

THE HIDDEN ALLY

By

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In the Princeton of the 1930s, it was a commonplace that Thaddeus Strong had long outlived his generation.

He was born in 1845, auspiciously enough at the very beginning of the war with Mexico. He was born in Princeton, New Jersey, a colonial town along the coach road between New York and Philadelphia, which might have remained very small had it not been for the presence of the College of New Jersey. Because of that presence, Princeton was always more alive than any of the towns surrounding it, which perhaps explains the fact that Thaddeus had “big ideas” even as a little boy.

He was, as they said, a “swift” young lad, always tinkering with wood and metal and glue, jiggling together harnesses and different kinds of pulleys and even a lady’s parasol which withstood the wind better than any you could buy.

By the time he was fifteen, there were several professors at the College who suggested that he should get some formal learning, and become a teacher or scholar in one of the natural sciences. At age fifteen, he was a bright, promising young lad.

But then came the Civil War, and the promise of an entire generation — Union and Confederate — was put at risk. Thaddeus was not keen on entering one of the New Jersey regiments; but when President Lincoln called for volunteers, he went willingly enough. His mother was heart-broken, of course, but Thaddeus saw this as the adventure of a lifetime: a chance to see large parts of the country he might never get to see, to be exposed to a thousand new technologies that would be used in the war, and perhaps to present some of his own inventions to an only too eager general staff.



As it happened, the war dragged on and on, and all that Thaddeus got to see was guns, ammunition, and heavy artillery pieces. By the time his service ended, he had seen more than enough comrades fallen on more than enough battlefields, and was happy to return to his home in New Jersey. But when an old Presbyterian min-

ister asked him what he had learned from the death and desolation he had experienced, Thaddeus replied: “I have thought long and hard about this, and what I have learned is that there is a lot of money to be made from selling war materiel, providing you have *the right product*.”

That thought, in one form or other, informed the rest of Thaddeus’s long, productive, and singularly greedy life. From 1865 onward, he would take no time to grieve and no time to reflect; instead, he would devote himself to the production of military equipment for the US army.

In later years, Thaddeus was seen as an ingenious man — indeed, as a great innovator. But his first successful product, the one that first brought his company to the attention of the US Army, was in truth not even his. During

the long and grueling Wilderness campaign, with its huge number of casualties on both sides, a fellow New Jerseyan had taken a small hammer and reshaped the sight on his rifle just enough to make it a much more accurate weapon. This New Jerseyan then set to work to create a sight that would be more accurate still, one that could be attached to Union rifles to make them the most lethal devices anywhere; but at the bloodily unsuccessful assault on Spotsylvania, this brilliant young man became but one more Union casualty, his plans for better and more lethal rifles having been shown to but one other soldier, his comrade-in-arms, Thaddeus Strong.

Thaddeus knew that his fallen friend had a young family living in his home in Trenton, he knew that this invention might revolutionize warfare and would certainly have brought at least some remuneration to its inventor, but for the rest of the war, and indeed for the rest of his life, Thaddeus kept the entire matter a secret, slobbering over the chance to exploit his friend's idea and use it to establish his fortune. Only once, some thirty years later when he had already made millions from munitions, did a twinge of conscience make him wonder about his fallen comrade's family.

It was during the great recession of the 1890s, and Thaddeus made his way to the poorest neighborhood in Trenton to find his friend's widow. There she still lived, having barely raised her two children but having never remarried, so much in love had she been. Naturally, Thaddeus did not tell her of the vast sums of money her husband's invention had made for him; instead, he told her that he had known her husband in the war and that as a remembrance of that good man, he wanted her to have \$20 and a pocket watch (which, in truth, he was

about to discard anyway). The poor impoverished widow, transported at meeting someone who had served with her husband, thanked Thaddeus Strong at least ten times over for his generosity and made him promise that if he ever needed anything, he should not hesitate to ask her for it.

Having thus atoned for his theft, Thaddeus Strong got into his carriage and had his driver take him back to Princeton.

The first successes of Thaddeus Strong's company came early, almost as soon as he began producing rifle sights. Thaddeus had successfully demonstrated "his" invention to his old commanding officer in the last days of the war, and this gentleman had immediately promised, on behalf of the US Army, to buy the first dozen rifles that Thaddeus could send him so that he could try out the new gun sight.

Without even bothering to write to this gentlemen, Thaddeus produced some two dozen rifles in early 1866 and sent them to the officer who was now commanding a unit of the Union Army occupying Virginia. Prominently displayed at the top of the crate containing the rifles was a large and, in many ways, grossly overcharged invoice. The bill was paid *almost at once*.

This episode taught Thaddeus Strong some significant lessons of life:

1. Always overship;
2. Always overbill; and
3. Never wait for approval, most especially when payment is to be rendered by the only too careless, only too

prodigal federal government. After all, if a payment is to be made not out of one's own pocket but out of the federal treasury, no amount of expense would *ever* be too great.

It became clear to Thaddeus that he should try to provide the government not merely with rifle sights but rather with entire assembled rifles. With large amounts of such weapons available, Strong could buy large quantities at dirt-cheap prices, refit them, and sell the government finished products at vastly more than it had cost him to make them. Thaddeus Strong saw this as the ultimate example of the Gospel of Work, and his increasingly large profits as the finest flowering of American enterprise.

But there was a problem: because sights are small pieces of metal, Thaddeus had originally felt that he could buy such items at any store in Princeton, hire one or two helpers, and start producing his product. But the inclusion of the entire rifle, and the ever increasing number of orders he had to fill, made this early plan quite impractical.

And there was something else: although New Jersey had always been a state in which commerce and industry had been welcomed, there was, in the minds of the locals, something distasteful about having a bustling munitions manufacturer on the main street of Princeton.

So it was that Thaddeus Strong moved his operation into the hills between Princeton and Hopewell, into an old, unused barn, where he had ample room for production and no disapproving, holier-than-thou eyes silently upbraiding him for producing instruments of death.

And in this new remote location, Thaddeus could work his poor employees far more rigorously than at the outset and for much less money than he had originally been

willing to pay. It was, he gleefully told some neighbors, “a perfect paradise”.

However, Thaddeus’s single most significant acquisition in his new location was the one he had least expected. Every day, in the late 1860s, he would leave his home on Edgehill Street in Princeton, fetch his horse, and journey out to his growing munitions works. Usually, there was little on his mind except, perhaps, some slight improvement in his rifles and the vast increase in pricing that he could demand for it.

But one lovely summer’s day in 1869, as he galloped down the dusty country lane that was Rosedale Road, he passed a horse tearing down the road in the other direction, a horse pulling a driverless wagon. Thaddeus knew what he would find as he continued down the road and, sure enough, he soon came upon a lady lying on the grass beside the road — clearly, the driver, who had been thrown or had fallen from the wagon.

