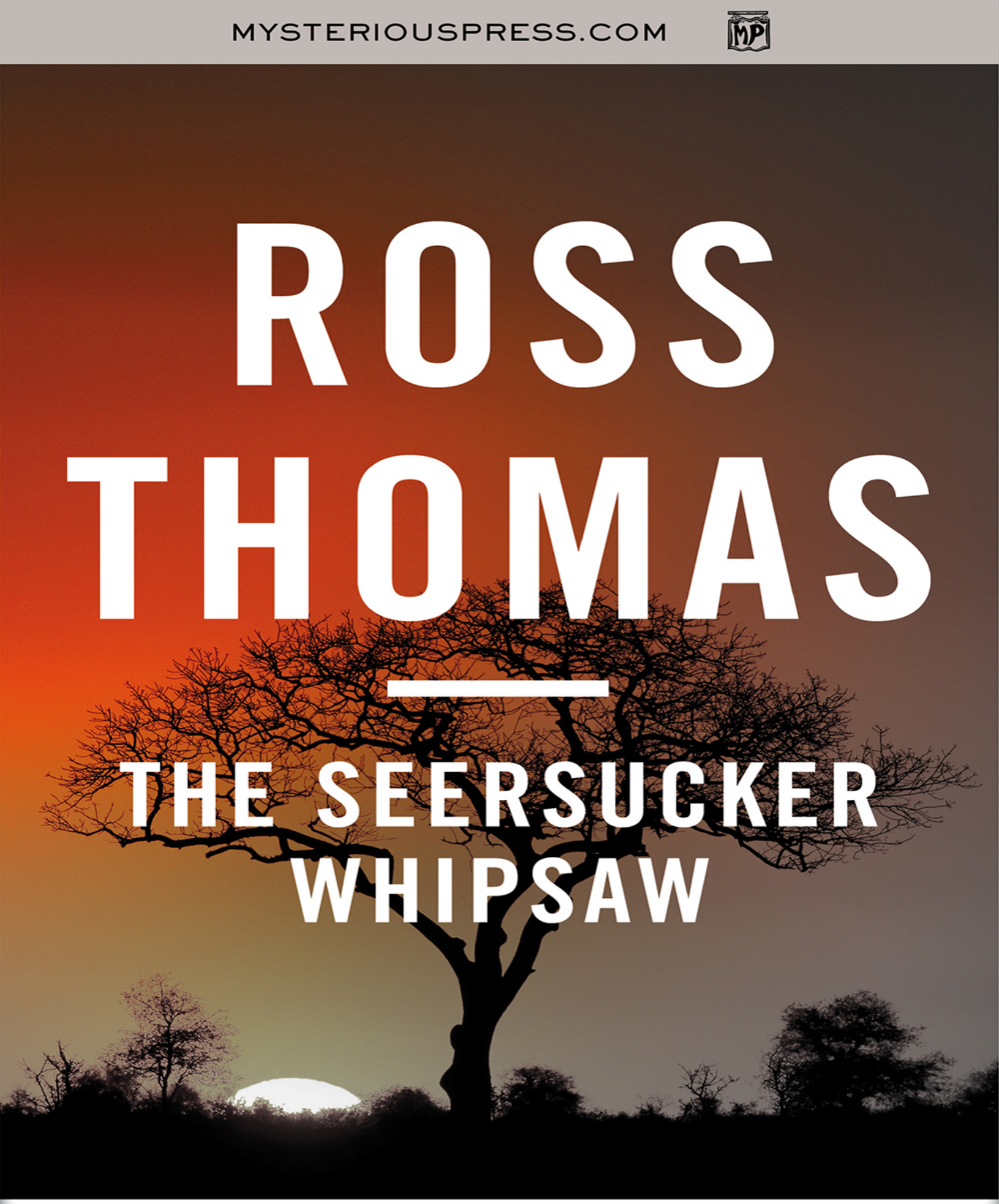
ROSS THOMAS

THE SEERSUCKER WHIPSAW



BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

Contents

Looking for more suspense?

