

THE CITY STORE

Elliott was uneasily aware that he had made no contributions to the discussion for the full hour the meeting had been in progress. Blacklock would think he was sulking over his demotion.

The irony of it was that when Blacklock had called him in 'for a little talk' he was sure that his long-overdue promotion had come at last. The Amandsen chain had grown and prospered, and although a few of the older men had been asked to accept early retirement and a few younger ones had been given a week's notice, he was sure that as a senior executive of long standing he himself would soon join the managerial staff.

Of course Blacklock, in his 'little talk', hadn't called it demotion.

"It's a more challenging job, Barry," he said. "Charlie Nicholson takes overall responsibility for marketing, but that leaves you free for research in all forms of marketing and merchandising. You'll work with Charlie but you'll be one of our important research team."

Elliott shook his head. He was angry and bitterly disappointed. He said, "I'm being demoted, Peter. Don't try to make it sound like anything else."

"Depends on how you look at it," Blacklock said. "Try to see the thing reasonably. You and Charlie ought to be able to work together. And there'll be less pressure on you."

"I never minded the pressure or the hard work," Elliott told him. "Now I have to take orders from a new boy."

"He's hardly a new boy, Barry. Charlie's been with us for three years."

"Three years!" Elliott had raised his voice. "I've given the company nearly thirty years of loyal service. I was a salesman when the second store opened, then I was hardware manager, and I worked my guts out doing two men's work while people like Nicholson -"

Blacklock raised both hands in protest.

"Spare me the lecture, Barry. You're fifty-seven, aren't you? You ought to be damned glad to share up the work."

"Nicholson's bloody odd jobs man."

Blacklock shrugged. "You'd better not wait to be given odd jobs. Do your own thinking. That's what the G.M. expects."

In the end Elliott had muttered something about giving it a try. The hurt and the humiliation and his sense of failure sickened him and frightened him. The store had been his life . . .

There was a burst of laughter and he smiled quickly to show he had been following the discussion.

"Let's get on," Blacklock said. The laughing stopped. "What's next, Susan?" Blacklock looked over at the agenda. "Yes, this business of the girls." He looked at Stevens, the floor supervisor. "This was your idea, Bruce. Do you want to talk on it?"

Stevens nodded. "I've been thinking our girls look — well, too ordinary. I thought we might get a snazzier uniform designed, something bright, and maybe take up their dresses a couple of inches."

"I didn't think anybody saw much of the check-out girls' legs."

"They don't, but there are the girls in the departments, Peter. We've got a lot of male customers and they all like to see as much as they can."

"Do they?" Blacklock said. "I'm too busy myself." Some of the men laughed and Blacklock nodded. "All right, Bruce, we'll do something about it. Let's see . . . Charlie. And you, Myra. Join up with Bruce on this. Talk it over with the girls and we'll have another look at it next week. Now, Susan — is that the lot?"

"It's not on the agenda, Mr Blacklock, but Mr Gehrman wanted you to bring up that matter of the different kinds of soap."

"Yes — but it's getting late." Blacklock looked round the table. "Allan thought we might be stocking too many brands. A dozen or so. I told him I couldn't see much wrong with that. Anybody want to speak on it?"

Elliott decided he should make his contribution.

"Yes, Peter — very briefly. I think it's worth looking at. If we buy from only three or four sources instead of a dozen we ought to get our soap marginally cheaper. And cut down on paper work."

"Points taken, Barry. Now, how much do you figure we'd save — per cake of soap?"

“I haven’t figured it, Peter. Would you like me – ”

Blacklock shook his head. “Forget it, Barry, I’ll tell you how much we’d save. About a quarter of a cent on each cake. And we wouldn’t have all those different shapes and bright colours to attract the ladies.”

“But even a quarter of a cent’s worth saving. And I think we’d increase turnover. Housewives still like to get a bargain. The point is, they don’t need all those different brands.”

Blacklock decided the moment had arrived. This man couldn’t take a hint. Anyway the G.M. would be happy if he quit.

“Isn’t it interesting,” he said, looking round with a smile, “how our new research man wants to save us from bankruptcy? I bet his mother told him if you save the pennies the pounds’ll look after themselves.” He looked directly at Elliott. “You disappoint me, Barry. And you make me tired, talking on and on about saving on soap. Haven’t you done any reading or thinking in the last thirty years? Diversity’s the name of the game these days, not Grandma’s standardization. Go to the People’s Stores in Moscow if you want that. And another thing. We’re not interested in *needs*, we’re interested in *wants*. I don’t bloody care if we have fifty different kinds of soap. I tell you what. Go out and start researching. Take a warm bath and use some of that nice new perfumed French soap. Then move around amongst our pretty girls and see if there’s any reaction.”

Elliott, through his sickness, tried to appear amused. He called to the top of the table, “All right, Peter. I’ll try that some time.”

But his voice had become husky and it was doubtful whether anyone heard what he said. Everybody, including Blacklock’s secretary, was smiling. Once when he had spoken everyone had listened with respect. Now they smiled. And behind the smiles there was no sympathy, or even pity, only amusement. And perhaps relief. Their own jobs were safe.

“While we’re talking about perfume,” Blacklock said, “who was the genius responsible for putting the perfume bar near the fruit and vegetables department at Brighton Place?”