Thaddeus was to meet with several new representatives of the War Department that very day to negotiate what would surely be a lucrative new sale. His natural instinct, the one which had already made him a reasonably rich man, would have been to ignore this fallen woman and keep on going; then, after he reached his destination and if he had a few spare moments, he might perhaps get one of his growing number of assistants to go back and help her.

But Thaddeus Strong recognized this woman: she was Letitia Van Dorn, the scion of an old Dutch farming family and the certain heiress to one of the largest properties outside Princeton. Thaddeus brought his horse to an abrupt stop, got off, and ran over to Miss Van Dorn.

“Have you had an accident? Are you hurt?” His words sounded so sincere, so caring, that Miss Van Dorn looked up at him as if he had been a god come to rescue her.

“I ... I’m quite well,” she said, in a voice so shaken and so trembling that it was obvious how unwell she really was.

“Let me help you,” said the solicitous Mr. Strong. “I have always thought it fitting to help a lady any way I can.”

Miss Van Dorn was deeply moved by all this. Though it took Thaddeus some time to help her to her feet, and she was still shaking and most unsteady, she never stopped looking at this wondrous gentleman — and it is a fair guess that she fell in love with him then and there.

Letitia Van Dorn was, as it happened, an only child, largely ignored by her solemn, brooding parents. Though she was in truth rather handsome, she was always dressed in dark, somber clothing that revealed little of her charm. For most of her twenty-nine years — indeed from the time she was a little girl — it was always assumed that she would never marry. With considerable sorrow, Letitia essentially agreed with that assessment.

One can see how powerful an impression Thaddeus’s actions made on this poor woman. Thaddeus suggested that he could ride up to his factory and bring back one of his carts for her; but Letitia was a farm girl and said she could easily ride on his horse behind him. On the way to his factory, she held him tight about the body and dreamed that she was being saved by a hero of classical antiquity.

Thaddeus Strong had never mastered the art of courting and was far more interested in business in all its myriad

demands; but the Van Dorn farm was a prize worth pursuing, and Thaddeus became something of a permanent presence at the Van Dorns' home, especially at dinner-time when he graciously accepted the hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Van Dorn. Once or twice, the Van Dorns did seem to indicate that he was perhaps wearing out his welcome, but at those times Thaddeus would always contrive to remind them about how he had "saved" their daughter and she would gleefully second his overstatements.

Finally, because their daughter seemed genuinely moved by Thaddeus, and perhaps to save themselves the cost of any further dinners, Mr. and Mrs. Van Dorn agreed to Thaddeus's proposal of marriage to Letitia. In the manner of a consummate businessman, Thaddeus did not actually propose to Letitia but rather to her parents, for his principal concern was a possible dowry as well as the future disposition of their estate. Letitia's opinion was barely asked, though, of course, she was enchanted.

Their wedding was in every respect a disappointment or, in any case, a disappointment to Letitia. The Van Dorns were members of a very Calvinist Dutch-Reformed congregation whose church was, in every respect, a stern, severe, sparsely decorated building with little about it to suggest the joyful or the uplifting. Letitia had hoped to be married in the rather elegant Presbyterian church that Thaddeus sometimes attended in Princeton, but her parents, seeking to reduce their expenditures to the bare minimum needed to have a wedding at all, chose their church, with a small, private reception at their home afterward.

Thaddeus, in truth, did not care one way or the other: nuptial plans were not his interest, just as long as his

union — which he saw as a business venture — was consummated.

And as the wedding drew near, and with the details left to the Van Dorns, Thaddeus began to negotiate with the government on his largest sale yet. In truth, this was the moment he had long been waiting for: after years of what he viewed as the wishy-washy administration of Andrew Johnson — an administration that he thought almost pro-Confederate — the new administration of General Grant was taking office, and Thaddeus foresaw the possibility of huge new sales to a government run by the former Commander of the Union Army.

But his preliminary negotiations did not go as well or as easily as he had expected, and Thaddeus, growing ever more annoyed and impatient, was a singularly unpleasant man to be around. That is why, on his very wedding day, when Letitia was so full of hope and excitement that she could barely contain herself, Thaddeus was almost an hour late for the ceremony, and finally arrived dressed in a manner quite unkempt and *far* less dashing than he had appeared on the day of Letitia's historic rescue. It was all the bride could do to keep from crying.

On their way back to Thaddeus's house, the ceremony and reception finally over, Letitia did not speak but simply looked at her husband with a shiver that she did not really understand, as Thaddeus, in a passionate outburst, kept muttering over and over: "They said they'd send a contract but they didn't. The said they'd send a contract *but they didn't.*"

To say that the Strongs' marriage was loveless would be a considerable understatement. Thaddeus had, in his mind, already wasted far too much time on courtship, and he

certainly did not wish to trouble himself with lavishing attention on his wife now that he was married. Through their entire life together, Letitia never had to worry about having a female rival, but a rival she had, nonetheless: a voluptuous, slinky, seductive dollar bill, which Thaddeus pursued ever more lasciviously.

Each day, he would leave the house at dawn, travel to the factory, and push his workers into ever greater exertions. In the early 1870s, Thaddeus had had a certain apprehension about whether the Army's need for rifles might diminish: the Civil War was in the past, Reconstruction was ending, and America — alas! — was at peace with the rest of the world.

But as the American nation spread across the North American continent, settlers increasingly confronted Indian tribes not happy about losing their land to the white man. As Thaddeus Strong looked at a map and contemplated the vast expanses of the wild west, he would smile — realizing that with an infinite number of Indians to exterminate, his future and the future of his company would be assured for the rest of his days.

With so much hope in his heart, Thaddeus began construction of a second factory, one which could produce not merely rifles but also artillery pieces to make the country even stronger and more lethal. This new project kept him away from home for greater and greater periods, but Letitia, duty-bound and meticulous, kept his house as well-furnished and as immaculate as he could possibly have wished.

Her earthly rewards were not great. Can one use the word “frigid” of a man? Not “impotent”, you understand, for Thaddeus was about as forceful and potent as a

man could be, but *frigid* — lacking in even the remotest trace of warmth, either personal or sexual. Love-making was for him what spitting was for a braggart: a way of relieving his body of pent-up but essentially useless fluids. It seems quite likely that in their entire life together, Thaddeus never imagined — even in his wildest imaginings — that Letitia was actually supposed to enjoy the experience.

So it was that when one evening, Letitia, having spoken about trivialities for a great while, finally announced, almost in embarrassment, that she *thought* she was pregnant, Thaddeus Strong seemed almost offended: he would have an heir, yes, and eventually someone to work in one of his factories, but why couldn't his wife have the *consideration* to check with him about the timing? Another mouth to feed, another bed to buy: how supremely inconsiderate!

But the ultimate inconsiderateness was that the child, when it was born, proved to be a *girl*, and what earthly contribution could a girl make to Thaddeus's growing set of munitions factories? The far from proud papa was especially disgusted when he was apprised of the name that poor Letitia had chosen for the child: Clothilde. Apparently, Letitia had learned just enough about France and French Literature to give her daughter a name that would put her a cut above all the Sallys and Sarahs in town.