About the Book

An old-school Southerner is recruited to run a political campaign in a dangerous African election.
Clinton Shartelle doesn't seem like a good choice to run a political campaign in Albertia. For one thing, he's American, and Albertia is a small coastal republic in Africa, about to be cut loose from the English Crown. For another, Shartelle is Southern and fiercely proud of it, and his ideas about racial politics veer unpredictably from progressive to rigidly old-fashioned. But Shartelle is the best, and the political future of Albertia is too important to be left to anyone else.
If history is any indication, this first fair election will probably be the country's last. Rich natural resources make it attractive to businessmen on both sides of the Atlantic, opening Albertia up to political corruption. For his part, Shartelle is hired to make sure that a British industrialist's favored candidate wins the presidency. But the opposition is backed by the CIA, for whom murder is just another political tool.

Review quote.

"Ross Thomas is without peer in American suspense." - *Los Angeles Times.*

"What Elmore Leonard does for crime in the streets, Ross Thomas does for crime in the suites." - *The Village Voice.*

"Ross Thomas is that rare phenomenon, a writer of suspense whose novels can be read with pleasure more than once." - *Eric Ambler, author of The Mask of Dimitrios*.

About the Author

The winner of the inaugural Gumshoe Lifetime Achievement Award, Ross Thomas (1926-1995) was a prolific author whose political thrillers drew praise for their blend of wit and suspense. Born in Oklahoma City, Thomas grew up during the Great Depression, and served in the Philippines during World War II. After the war, he worked as a foreign correspondent, public relations official, and political strategist before publishing his first novel, "The Cold War Swap" (1967), based on his experience working in Bonn, Germany. The novel was a hit, winning Thomas as an Edgar Award for Best First Novel and establishing the characters Mac McCorkle and Mike Padillo.

Thomas followed it up with three more novels about McCorkle and Padillo, the last of which was published in 1990. He wrote nearly a book a year for twenty-five years, occasionally under the pen name Oliver Bleeck, and won the Edgar Award for Best Novel with "Briarpatch" (1984). Thomas died of lung cancer in California in 1995, a year after publishing his final novel, "*Ah, Treachery*!"

The Seersucker Whipsaw

Ross Thomas

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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Confound their politics,
Frustrate their knavish tricks …
—*Old Song*

TO HARRIET

whip · saw (hwip’so) v.t. 1. to cut with a whipsaw; hence, 2. to defeat or get the best of (a person) two ways at once, as in *faro,* by winning two different bets in a single play.

Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language

Chapter

1

My four-city search for Clinton Shartelle ended in Denver where I found him playing shortstop for the Kwikway Truckers in a sandlot park at 29th and Champa. He was playing barefoot and talking it up in the infield.

The scoreboard said it was the top half of the ninth and that the Truckers were leading the Pueblo Ironmen six to five. There was one out with the tying run on first. The bleachers that ran along the third and first base lines were about three-quarters filled with the teams' families, friends, and just people who think a free baseball game is a good way to kill a warm July evening.

I took a seat in the stands next to a fat Mexican who ate tamales out of a newspaper as he gave some advice to the pitcher.

"Burn it in there, baby!" the Mexican yelled through a cupped hand. He had something wrong with his adenoids and whatever it was lent his voice a blasting resonance that crackled in the night air.

"Where do you get the tamales?" I asked.

"Guy's got a cart, right down there by third," the Mexican said. I went over and bought three tamales from an old man with a white pushcart that rolled on bicycle wheels. He used *The Denver Post* to wrap them in, but the individual tamales were bound in real cornshucks. They cost twenty-five cents each.

I went back to the bleachers and sat down by the Mexican again. The pitcher tried another fast ball, but it was low and outside. “How come the guy playing short hasn’t got any uniform?” I asked the Mexican.

“Just a minute,” he said and gave the pitcher some additional encouragement. “The guy out there was just sitting here watching. Then when Connors got his ankle twisted, he just goes over and talks to the manager and they give him Connors’ glove and he starts playing. He ain’t bad neither.”

“Connors is regular short, huh?”

“He’s regular short, but he got his ankle twisted in the second inning when he mistook a hop.”

“And the tall guy’s been playing since?”

The Mexican chewed the last of his tamale, licked his fingers neatly, and nodded. “That’s right,” he said after he tidied himself up.

The pitcher took a long windup and tried a slider. It was hit-and-run. The man at the plate got a fat piece of the ball as the runner on first scampered towards second. It was a hard-hit grounder to short that took a nasty bounce, but Shartelle pulled it in on the hop and snapped it to second in one smooth motion as if he had been doing it all spring and summer. The second baseman made a nice throw to first in time for the double play.