Vincent Osborne raised his hand.

“Guilty, Peter. It’s such a small area and I was in a hell of a hurry. Anyway I had a talk with Myra at lunchtime today. We’ve arranged to have the bar dismantled and set up near Ladies’ Gloves before opening time tomorrow.”

“Right, Vince, that sounds more like it.” Blacklock addressed the whole table. “The girls complained that when they put a little dab of *Nuits d’Amour* on madame’s wrist to allow madame to test its seductive fragrance all madame got was the ripe smell of cabbage and turnips.”

Everybody laughed and Blacklock closed the meeting. He liked his meetings to end on a happy note and as usual he opened up the liquor cabinet. It was the winding-down half-hour before going home, the time for good-fellowship.

Myra Wills helped herself to a gin and tonic and found herself standing beside Barry Elliott. She made a vague comment on how quickly the year was passing before smiling politely and walking away.

Elliott took his drink over to the wall and stared at a painting, an Australian landscape – a creek, light and shade, weeping willows, cows grazing on green pasture. Elliott had never liked it, and for the first time wondered why. He frowned as fragments of business chatter reached him. Perhaps that was it, the irony of the painter’s peaceful world against a background talk of computer printouts, target dates, advertising, packaging, turnover rates . . .

He turned away and looked at the little groups in the room and suddenly felt a sense of desolation that frightened him so much that he felt giddy. He sat down quickly on a leather couch and sipped his whisky. What was happening? He had never indulged in self-pity, but now it came in a deluge, he was drowning in it. It was not simply the conviction that he must resign, it was something else, something deeper . . . Elliott stared at his colleagues and knew that he had been dismissed from the club. From their fellowship. That was a sad and bitter fact, but this feeling deep inside him meant more than that, too. In a way it was as if the whole world had withdrawn from him, leaving him absolutely alone. He decided he must get away quickly. He left his glass on the table and without looking directly at anybody walked out of the room.

In the parking lot he said good-evening to the attendant and drove slowly out to the highway.

It was more than ordinary loneliness. It was as if he had died. No, much worse than that. He waited at a red light. When you died you joined the rest of the dead. The fellowship of silence. Now he was still alive, but alone. The lights turned

green and he followed the Cortina in front of him. He wondered if anyone else in the world had ever felt quite like this. Perhaps criminals, condemned to death. But even they had visitors, clergymen offering solace and hope, warders who felt sorry for them as human beings. And yet he didn't really want pity. That was not it either. It was the unreality of it all . . . Yes, that was closer. The unreality of everything, of life itself. With all the rest of humanity he had been playing at some game, and now, for him, the game had ended. So perhaps this was the reality, the recognition that it was all some kind of game. Finally, a meaningless game. But you played it hard to keep your mind off the silence ahead . . .

He told his wife, at the dinner-table, that there had been some conflicting opinions at the meeting but that they had all had a friendly drink as usual when it was over. He would tell her more — part of the truth — tomorrow. Perhaps say he was feeling about ready for early retirement. She mightn't believe him but that didn't matter, they hadn't confided much in each other for a very long time. In the early years of their marriage he had tried to make Betty a part of his success pattern, but she had let him down. She was the home-loving girl, the faithful girl, not the bright social woman who might have helped him up the ladder. He shouldn't blame her too much . . .

After dinner as usual, they watched television for an hour. They usually read for another couple of hours after that before going to their separate beds at eleven o'clock, but tonight while he pretended to read the paper he went on with his sad and puzzling thoughts. In a few hours everything had changed in the world he had known. All the life had drained out of him, leaving him empty but still alive. Nothing mattered any more. He glanced over at his wife. She was reading a novel by Graham Greene. That was another puzzle. Was she living in the author's world or in her own? What world *did* she live in?

At ten o'clock Elliott put his paper down and said he thought he would go for a walk. His wife looked directly at him. It occurred to Elliott that it was seldom that their eyes met.

"Now?" she asked.

He attempted to smile. "Why not? I feel — " He almost said 'lonely', but stopped and began again. "I feel like a little stretch. It's not very late."

She said, "All right, Barry," and held her book in front of her, waiting for him to leave.

Elliott said, "I won't be long." He went to the door, opened it, and looked back at his wife. "Would you like to come with me?"

His wife stared for a moment and then smiled at him. Elliott remembered those other smiles at the meeting, and behind the smiles the malice and amusement. Betty's smile was different.

She said, "Yes, I'd like to come. It's such a lovely night. I'll just get my coat."

While she was in the bedroom Elliott continued to think about her smile. A sad smile? Not so much sad as — uncertain. A timid smile. And behind the timidity something else, a certain loneliness. *Loneliness . . .*

Elliott felt that what remained of the solid world was dissolving and that he was part of the final dissolution. How long ago had he dismissed his wife and sentenced her to her own kind of loneliness? Was it possible that what he had known for a few hours she had known for twenty years? The shock brought with it a monstrous sense of guilt. He wanted to weep and cry out, to beg the world for forgiveness . . .

His wife came back and smiled at him again. He saw that she had not brought her coat but that she had put on a touch of lipstick.

At the door he stood near her, looking at her in silence, then put out his hand and for a moment held her hand lightly.

"You didn't bring your coat."

She gave a little laugh as she looked up at him. She said, "I won't be cold. It's a lovely night."