This was too much for Thaddeus; and since he had already used up his wife's dowry, he might almost have abandoned her and his new-born daughter when it was pointed out to him that Clothilde was the name of the last US ship to transport slaves to America. "Very well," he

thought, “that would make it into a good *commercial* vessel whose name I will be proud to have in my family.” So, Clothilde it was.



And then, because the Van Dorns were overjoyed to finally have a grandchild, they suggested to their son-in-law that he and his growing family should live in a much bigger home, one where they could live in comfort. By this time, in the mid-

1870s, Thaddeus was already vastly richer than Mr. Van Dorn; but crying poverty as he did so well, and endlessly playing upon the kindly man’s love for his daughter and granddaughter, he persuaded Mr. Van Dorn to pay for a new home on Rosedale Road — the largest and most magnificent home just slightly beyond the border of the Town of Princeton, and one which all but bankrupted Mr. Van Dorn. Years later, when Mr. and Mrs. Van Dorn begged Thaddeus to let them live with him in the mansion that they had funded, Thaddeus gave them the address of the local poor farm but generously offered to have one of his servants drive them there in one of his three horse-drawn carriages.

Still, as Thaddeus’s munitions empire grew, he more and more wished to have a son, someone to take on his responsibilities as he grew older. By the late 1870s, Letitia,

who was older than Thaddeus, was in her late thirties and Thaddeus, who excelled in counting and then terminating human lifespans, began to feel that it was then or never for his long-suffering wife to have another child. So he, who had never much interested himself in their sex life, began to all but drag her into bed, forcing her into copulation even when she was not feeling well and even during her most painful periods. “We’ve got to do this for the family,” he would proclaim, and his poor wife would nod with whatever meager approval she could muster.

Finally, in the spring of 1878, Letitia gave birth to a baby boy, and she hoped that at last she had gratified her husband’s fondest wish. But the boy was sickly from birth, and Thaddeus, in perhaps his only true flight of fancy, named him Jeremiah, much to his wife’s shock and horror. “*You* take care of him,” he said to his poor wife. “*You* manufactured him.” And so, from the very beginning, Letitia fed him, reared him, and taught him what little she knew of history and literature, while endlessly imparting Calvinist lessons to him from the Bible.

For the first few years of Jeremiah’s life, his father was so absorbed in creating newer and deadlier weapons and felt so repelled by his fragile, sickly son, that he spent as little time with him as possible and never discussed his life’s profession with the boy; but when Jeremiah was ten years old, Thaddeus felt that he had to introduce his son and successor to his business, and he took Jeremiah on his first tour of his Trenton factory.

At first the lad was impressed by the sheer numbers of workers slaving away, but when he was told they were making war materials, Jeremiah asked with great innocence: “But, won’t this stuff hurt people?” It was un-

doubtedly at that moment that Thaddeus Strong came to positively *hate* his son, and that hatred came to inform their relationship for the balance of Thaddeus's life. The loving father answered his son's question with a firm "That's what they're there for." But to himself he thought, with great bitterness: "How *dare* this little idiot criticize my work? Where does he think his food and his toys come from?"

Thaddeus refused to allow his son to have any schooling other than the religious schooling that his wife was giving him, and instead began to unfeelingly drag poor Jeremiah into his business, training him to learn about instruments of destruction whether the kid wanted to or not. But it was at that time, in order to remind his son and all his employees how hugely successful he was, that he had a local artist create an equally huge painting of himself, which he hung in the dining room of his mansion. The painting's height reached from the ceiling more than half-way down to the floor, and in an imperious, almost overpowering way glowered down on every meal that was thereafter eaten. Naturally, the very competent artist was paid as little as possible.

The 1890s seemed like a promising decade for the instruments of death that Thaddeus manufactured, but the Depression of 1893 caused a serious downturn in government purchases of weapons and the Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland, whom Thaddeus Strong considered a left-wing anarchist, was far from receptive to the new weapons that Thaddeus and his engineers came up with. So Thaddeus began to dream of weapons that could be sold in the domestic market.

Two such instruments deserve especial attention. Because Thaddeus had always admired the public hanging of criminals and random malcontents, he and his men designed what they styled “The Theophilus Safety Winch”, a motorized device that could hoist as many as six men at a time on the gallows. No longer would it be necessary to have a trap door beneath the condemned men: one needed only to put nooses around the necks of the condemned men and then hoist them up. It was a quick, efficient, and thoroughly modern approach to public hangings, and Thaddeus was convinced that it would richly edify the crowds who gathered around the gallows, drinking hard liquor and shouting obscene insults at the dying men.

Thaddeus managed to sell a number of these devices to several jurisdictions, mainly in the Plain States like Dakota, where this sort of punishment was considered more than appropriate, but sales of the Safety Winch proved on the whole disappointing. The New York Tribune commented: “This infernal machine brings us back to the darkest part of the Dark Ages.”

Undeterred by his first business failure, Thaddeus, perhaps inspired by his deeply religious wife, started to feel that his hanging machine was not punishment enough. So he began to dream of a fully mechanized, fully automated machine, one that could crucify up to six culprits at a time. This idea was so insane that even his most rabid engineers voted it down and it never went beyond Thaddeus’s drawing board. But years later, just before she died, Letitia reminded Thaddeus of what he had once actually planned to create and Thaddeus responded with his usual compassion: “Well, what do you want? It’s in your damn Bible.” At that point, Letitia began to fervently pray for Thaddeus’s immortal soul.

The Republican administration of William McKinley, which took office in 1897, seemed much more promising for Thaddeus and his industrial creations. But as we know, Thaddeus had long since given up on his namby-pamby son; and being in his fifties, he yearned to have an heir — presumably a grandson — who could succeed him. So Thaddeus pushed and prodded Jeremiah to find a wife and, if necessary, *buy* a wife. And even though Thaddeus's profession was repellent to many of the genteel families of Princeton, Seth Wainwright was open to just such a marriage.

The Wainwrights were among the oldest families in Princeton, but Seth had been a farmer during the Depression and had almost lost his land and his beautiful old colonial house; by contrast, repellent though the Stronges were, they were *rich*. So Seth offered his eldest daughter, Gwendolyn, to Jeremiah Strong, in return for a near-repayment of all the Wainwrights' debts. One might be astonished that Thaddeus Strong could have been so generous, but Gwendolyn was a beautiful, graceful creature, and Thaddeus was convinced that she would bear him a litter of healthy grandchildren who could make up for his loser son. However, in case things did not work out for Thaddeus as he had planned, he made Seth Wainwright sign an agreement that he could give Gwendolyn back to him at any time, after which Seth would repay Thaddeus for all the money he had given him, at 120% interest.