“How ’bout that?” the Mexican said.

“He can go to his right,” I said.

“Not bad for an old guy like that.”

“You mean the shortstop?”

“He must be close to forty.”

“And then some,” I said and walked down from the bleachers towards the bench of the Kwikway Truckers.

I had never met Clinton Shartelle, but I had seen pictures of him in the elaborate dossier that the agency had compiled and bound in a leather folder that made it look like a presentation to Anaconda Copper. We always went

sled-length in that agency. The pictures had been mostly news shots, grainy stuff from AP, UPI's Wide World, Black Star, and the rest of the commercial houses. In nearly all of them Shartelle had been in the background, apparently by accident, standing slightly behind and to the right of the photos' principal figures. In most of the shots he wore a preoccupied look, as if he were trying to remember whether he had turned off the roast. In others, he was next to a variety of beaming but somehow glassy-eyed men—young, old, and middleaged—who smiled vacuous smiles and made some small gesture of victory: a thumb and index finger forming an O or hands clasped together over their heads in the boxer's salute.

The pictures showed Shartelle as a man with a face in the shape of a broken heart. His chin came to a rough point and a wide mouth wandered around above it. His nose was on the right track until it got halfway to where it was supposed to go and then it veered slightly to the left. It was a good nose, a strong nose. His eyes in the pictures were dark and direct and the left eyebrow was in a fixed arc that lent him a questioning look. It was a face that gave off, if it gave off anything, an air of preoccupied amusement that stopped just short of cynicism, but not much short.

He was using a towel on the short-cropped hair that was his trademark, when I approached him. The hair met in a widow's peak, was pure white, and had been so since he was nineteen years old.

"That was a nice play, Mr. Shartelle," I said.

He turned to look at me. "Now you'd be a little young to scout for the Pittsburgh Pirates," he said. "Although that was a kindly thing to say to a man of my years."

"It was a fine catch and a good snap to second. I'm Peter Upshaw."

He put the towel on the bench and we shook hands. "My pleasure, Mr. Upshaw."

“I’ve been looking for you for five days. You’ve been moving around.”

“You come on slow, Mr. Upshaw. But nice.”

I smiled. “It’s a holdover from the days when I sold mutual funds in college.”

“And now you’re selling?”

“I’m not. I work for Padraic Duffy. In London.”

“Himself?”

“The same.”

Shartelle nodded and looked up as the ballpark’s lights were switched off. “And how is the poor Irish lad from Chicago who aspires to be England’s noblest lord?” He didn’t seem really interested.

“He was in New York for a month recently. We all hoped that they enjoyed having him there as much as we enjoyed him being there.”

“He hasn’t changed, I take it?”

“No. He hasn’t changed.”

Shartelle gave me an appraising look and again nodded his head slightly. “He hasn’t changed the initials either?”

“No. They still stand for Duffy, Downer and Theims. Limited.”

“Prosperous, I hear.”

“Very.”

“Padraic Francis Duffy—or Pig as we called him.”

“He raises them now, in case you’re interested.”

“He would,” Shartelle said. “He would raise pigs just to prove that a pigsty, as long as it’s Irish, can be a work of art. Chester Whites?”

“Poland Chinas.”

Shartelle produced a package of Picayunes and offered me one.

“I didn’t think they still made these,” I said.

“You can get them at the tobacco stores, the kind of places that sell nothing but tobacco. Most drug stores don’t carry them.”

“They’re strong.”

“I’m getting just a little chilled,” Shartelle said. “Why don’t we go to my hotel and I’ll take a shower and then you can make your pitch.” He looked around the deserted baseball field. “For some reason, I don’t think this is quite the place to entertain a proposition from Pig Duffy.”

Shartelle had a small suite in the old part of the Brown Palace on Sixteenth and Broadway. He had a view of the mountains, furniture that was a cross between Italian Provincial and Midwestern Modern, about two dozen books, and an ample liquor supply. It looked as if he had settled in for a long stay.

“You a married man, Mr. Upshaw?”

“Not any more.”

“Well, I don’t reckon this kind of living would appeal to a married man.”

“It probably depends on how long he’s been married.”

Shartelle grinned. “It might at that. Why don’t you fix yourself a drink while I take a shower. There’s a bucket of ice in the refrigerator and the refrigerator is in the bottom of that thing that looks like an *escritoire*.”

I poured a measure of Virginia Gentleman into a glass, dropped in two ice cubes which slopped a little of the liquor over the side, added some water and walked over to the window to see what I could of the mountains at night. There were some lights high up, but at night Denver looked very much like Birmingham, New Orleans, and Oklahoma City which were the three other towns where I had been searching for Clinton Shartelle.

He came out of the bedroom wearing a white shirt, a yellow, green and black striped tie that rightfully belonged to the Lancashire Fusiliers, dark gray slacks, and black loafers. His thick white hair was brushed and lay close to his head in a damp, tidy pile.

“‘Denver,’ some early settler once remarked, ‘has more sunshine and sons of bitches per square foot than any place else in the United States.’ He may have been right. I know Pig Duffy would feel right at home here.” He walked over to the fake writing desk and put some ice in a glass. “I see you have your drink, Mr. Upshaw.”

“I’m fine.”

He sat in an armchair and took a sip of his whiskey. From a distance he would look sixty, until you saw him move. The dossier said he was forty-three. Up close, if you blocked out the hair, he looked thirty-two or thirty-three despite the wide mouth and the meandering nose. I decided that it must be his eyes. There has been a lot of nonsense written about childlike gazes, but Shartelle seemed to look out on the world with the lesson-learning gray eyes of a nine-year-old who has been told that he must save the ten-dollar bill he found under the bench in the park. Although he knows he will never find another one, he also knows that he will never again tell anybody if he does.

“What role do you play in the Duffy charade, Mr. Upshaw?”

“I’m an account executive.”

“Which side?”

“Public relations.”

“In London?”

“Yes.”

“While I was taking a shower, I was thinking about your name. You did a series on Hungary a long time ago.” He named the paper I had worked for.

“You’re right. It was a long time ago.”

“And now you’re flacking for Pig Duffy?”

“They’re calling us public relations practitioners this year.”

“How’d you locate me?”

“I checked with the national committee in Washington. They had a rough itinerary. I kept just missing you. My

instructions were to make the proposition in person; no phone calls."

Shartelle rose and moved over to the window that looked out on the Denver night scene. "And what is Pig's proposition?"

"He told me to mention the fee first."

"He would."

"It's thirty thousand."

"Oh?"

"Pounds. Not dollars."

"I'll say 'oh' again and put a little interest into it."

"I don't blame you."

"Campaign?"

"Yes."

Shartelle turned from the window and looked at me. "Where?"

"Africa."

He smiled, and the smile grew into a laugh. A delightful laugh. "I'll be goddamned," he said, choked, and laughed again. "I'll be goddamned to hell! Nobody but that shanty-Irish son of a bitch would have the nerve."

"He does have a plentiful reserve."

"Mr. Upshaw, he's got the balls of a brass ape. I've seen high rollers in my time, but for plain green gall there's none that'll match Padraic Duffy, landed gentry."

"He speaks well of you," I said in game defense of my employer.

Shartelle dragged a chair close to mine, dropped into it, then leaned over and tapped me on the knee. "Why, he should, Mr. Upshaw. By God, he should! You don't know about old Pig Duffy and me and it's too long a story to tell right now, but I will say that he *should* speak well of me."

"He said you'd worked together once or twice."

"Did he tell you about the last time?"

"No."

“I don’t imagine he tells many people about that, but after it was over, I told him just like I’m talking to you that if he ever so much as mentioned my name in the same breath with his, I was going to clean his plow good.” He tapped me on the knee again. “Now I told him that as one Southern gentlemen to another.”

“Duffy’s from Chicago,” I said.

“Not when he’s in New Orleans, he’s not. In New Orleans he tells folks he’s from Breaux Bridge. Where’re you from, Mr. Upshaw?”

“North Dakota, Fargo.”

“Why, if old Pig got up to Fargo, he’d tell folks up there he was from Mandan. Or Valley City.”

“You know North Dakota?”

“Boy,” he said, “there’s damned few places in this country I don’t know. And if I call you ‘boy’, it’s just my purposeful’ plain way of speaking that seems to put folks at their ease and makes them think I’m not too bright which I probably ain’t.”