Naturally, Jeremiah had virtually nothing to say about his father's choice of a wife, but because Gwendolyn was quite beautiful, Jeremiah actually grew to love her and was pleased that, for once, his father had done something that he approved of. As for Gwendolyn, she accepted this

arranged marriage, knowing full well that it had saved her family from total bankruptcy — and as time went by, she actually came to like her fragile, religious husband, so the marriage bade fair to be a happy one.

The nuptials were arranged for April, 1898, and at about that time, America entered into its war with Spain. Thaddeus Strong, hardly a religious man, saw that as a truly good omen. As he told the minister: “My son’s wedding is *blessed* with a bright new outlet for my war materials.” But the war did not last long, and Thaddeus found himself once again frustrated, not only by the lack of sales but also because he had for the longest time been dreaming of a new weapon, one which he was sure would outclass all the competitive weapons on the market, and one that the federal government would surely buy in outrageously large quantities.

Thaddeus was aware of the violent wars that had begun to involve whole continents. Any gun that could fire a mere few rounds must have seemed as obsolete as a medieval pike for jousting. Thaddeus very much admired the Gatling gun, a device designed during the American Civil War, which could fire round after round before it needed to be reloaded. But the Gatling was so heavy and cumbersome that it had to be positioned on the ground, where it could fire directly on approaching enemy forces.

What Thaddeus had in mind was a gun that was compact enough so that it could be carried into battle by individual soldiers, who could then come much closer to enemy soldiers and blow them away. When Thaddeus learned that the American Army had occupied the Philippines and was slowly exterminating the insurgent natives, he immediately set to work on his newest device, convinced

that it would mow down these savages and secure the islands for American hegemony. And because his wife had always admired the French sounding name of the warship Bonhomme Richard, Thaddeus chose to honor his wife by naming his newest and brightest weapon “The Bonhomme Richard Carnage Machine”.

Work on this device proceeded slowly, for balancing its lethality against its portability proved a most difficult task. The war in the Philippines ended but the device was not ready for use, and Thaddeus might almost have given up on it when he learned that his daughter-in-law was pregnant. “Yet again,” he thought, “my works and days have been blessed.” With the old Rough Rider, Theodore Roosevelt, in the White House, and a splendid new heir on the way, what could possibly go wrong?

Since Thaddeus was now almost sixty, he forced his son into the preparation of both blessed events, endlessly reminding Jeremiah of his myriad forthcoming duties as a father while also putting him in charge of the endless details relating to the final preparations and testing of the Carnage Machine. They would be born at the same time, thought Thaddeus, and his life’s work would be complete.

But the Carnage Machine was never as light as Thaddeus wanted, and Jeremiah was far too concerned about his pregnant wife to demand that the machine’s lightness be balanced against its safety. On May 25, 1903, a battalion of soldiers assembled on a field outside of Washington for the first official government test of the Bonhomme Richard. The poor private who had to carry the gun into the field nearly died under its impossibly heavy weight, but when he began to fire it, it spit out a few bullets in a staccato manner, stopped, and then exploded with so

large a blast that it killed the man carrying it and severely wounded five of the soldiers surrounding him.

The test had been a dismal failure, and Thaddeus was so filled with rage that he screamed every curse he could think of at his son and daughter-in-law. Several days later, the only too fragile Gwendolyn went into premature labor and gave birth to a baby girl — after which she became more and more feverish and died a few days later. Jeremiah, who had grown to love his beautiful wife, was absolutely beside himself with grief, and Thaddeus grieved too, muttering over and over again: “My gun is dead, *my gun is dead!*”

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Although he did not know it at the time, there was little left that Thaddeus Strong would ever again appreciate. Because one of the soldiers wounded by the explosion was the nephew of a US senator, that political leader immediately urged the Army to suspend a dozen contracts that it had with the Strong Munitions Company, and the senator’s cronies launched an enormous lawsuit against Strong which took years to settle.

Thaddeus, who had always despised his son Jeremiah, now refused even to listen to his earnest apologies, and the relationship between father and son all but disappeared. And Letitia, who had been in failing health for some time and had always had the gravest misgivings about Thaddeus’s line of work, even when it was prospering, almost collapsed when things went wrong and died a year after the explosion.

Everything in Thaddeus’s world appeared to him a disaster except for one wondrous addition to his life: his newly

born granddaughter, whom he named Margaret after the *one* woman he had been attracted to before marching off to the Civil War.

Margaret was an adorable little baby: even at the youngest age, she clearly bade fair to resemble her mother, Gwendolyn. Perhaps Thaddeus's love for this precious little child reflected his attraction to his late daughter-in-law: Gwen was the first woman he actually been attracted to in years, and he would have dragged her to bed if, alas, she had not already been married to his son.

But perhaps Thaddeus was now so frustrated, so increasingly aged, and, in truth, so alone, that he was looking for *something* that could lift his spirits, something that he could hold on to and make his own, so the very young Margaret came along at just the right moment to become his *everything*.



So infatuated was Thaddeus that he had a photographer create a small, three-inch by three-inch photo of the magnificent painting of himself which hung in his dining room, and then he hired a goldsmith to create a

large locket to house the photo and attach it to a slender golden chain to be worn as a necklace. All of this he gave to his beloved Margaret on her third birthday, with the explicit instruction that she should wear it from that time forward. The locket was but one present that Thaddeus was to give his granddaughter, but it was always the most

important one because it was so clearly designed to perpetually remind her of *him*.

In truth, there was nothing too good for the young Margaret, and her grandfather told his servants to give her anything she wanted, even when her childish whims led her to excessive demands on their time and energy. Thaddeus even found some use for his poor, spinster daughter Clothilde, turning her into Margaret's nurse, caregiver, and eventual teacher. Let it be said that because Clothilde had never received the least affection from her father, she actually *enjoyed* becoming Margaret's virtual slave, so happy was she to finally be doing something that actually made her father smile at her, however infrequently.

It was with only the slightest exaggeration that Margaret was known about the Strong mansion and even in the Town of Princeton as "The Little Princess", and as her childhood years went by, she became the very image of her beautiful, blond mother, which of course made her even more adored by her aging grandfather.

For Thaddeus, she was — well — *perfect*, and as he was still a very wealthy man, despite his business's declining fortunes, he made every effort to introduce her to the children of some of the most sophisticated and well-to-do families in town.

One such girl, whom Thaddeus came to know during services at the First Presbyterian Church, was the daughter of the minister and university professor, Alexander Shepherd. His daughter Mary Ann, who had been born on almost the same day as Margaret, was a much brighter child than many of the other children whom Margaret got to know and quickly dismissed as "cow-like", and the two girls became friends and, as it turned out, lifelong

friends. Shepherd was not as rich as Thaddeus would have liked, but when Thaddeus saw how fond his seven-year-old granddaughter was of her new best friend, he immediately accepted her into his home, sensing that Dr. Shepherd would one day have a privileged place in Princeton society and perhaps lead his granddaughter to marrying the richest university student she could be introduced to.

Thaddeus's instincts now proved far more on-target than his obsessions with defective machine guns. The College of New Jersey had recently been rechristened "Princeton University", and upon the resignation of Princeton's president, Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Shepherd was elected President of the University. Thaddeus could see that his beloved granddaughter would now be associating with members of the intellectual aristocracy of Princeton. He was therefore very pleased when Dr. Shepherd invited Margaret to sit with his daughter and wife at his presidential inauguration; and as the Princeton undergrads passed by the reviewing stand, Margaret looked with fascination at this army of handsome young men, some of whom even saluted her as they passed.

Margaret's presence in the reviewing stand was, however, not surprising. She had been enrolled by her grandfather in Miss Fine's School, a very proper school for elegant young girls, when she was but seven; at the same time, Mary Ann Shepherd was placed there, and the two young ladies, in addition to learning History, French, Math, and the social graces, spent a great deal of their time talking about boys. Because the two of them were only children and there were no young male members of their families, gossiping about and sometimes laughing at boys was a particular treat for them.

And the families that the two girls grew up in were rather similar. Margaret's family was extremely reserved and in many ways religious, Mary Ann's was scarcely more laid-back, and her father, a very honorable man, was quite rigid in distinguishing between right and wrong. Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd were in Europe when the First World War broke out, and for the two young ladies in Miss Fine's School, this great, unending tragedy promised to be an amazing adventure filled with soldiers, magnificent uniforms, and dashing acts of courage and heroism.

For Thaddeus, though, the potential for arms sales to the government was minimal. Dr. Shepherd once remarked to Thaddeus that he hoped that America would enter the war on England's side — in the name of the righteousness that he felt informed that side. Thaddeus totally agreed with the good Dr. Shepherd, but only, of course, because he wanted to sell a whole new batch of weapons to the US government. But when America finally entered the war in 1917, Thaddeus was again frustrated — and for once he simply bowed to the inevitable decline of his company's fortunes, shouted a curse or two at Jeremiah, and went to sleep.

Mrs. Shepherd now set about running charity fetes and garden parties to raise money for the troops, and she enlisted her fourteen-year-old daughter and her daughter's best friend to help out in any way they could. Margaret was ecstatic, and it was not very long before soldiers, many of them Princeton students, would stop by, enjoying these receptions before going off to war. Margaret spent as much of her 14th and 15th years being as "helpful" as she could be, all the while checking out the handsomely dressed soldiers who were passing through.

All this fraternizing, along with the polish she was getting from her finishing school, was turning Margaret

into a most striking and enticing young woman, and there was a day in the spring of 1918 when her father began to feel that she was becoming a bit too seductive. He scolded her, and Margaret went running off to her grandfather, crying all the way.

Knowing that Thaddeus would take her side no matter what, Jeremiah asked his poor spinster sister Clothilde, who had helped raise Margaret, to join him in his appeal to their father; but Clothilde, who had never had even a fraction of Margaret's attractiveness to men firmly refused to take her brother's side. Perhaps she simply wanted to curry favor with her father, knowing well his adoration of Margaret, but maybe, just maybe, she saw that her niece was having the personal life that she could never have and she was secretly cheering Margaret on. One can almost imagine Clothilde thinking: "Finally we have a member of the family who actually enjoys life!"



One way or the other, Margaret saw that she had her grandfather's permission to be a beautiful, seductive young thing, and she enjoyed every minute of that role, helping the war effort in her own seductive way and, when the war ended, accepting an invitation to every party on campus and dancing

the night away with as many Princeton undergrads as she could.

In the early 1920s, Margaret was almost exactly the same age as the Princeton undergraduates, and she was more than ready to begin dating. The period just after the war was one of unbridled energy for young people, and the growing “Jazz Age” began to lead to a great liberation of social mores as well as much freer sex and, despite Prohibition, the much wider use of alcohol in all its forms. Margaret was more than ready for this new way of relating to the men around her, but her kindly friend Mary Ann, undoubtedly influenced by her very serious father, warned her that she might one day get into trouble.

“Be careful,” Mary Ann said, sounding very much like Margaret’s brooding but invariably overruled father. But Margaret just laughed and laughed, and indulged herself in a world that could not have been further removed from the pious, somber world she had been born into.

In the fall of 1920, a young man named William Bratton entered Princeton. He was, as one might say, a Young Gentleman of Promise, having a mother who was considered the Toast of New York society in the 1890s and a well-to-do broker father, who was beginning to make a considerable fortune in the burgeoning American stock market. Billy Bratton was handsome, reckless, and far less interested in his studies than he was in having fun. He frittered away his freshman and sophomore years, having several times come perilously close to being expelled, and he was admitted to Ivy as a perfect candidate for that ultimate Princeton club.

It was there at a singularly drunken Christmas party in 1922 that Billy met the gorgeous and gorgeously dressed Margaret. Those two were made for each other, or so it appeared. They were both nineteen years old: he was as handsome as he was ever likely to be, and the slightly disheveled quality of his tuxedo made him irresistible to

Margaret. She was, as many of her fellow townies readily acknowledged, one of the Great Beauties of that small but bustling University town. And neither of them cared, or seemed to care, about social conventions or moral convictions.

Amazingly and, one might say, shockingly enough, Margaret was at that time still a virgin: for all her flirtations with so many young men, the strictures of her father and grandmother had as yet prevented her from letting the boys have their way with her. But Margaret was now *so* ready for that ultimate rite of passage that Billy Bratton did not have to try very hard to get her to follow him upstairs into the room that he and his friends reserved for such elevated occasions.

That night, Christmas eve, 1922, was in many ways the most rapturous moment of Margaret's pretty rapturous life, and she fell so utterly in love with Billy Bratton that she could not wait to see him and sleep with him again and again and again. Then Margaret would go breezing through the house on Rosedale Road, and her family members and all the servants would notice how huge was her smile and how almost incoherent were her words as she rambled on about the more trivial details of her day. And when her father finally ventured a slight suggestion like "Do please calm down," Margaret would answer with an utterly dismissive "Oh, papa, *really!*" and then she would laugh and go running out of the house.

But Billy Bratton was not so rapturous. He had at first been quite taken with Margaret — and, in any case, there was a certain prestige involved in having the pettiest Princeton townie as his girl friend. But his father had already begun planning to have him make something of a dynastic marriage with the heiress to another large brokerage house. Billy Bratton was well aware that he could

play with any number of girls that he wanted, but that he was effectively reserved for someone *serious* later on.

So it was that at the end of his Junior year, his parents contrived to send him off to Europe to spend the summer; and given what he had begun to feel was Margaret's unpleasant way of clinging to him, Billy was not at all unhappy to go, even telling his friends in as ungallant a way as possible: "She's such a tramp, she'll probably find someone else to go to bed with."