“Just call me Pete.”

“I was fixing to.”

“I think I’ll have another drink.”

“You do that. Now what’s this about Africa?”

I tried the Virginia Gentleman again. “Duffy has been asked to handle the strategy, campaign management, and public relations for Chief Sunday Akomolo who wants to be premier of Albertia when it gets independence from the Crown come next Labor Day.” I needed a breath after that.

“Who’s Chief Akomolo?”

“He’s the head of the second largest political party in the country—the National Progressives.”

“How many in the race?”

“There’re fourteen parties—but only three of them count.”

“How did Duffy get asked in?”

“Cocoa. He landed the Cocoa Marketing Board account and did his usual promotion job.”

Shartelle nodded. “I heard about it. The cocoa futures bounced around some as a result.”

“It was a volatile commodity for a while,” I said a bit pontifically. “Well, Chief Akomolo is on the Cocoa Board, met Duffy, and got the idea.”

Shartelle rose and walked over to the window again. “O.K., let’s bring it all out nice and plain. Just what kind of stakes you playing for?”

“No limit. The country’s got twenty million people, add or subtract a million or so. It’s got one of the best harbors on the West Coast. It’s got oil that hasn’t been touched, mineral deposits, a solid agricultural economy, and a built-in civil service system that’ll run for a hundred years and a day before it breaks down or someone forgets to minute a file. The British have seen to that.”

“Who’ll count the votes?”

“The Crown.”

“So the boy who gets in this time will be counting the votes the next time.”

“Probably.”

“Then there’s really going to be only one election, the first one, because the next time around the ins will have it wired.”

“You seem familiar with African politics.”

“No, I’m just familiar with all politics. It’s been my life-study. And in some circles I’m considered a leading authority, and I say that with all modesty.”

“You’ve got the track record, I hear.”

“What’s Duffy’s end?”

“Not as much as you’d think. The entire package is five-hundred thousand pounds. Your cut would be thirty thousand, as I said.”

“And if the Chief wins?”

I looked up at the ceiling. “I don’t know really. Let’s just say that there’s probably a tacit understanding that DDT would get the whole thing—advertising, promotion, consultation, marketing, feasibility studies—everything.”

“How much is all that, you reckon?”

I shrugged. “I’d guess twenty million annual billing.”

“Dollars?”

“Pounds.”

Shartelle chuckled and shook his head slowly from side to side. “Now ain’t that something? Old Pig’s got himself a fifty-six-million-dollar-a-year nigger candidate and he’s calling for help. From me. Now that’s really something.”

“He said you’d say that.”

“What?”

“Nigger candidate.”

“It bother you?”

“Nothing much bothers me, Mr. Shartelle.”

“Let me tell you one thing, boy.”

“What’s that?”

“It wouldn’t bother Pig.”

There was a silence that grew. I lighted a cigarette, an honest Lucky Strike, and smoked it without pleasure as Shartelle looked at me with a slight smile. It was the same smile he would have given a fifteen-year-old. That was all right; I felt like thirteen.

“Look, we can sit here all night and you can make snotty remarks about Duffy, but he’s paying my salary, so don’t get upset if I don’t chime in.”

Shartelle grinned. “Now, Pete, you’re just pissed off because of the nigger talk, aren’t you?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not pissed off.”

“Now, boy, I could pull out my cards in the N-Double A-C-P and CORE and show them to you. Or I could put in your hands some kindly letters I got from some of my colored friends who’ve been right active in all this Civil Rights hoop-to-do. Or as a Southern gentleman I could tell you

that I *know* colored folks because I was brought up with them, which I was, or that I had a fine old colored mammy who I loved better than anyone in this world, which I did. I could parade, right before your eyes, evidence—real evidence—that I am probably the world's biggest nigger lover, and to top it off I could describe in detail to you a high yellow I once courted in Chicago and would have married except she ran off with some smooth-talking firetruck salesman. He was of the Jewish persuasion, I believe. Now when I say nigger it's because I plain can't stand to hear some flannelmouth like me from Opelousas or Natchez trying to say Nee-gro and the word just sticking in his throat like a catfish bone. When I say nigger, it don't mean a goddamned thing because I go by the Shartelle theory of race relations, and the Shartelle theory was pounded and shaped out of a hell of a lot of experience with black and white alike and, boy, I'm gonna give you the benefit of long hours of serious thought and hard study, and I'm surely not one for much introspection. I am possessed, you may have noticed, of an outward-going personality."

"I've noticed."

"Well, now. The Shartelle theory of harmonious race relations is simple and straightforward. My theory is that we either ought to give the niggers their rights—not just lip service, but every blasted right there is from voting to fornicating, that we ought to make them have all these rights and enforce their right to them by law, and I mean tough, FBI-attracting law, until every man jack of them is just as equal as you middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. I said *either* and I mean it. Either we give them the right to marry your daughter, if you got one, and fix it so that they'll not only have the same social and educational rights that you have, but the same economic rights—the same ways and means that you've got to the pursuit of happiness out there in one of those fine suburban developments instead of in a slum. And then they'll be just

like you white folks with all your sound moral values, your Christian virtue, and your treasured togetherness. ’Course, they might lose something along the way, something like a culture, but that ain’t nothing. Now I say either we do that for them—make ’em just like everybody else—or, by God, we ought to drive ’em down in the ground like tent pegs!” Shartelle slammed his fist down on a table to show me how tent pegs are driven.”

“What do you mean ‘your’ social rights, Shartelle? You’re in just as deep.”

“Why no I ain’t, boy. My great-grandmother was a pretty little octoroon thing from New Orleans. At least that’s what my daddy told me. And that makes me about one-sixty-fourth colored, which is more than enough in most Southern states. Now who has the better right to say nigger than us niggers?”

“You’re putting me on, Shartelle.”

“Now I may be, boy, but you’ll never know for sure, will you?” He paused and grinned wickedly. “And you don’t mean to tell me it would make any difference?”

Chapter

2

We had breakfast the next morning. Shartelle had said he wished to study Duffy's proposition during the night. "I want to give it my most careful consideration, just like a Congressman writing to a constituent who's got a plan to build a bridge across the Grand Canyon."

At breakfast he was wearing a dark plaid suit pressed to perfection, a blue oxford shirt with a button-down collar, and a striped blue and black tie that he must have borrowed from another English regiment. We ordered sausage, eggs, toast, coffee, and milk for Shartelle. He had his eggs up; I asked for mine over.

"I made a few calls last night, Pete," Shartelle said as he buttered a piece of toast.

"To whom?"

"Couple of people in New York. Pig was doing some bragging there. That's to be expected. But there's something else you might be interested in—you're going to have some opposition."

"What kind?"

"Another agency."

I made the kind of face that Eisenhower did when they told him MacArthur was fired. "Who?"

"Renesslaer."

"My. Or maybe I should say my, my."

“You echo my reaction,” Shartelle said. “The name Renesslaer does hit a responsive chord. Like a kid drawing his fingernail across a blackboard.”

I thought a moment. “With offices in London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Brussels, Paris, Madrid, Frankfurt, Zurich, Rome, a dozen cities in the states, Hongkong, Bombay, Tokyo and Manila. What did I miss?”

“Toronto, Sydney, and Johannesburg.”

There are all kinds of advertising and public relations agencies. Some are desperate, one-man operations that exist from the commissions paid by equally desperate radio stations and trade publications. There are the swift-moving, hot-eyed agencies that skyrocket to success and then mellow into the pattern of the business world, much like a plumbing fixture manufacturer. And then there are the agencies like Duffy, Downer, and Theims, Ltd., multi-million dollar concerns running on charm, genius, exuberance, and the business morality of a bankrupt carnival. Finally, there are a dozen or so agencies whose size, financial power, and ruthlessness are equalled only by their stunning grasp of the mediocre. It is to these agencies, and the pilot fish which swarm about them, that the nation owes thanks for the present level of its television, radio, and the large chunk of American sub-culture that has been so profitably exported abroad.

Of these dozen or so agencies, Renesslaer was the third or fourth largest, and while the majority of them were snaking their fortunes by following Menckenian law and betting their all on the bad taste of the American public, Renesslaer had developed a world conscience.