Margaret was of course broken-hearted, and she vowed again and again to be waiting for him, even while making him promise to write to her from Europe every chance he got. And Billy, in his own cowardly way, said that he loved her, promised that he would write to her, and said that he could not wait to return to her.

Their last night together was as difficult as it could possibly have been, with Margaret crying while hugging Billy and embracing him, and Billy wanting in the worst way just to get out of there.

There followed a summer of unbalanced correspondence.

Margaret wrote of everything that was in her heart: her enduring, unshakable love for Billy; the joyous novelty of the feelings she had finally come to know; the cunning ways she had found to keep the secret of her love from her family and yet, she was sure, to reveal it at the same time; and always her desire, her insatiable desire, to be with her lover again.

Billy, remembering his myriad promises, felt obligated to respond to her, but his letters were more like a travel guide, discussing with considerable refinement the better hotels and spas that he and his family visited. In one let-

ter, written toward the end of summer, he allowed as how he “thought” of her often, though *what* he thought was never revealed.



When Billy returned to Cuyler Hall in the September of his Senior year, he knew that he would soon hear from Margaret, but her visit was quite different from what he expected.

Margaret knocked on his door his second night back, just after he had returned from Ivy. She was certainly intense enough, but this time in a troubled, almost haunted way that seemed different from the passion she had expressed in her letters.

At first the two danced an uncomfortable little dance around Margaret’s emotions: How are you? You look well. The trip was lovely. Summer in Princeton was hot and damp, as usual.

Finally, Margaret said: “Bill, I ... I must ask you: do you love me — I mean, *really* love me?”

Billy didn't want to get into this now. He had only just returned, he was re-establishing his relationship with his classmates and his friends at Ivy, and he had other things on his mind. Why, he wondered, would she ask him that so intensely? What could possibly be driving her?

Casually, he looked down at her stomach and said: “You're not ...?”

But *of course* she was: that was why she was acting so queerly.

Billy had actually been looking forward to telling Margaret his big news: that he had met a friend of his father's who was very successful in the brokerage business and who wished to take him on as an associate after he graduated. Being the wretched young man that he was, he knew that at first he would have to leave aside the fact that he had met and was all but pledged to the broker's daughter — a detail that he thought he could allow to come out *gradually*, as if fate itself had somehow conspired to bring the two of them together.

But given Margaret's condition, Billy's profound conscience and sensitivity convinced him that this was *not* the moment for any of his revelation.

Instead, he simply asked her: “How will you dispose of it?”

Margaret looked at him with absolute horror and not a little disgust. “I hadn't thought of *disposing* of it at all. I hadn't thought it was something that I ... that *we* ... would ever consider disposing of.

“Bill, I know that it will seem rather hurried for us to get married at this point, but *of course* you know it is the right thing to do.”

Margaret had begun her speech with the slight hope of a favorable reception; but even as her words were leaving her lips, she could tell from Billy’s face how he was taking it. By the time she reached the words “right thing”, she understood that this would not be an easy task; and even though she had gotten almost everything she had ever wanted, and rather easily too, this singularly important and meaningful thing — marriage — seemed frighteningly far away.

“Bill, darling,” she began, “you know how much I love you, and I *thought* I knew how much you loved me; and now that we are going to have a baby, you know that marriage is of course the only appropriate thing for us.”

But Billy was as resistant and, in many ways, as spoiled as Margaret herself, and he immediately began to talk about finishing his schooling, and the job that awaited him after college, and even the feelings that his parents might have about this sudden marriage.

“But Billy, *your parents?* What will your parents think if you suddenly show up with a baby but no wife? Won’t they be utterly humiliated? And what about *my* parents?”

So Billy again repeated his humane solution to this problem, namely, getting rid of the child *at once*.

“But Bill, I don’t *want* to get rid of the child — of *our* child! If you still want me, you’ve got to accept our child into your precious family.”

And then, as if a lightning bolt had struck her, Margaret added: “Unless, of course, *you don’t want me.*”

It had come to that — to the point that he felt he could put off for as long as possible — but, what the hell, why not just say it and be done with it?

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m dreadfully sorry but you’re right: I don’t think we should continue seeing each other.” And then, to top it off, “I’ve found someone else.”

There followed a long, long series of sorrowful rantings on Margaret’s part, reminding him that he had said he loved her, reminding him of her love for him, cursing him for betraying her with another woman, and ending with the screaming, raging statement: “You made me pregnant, you *screwed* me, and now you’re leaving me to die!”

And Billy, ever the perfectly gallant gentleman, took out his wallet and said: “I’m sorry about all this, but I would be happy to pay for the abortion.”

After all her shrieking and all her tears, Margaret simply looked straight at him with a mixture of pain and disgust. She might have wanted to blow him away with one of her grandfather’s artillery pieces, but instead, after everything she had come to love about the University, she said what was for her the most scathing comment she could come up with: “William Bratton, you are *no* Princeton gentleman.”

Then Margaret tore out of Cuyler Hall and left the Princeton campus — forever.

* * *

When Margaret returned to her beautiful old home on Rosedale Road, her entire world had changed. She had had every advantage, she had sought out and gotten the affection of friends and boyfriends and her entire family. She had been seen as a Great Beauty in the town, and courtesy of her grandfather, she had never wanted for anything. Undoubtedly, during her first twenty years she had gotten too much too soon, but now she had been heartlessly dumped by the one great love of her life, and he had left her “with child”, as they say: a pathetic loser headed down the road to some dreary future of scandal, loneliness, and ruin. For the first time, Margaret actually admired her aunt Clothilde, who had never had any of the things that she had had and who therefore had so much less to lose.

But most especially, Margaret feared the reaction that grandfather Thaddeus would give to her situation. It was not that he had been embarrassed by her becoming pregnant out of wedlock: at first he had been appalled that his beloved granddaughter had been deflowered by young Mr. Bratton, but then he realized that her baby would cement his relationship with the Bratton family, and because Billy Bratton was also an only child, the Bratton fortune would eventually be comingled with the Strong family fortune. Suddenly the deflowering seemed to Thaddeus to be a very *fortunate* matter.

So it was not her pregnancy that made Margaret fear her grandfather’s reaction: it was that throughout her twenty years, Thaddeus had endlessly inculcated her with the notion that *winning* was the only thing that really mattered and that no one should be considered a part of his family who had been defeated in life. Margaret had heard endless times about how her grandfather hated her father because of his failure with the Carnage Machine, and now

Jeremiah's beautiful but frivolous daughter had gone him one better and had humiliated his family by not even being able to hold on to the man she loved and the father of her child.

Therefore, remembering everything she had ever experienced in that uptight, oppressive family, Margaret for the first time turned to the father whom she had so often scorned, for they were now, as it were, co-equals in the esteem of the Thaddeus Strong. And Margaret was amazed and even moved by the kindness that her father seemed to show her. Jeremiah did care for his daughter, but because of his father's tyranny, he had never been permitted to show his affection. Now that Margaret actually needed him, he seemed ready to assist her in any way he could.