“They’ve set up, in that agency, a world public affairs section,” Shartelle said gloomily. “And it combines all the worst features of Moral Rearmament, the Peace Corps, and International Rotary. They have a speakers’ bureau that will fly a speaker any place in the world on twelve hours notice for the guarantee of an audience of five hundred people.

And he'll make the speech in his audience's language. They've got an Oceania desk, a Southwest Africa desk, an Italian desk, and an Icelandic desk. For all I know they've got an Antarctic desk."

"I've heard about it," I said. "They send copies of the speeches around. They're translated and arrive all over the world the same day that the speech is given. You'd be surprised how many of them get printed."

Shartelle poured us some more coffee from the pewter pot. He drank his black. I used sugar.

"I remember they handled that special election in California last year," he said.

"Which side?"

"They had the one who used to play the bad guy in the movies. The one who used to play the good guy lost by half-a-million votes."

"You in on that one?" I asked.

"I could have been, but I sniffed around out there and decided it was too dicey. I can't figure that nut vote. But apparently Renesslaer got enough of them switched over at the last second."

I drew some patterns on the tablecloth with my spoon. Shartelle was silent and remote.

"Who's Renesslaer's client?" I asked.

Shartelle fished in his coat pocket and produced a scrap of paper. "I wrote his name down. I wanted to ask you about him. Renesslaer's client is Alhaji Sir Alakada Mejara Fulawa. He's a northern Albertian, I understand. What's the Alhaji mean?"

"It means he's been to Mecca."

"You mean to say Renesslaer's got themselves a non-Christian for a candidate? What else you know about him?"

"He was educated in England, speaks with a perfect Oxford accent, if there is such a thing. He's rich—I mean the private-Comet, fleet-of-Rolls-type rich. He's the natural ruler of about seven million Albertians and he lives in a

palace just south of the Sahara that's something out of *Arabian Nights*. The British love him because he's kept the troublemakers quiet."

"And Pig Duffy wants me to go to Albertia and run old Chief what's his name … Akomolo—*Sunday* Akomolo at that—against this *A*-rab Alhaji Sir Alakada Mejara Fulawa. Oh, ain't he got a name that just rolls pretty off the tongue!"

"From what I've heard he's had a few cut out."

Shartelle shook his head slowly from side to side, a broad crooked grin on his face, sheer delight in his eyes. "I tell you, Petey, it's Richard Halliburton and Rudolph Valentino and Tar*zan* all rolled into one big package and snuffed up tight with a pretty blue ribbon. Man, it's foreign intrigue and Madison Avenue and Trader Horn and *Africa!* And Pig Duffy's caught smack in the middle of it, wallowing around and squealing for help, and here comes old Clint Shartelle, all decked out in his pith helmet and bush jacket just a-rushing to the rescue. My, it's fine!"

"Call me Peter," I said. "Call me Pete, call me Mr. Upsham, or hey you, but for God's sake don't call me Petey."

"Why, boy, you're getting touchous again about my language."

"Oh, hell, call me anything."

"Now I take it that you are going to be working this cam. paign for Chief Akomolo?"

I nodded. "I drew the short straw."

"Just what will your duties be?"

"I'll be the writer. If there's anybody to read it."

"Well, now, that's fine. What kind of writer are you, Pete?"

"A fast one. Not good, just fast. When I'm not writing sharpen the pencils and mix the drinks."

"And just what does Pig want me to do?"

I looked at him and grinned. It was the first time I had smiled all morning. "Mr. Duffy said that he would like you—

and I quote—‘to inject a little American razzmatazz into the campaign.’”

Shartelle leaned back in his chair and smiled up at the ceiling. “Did he now? What do you think I’ll be doing?”

“You have the reputation as the best rough-and-tumble campaign manager in the United States. You have six metropolitan mayors, five governors, three U. S. Senators, and nine Congressmen that you can honestly claim credit for. You’ve defeated the sales tax in four states, and got it passed in one. You got an oil severance tax passed in two states and got the resulting revenue earmarked for schools in one of them. In other words, you’re the best that’s available and Padraic Duffy told me to tell you he said that. You’re to do whatever has to be done to get Chief Akomolo elected.”

“I tell you, Pete, I’m just about at the end of what might be called a sentimental journey.”

“How’s that?”

Shartelle reached for the check, signed it, and rose. “Let’s go take a little walk.” We left the hotel and headed up Broadway towards Colfax. Shartelle puffed away on one of his Picayunes.