So Margaret opened up to her father as she had never done before and told him how hurt she felt and how confused she was about how she could manage her child's birth, now only five or six months away. Her tears flowed off and on through her whole narrative, with her father listening attentively, and in the end she asked him — no, *begged* him — to help her.

Jeremiah, who had learned the hard way that he must never decide anything on his own, promised his daughter to do what he could — and then immediately turned to his father, explaining Margaret's situation and begging the old man for help. And Thaddeus was his usual compassionate self and observed, first of all, that it would be a hopeless humiliation for Margaret to give birth in Princeton to a bastard child, and that, in any case, the child would represent but one more mouth to feed, a thought that made Thaddeus positively ill.

But fortunately, he said, his aunt and her husband had

moved to California just after the Civil War and his first cousin Matilda, a *grande dame* of San Francisco society, still lived there and might be willing to take Margaret in until she gave birth. Then she could stay in San Francisco for a while until she could find a suitable husband — and perhaps, Thaddeus might even have been thinking, she could stay there for keeps and he would be rid of the whole lot of them and have many fewer mouths to feed.

“But that might take years,” Margaret moaned when she heard about his plan, “and I’ll be all alone without you and Aunt Clothilde and grandpa and all of my friends.” So Jeremiah was forced to make some concessions and dream up some scenarios which he knew would never come true. He would accompany her to the West Coast and stay with her until the baby was born. As for a husband: if Margaret returned to Princeton after, say, a year, perhaps Bill Bratton would be so moved to see his new child that he might relent and he and Margaret could finally be married. Jeremiah never told Margaret that Thaddeus had finished their discussion by saying: “I hope that kid *never* comes back here. If she can’t find a husband, give him to an orphanage!”

But Jeremiah *sounded* sympathetic as he presented his plan to Margaret, even though he was as disgusted by the whole affair as his father was and even though his every thought was based on how to resolve things with as little embarrassment as possible. And Margaret, who might never have accepted her grandfather’s plan had she not been so distraught, signed on with it, and she and her father grandly announced that in a few days they would be leaving on a train to explore the Golden State of the West. It was a beautiful fall day when they left, and the beauty of the ride through the Midwest and especially the Rocky Mountains actually did cheer her up somewhat.

Matilda, Jeremiah's first cousin once removed, proved to be a stern but reasonably sympathetic woman who understood Margaret's plight and agreed to take her and Jeremiah in. Though she discreetly never mentioned it to Margaret, she had seen, as a socialite of a liberal and socialist persuasion, many an unwed mother among the "lower classes" of San Francisco and was willing to take in a girl in the same condition who just happened to be part of her family.

But as Margaret became more and more obviously pregnant, she became increasingly uncomfortable and emotional. She was clearly of two minds, sometimes desiring her baby as never before, but then moaning to her father that she should never have conceived the child, which she thought would be an impossible burden for her and which she sometimes wished would just go away.

Finally, as the February date of the childbirth drew near, Margaret suddenly announced to her father that she wanted to go home and give birth to her baby in Princeton — *that* was where she felt she belonged. Margaret had never forgotten her father's idle promise that Billy Bratton might see his new child and fall in love with her again, and day after day she insisted on returning home. Jeremiah tried to remind her that it was winter in the East and that traveling to Princeton, even on a train, might prove dangerous, but Margaret would not be refused; and finally Cousin Matilda intervened and opined, rather brusquely, that the baby was Margaret's and that she should do whatever she wished.

So, on February 2, 1923, Margaret and her father boarded a train that was headed East. They had been cautioned that there was a blizzard in the Midwest and that there was no guarantee that the train could make it all the way

through, but the Strongs boarded the train anyway and headed home. They got as far as North Platte, Nebraska, and there the engineer found that the drifting snow had reached so high a level that it was unsafe to continue until the storm let up and the tracks were cleared.

But Margaret, who had never imagined what childbirth would be like, felt her contractions coming more and more frequently and she started to scream with pain. The conductor was able to hail a policeman at the train station, who somehow got a horse and wagon, and in the midst of an almost blinding snowstorm, the two of them were able to remove Margaret and her father from the train and take them to the small North Platte Hospital.

There, an enormously sympathetic nurse, Mrs. Smith, who had dealt with pregnancies many times though she said she could never have a child of her own, worked gently but firmly with Margaret through the final moments of her pregnancy, and her baby was born. It was a boy, and when she saw it for the first time, she smiled the most angelic smile, and then, totally exhausted, sank back into a deep sleep which lasted for many, many hours.

It was at that moment that her father Jeremiah, being the spineless fellow that he was, came up with what for the rest of his life he would call "The Deal". He found all sorts of justifications for what he was about to do: the kindly nurse and her husband could never have a child; Thaddeus Strong had cautioned his son that he never wanted to see Margaret's child in his house; Billy Bratton would probably never come back to his daughter. All those excuses might still not have been enough for him to close The Deal, because he did have *some* compassion for his daughter. But Jeremiah kept reminding himself that Margaret *herself* had sometimes wished that her baby

would disappear, and that, for Jeremiah, was justification enough.

So, Jeremiah offered to give Margaret's new-born son to Mrs. Smith and her husband. At first, Mrs. Smith was appalled and could not believe what Jeremiah was proposing, so Jeremiah was forced to throw in a huge sweetener that he sensed the poor, hard-working Smiths could not refuse: he would pay the Smiths a large sum of his own money and, if that was still not enough, he would send them a large remittance every Christmas. He wanted the child to be well cared for, but, he said, the upper-crust of Princeton would never accept the fact that his socialite daughter had given birth out of wedlock.

"But," said Mrs. Smith, "what will you tell your daughter? How will you explain all of this?" And Jeremiah said, as coldly as he possibly could: "I will tell her *nothing*, except that her baby is dead. It would break her heart to know that her baby is alive but living here with *you*, so it might be easier just to tell her the child simply doesn't exist anymore."

And then he added: "But, you must *never* tell anyone that this is not your child. You'll have enough money, so just move away to where the neighbors don't know you and tell them that the child is yours. Just let me know where you're living and I will send you your money."

It took a lot of convincing to get Mrs. Smith to agree, but she knew that she and her husband needed the money and she certainly knew how to take care of children, and Jeremiah kept pushing her to make up her mind because, as he charmingly put it, "When my daughter wakes up and sees that her son's alive, you'll be out in the cold forever." Finally, Mrs. Smith said yes and the deed was done.

Not much later, Margaret woke up and Jeremiah told her the news of her son's demise: he could not have been more unctuous in his presentation and Margaret could not have been more devastated. But after resting for a few days in the hospital, carefully attended to by the very nurse who had inherited her child, Margaret was calm enough to say to her wretched father: "Well, perhaps it is for the best. Perhaps my son was never meant to be." Then she started to weep, and Jeremiah, obscenely proud of himself, hurried down to the station to purchase two tickets for the train back to the East.