“I happened to drop by that baseball game last night just after I’d bought a house,” he said. “I didn’t do too bad for an old fellow.”

“You’re forty-three. When Kennedy was forty-three he was playing touch football with a bad back.”

“I admit I’m a bit spry, but I owe it all to the wisdom of youth and my precocious reading habits.”

“You mentioned something about a sentimental journey back there,” I said. “About a block back.”

“The sentimental journey is associated with my youth. I used to live in this town, you know.”

We turned up Colfax towards the golddomed capitol where there is a marker that reads that at this exact spot

the city of Denver is 5,280 feet above sea level. A mile high and a mile ahead.

“I lived here in a house with my daddy and a lady friend from 1938 to 1939. Not too far from that ball park which is—you might have noticed—in a somewhat blighted area. It was a plumb miserable neighborhood even then. I was sixteen-seventeen years old. My daddy and I had come out here from Oklahoma City in the fall driving a big, black 1939 LaSalle convertible sedan. We checked in at the Brown Palace and my daddy got himself a lease on a section of land near Walsenburg, found him a rig and crew, and drilled three of the deepest dry holes you ever saw.”

Shartelle touched my arm and steered us into a drugstore. We sat in a booth, and ordered some more coffee.

“Well, sir, my daddy went busted again. He had wildcatted in Oklahoma City and brought in ten producers in the eastside field there and he had a potful of money, even if he did have to spend a spell in jail for running hot oil. He swore up and down that there was oil in Colorado. And, of course, he was right. He just drilled in the wrong place.”

The waitress brought us coffee. Shartelle stirred his. “We moved out of the Brown Palace and rented that house I bought yesterday. Me and my daddy and his lady friend. Her name was Golda Mae, a nice looking little thing. It was surely hard times, but I just went on with my lessons and let my daddy worry about the finances.”

“What lessons?” I asked.

“My Charles Atlas lessons, boy. I went through the whole course of Dynamic Tension. Clipped an ad out of *The Spider* and sent off for it. That’s when my Daddy was in the money in Oklahoma City. Hell, it wasn’t anything but isometrics, the same thing that everybody is doing now. But I followed the instructions like they were the gospel—and that’s why I’m so spry today.”

“So what are you going to do with the house you bought?”

Shartelle put a hand out in front of him and made an abrupt shoving motion. “Now don’t push me. When I’m telling, I like to tell my way. Not too long after the money ran out, Golda Mae moved on and it was just my daddy and me. I was sorry to see her go, because she was a mighty pleasant person. So one day my daddy calls me in and he says, ‘Son, I’m not making enough to support us both so I guess you’re going to have to be out on your own for a while. But I tell you what, you can have the LaSalle.’

“That offer of his was generous, even if it was worthless. You see it was winter and we didn’t have enough money for alcohol so the block froze on the LaSalle and it busted wide open. But it was the only thing he had to offer and he made the offer and we didn’t talk about the fact that the LaSalle wasn’t worth a dime. I just thanked him and declined politely, the way he’d taught me.” Shartelle paused and stirred his coffee some more. “So yesterday I bought the house in Denver, and I bought three others in New Orleans, Birmingham and Oklahoma City. They are the four my daddy and I lived in longest. I own them now and whenever I want to I can walk in and look around at the rooms and remember, or not remember.”

“You’re going to live in them?” I asked.

“No, I’m going to be landlord. I’m going to rent them for one dollar a year to poor colored folks. The only condition is that I can come in and look around when I want to. That’s not too much to ask, is it?”

“Not for a dollar a year.”

“I didn’t think so.”

We got up. I paid the cashier and we walked back down Colfax to Broadway. It was a bright cool July morning in Denver and I looked around trying to project how it was almost twenty-seven years before when a seventeen-year-

old was admonished to drive off in his legacy except that the legacy had a broken block.

“What happened to your father?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We lost touch after a while. I haven’t heard from him in twenty-five years.”

“Ever try to locate him?”

Shartelle looked at me and smiled. “I can’t say that I did. Do you think I should’ve?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

We walked on in silence. Then Shartelle asked, “How soon does Pig want me in London?”

“As soon as possible.”

He nodded. “Then we’d better leave today.”