The train moved very slowly through the snow-covered fields of the Midwest. Jeremiah had hoped that Margaret would recover at least some of her former equanimity, but she remained sad and despairing and often began crying for no apparent reason; and it finally dawned on him that what he had done had in fact devastated his daughter. In his whole life he had never undertaken anything on his own initiative, always deferring to his father's wishes: now he had come up with a solution to the family's "problem" and it was proving to be as disastrous as his work with the Carnage Machine. And of course, he could never tell any of it to Margaret or her adoring grandfather for he knew that they would never forgive him.



At one point on the trip home, Jeremiah tried to get his daughter to cheer up a little bit, to smile, and Margaret replied grimly: "*My smile?* My smile is back there, in the Great American Desert." Jeremiah nodded that he understood, though inwardly he almost wept for the daughter he had so recklessly betrayed.

And it was only then that he realized that among the few of Margaret's effects that he had left behind at the hospital was the locket that Thaddeus had given her two decades ago. Knowing how meaningful that locket was, and how miserably things had worked out, Jeremiah trembled but said nothing.

Back home in Princeton, Jeremiah told his father that his great-grandson had died, endlessly embroidering the tale with descriptions of how devotedly he had worked to save his granddaughter's life, and Thaddeus, totally ignoring his son's self-congratulations, took to making comforting noises to Margaret, all the while rejoicing that he would not have to deal with yet another generation of Strongs. He was now almost eighty years old and his business was down to but two factories: he really did not have time to worry about a child whose very presence would humiliate him and who, so he thought, would probably be a loser like his son rather than a splendid presence like his granddaughter.

But, Clothilde, as always, was very sympathetic to her niece and tried to console her as best she could — though not being very worldly, she did not quite know what to say. True consolation came from the friendship and love of her dearest friend, Mary Ann Shepherd. These two ladies had long played the role of the sisters each had never had, and now the two of them grew even closer as Margaret shared every sorrow she had experienced and Mary Ann returned her confidences with poignant experi-

ences of her own.

And because Mary Ann's father was the President of Princeton, she apologized many times over for the unchivalrous conduct of William Bratton, whom she called a thoroughly uncharacteristic Princeton student, and she promised Margaret that one day she would introduce her to a man who would be vastly more worthy of her love.

* * *

As the 1920s phased into the 1930s, the American economy collapsed into The Great Depression. People lost their savings and then their homes, and businesses went bankrupt. The brokerage house that the Bratton family had so artfully cobbled together was wiped out in the stock market crash of 1929. Billy Bratton lost all his savings and investments and was subsequently shot by his jealous, vindictive wife.

As for the Strong Munitions Company, it was not in good shape to begin with, and the Depression was the final blow. Thaddeus was by now too elderly to make any serious decisions, and Jeremiah was more and more befuddled: being deeply troubled by the awful effects of The Deal, he did not dare to make any serious changes in the company.

So one day, Jeremiah, with some trepidation, called on his daughter to get her opinion about what to do. He was utterly perplexed, he said, and he knew that Margaret, who in her twenties had become involved in organizing charitable and philanthropic organizations, might have an insight into how he should proceed.

For Margaret, this consultation was astonishing: her father, who had seldom even spoken to her about the com-

pany, was now asking for her help? But Margaret, who had lived with the presence of the Strong enterprises her entire life and had often heard her grandfather barking out orders about the business, immediately began to consider what might be done.

She was pretty sure that the business could only die a slow death in the shape it was in, and she had infinite compassion for the many workers she had come to know. So she proposed selling all of the company's principal assets and all of its inventory so as to provide its workers with a decent amount of money to prevent them from starving, while keeping the remaining money for her family.

Jeremiah was shocked by all this, and it was a solution he would never have come up with. But when Margaret presented her plan to her eighty-seven-year-old grandfather, Thaddeus's eyes opened wide and he blurted out: "Sure! She's a winner! *Let her have it!*"

Neither Margaret nor Jeremiah knew exactly what Thaddeus meant, or whether even he, in his near-senility, knew what he meant, but from that moment on, Margaret became the chief executive of whatever was left of the Strong Munitions Company. She hired lawyers to help negotiate the sale of her business properties and provided for at least a modest pension for her employees. And Jeremiah, perhaps inspired by her generosity, finally thought of a way to tell Margaret about the remittances he had sent every year to the Smith family of North Platte, Nebraska.

"You remember that nurse, the one who took care of you in the hospital?" Margaret nodded yes. "You were very sick you know, very sick." Again Margaret nodded yes. "You almost died: did you know that?" Here Margaret did

not nod, but looked questioningly at her father. “My ... my baby died. I didn’t know that *I* was so sick.”

“Oh yes,” said her father, “you would have died but for the care given to you by the nurse in that little hospital. She entered your life like an angel, and I swore to her that I would send her and her family some money for the rest of her life.”

And then Jeremiah began to implore his daughter:

“Please, *please* promise me that, whatever happens, you will keep my vow and keep sending those checks.”

Margaret had never heard her father talk that way and she was very moved. “Of course I will,” she said very tenderly; and she even thought, in her simple, naïve way, “Maybe father is more compassionate than I ever realized.”

As Margaret continued the process of liquidating what was left of her family’s holdings, the one asset that she refused to sell was the beautiful old house on Rosedale Road. The house meant everything to her and it was the only possible home for her aunt, her father, and her grandfather. Many good townspeople of Princeton had offered to buy the house and the twenty acres of land that surrounded it, but Margaret categorically refused. Perhaps, she sometimes thought, if the rest of my family is gone, I can sell the house; but then she would remember all the devoted domestic servants who worked there, some of them since the day she was born, and she would resolve never to sell unless she absolutely had to. And indeed, as the 1930s grinded on, Margaret began purchasing fewer little knick-knacks for herself so that she could continue to pay her servants’ wages.

The family car, a once elegant 1928 Packard limousine,

needed more and more repairs, but as there was little money for such finesses, Margaret would have the chauffeur drive her into town, all the while crossing her fingers and hoping that the car would not fall apart. And it became her sorrowful duty to sometimes drive her grandfather into town herself, even though he seemingly did not know where they were going or where they were when they got there.

It was becoming obvious to everyone that Thaddeus was less and less aware of what he was doing and less and less capable of handling even the simplest chores in his life. The servants had to help him put on his clothes, and he would often curse them, telling them that they were doing it all wrong and he would “cashier them pronto.” When he spoke, it was in a shrill, high-pitched, birdlike voice that made very little sense; and he would sometimes bark out orders as if he was still running the Munitions Company: “Buy gunpowder, *gunpowder*, and get this blasted rifle to work! You incompetents: you’re all fired, *fred!*”

As the months went by, Thaddeus seemed to be retreating into the past, and one day it became clear to Margaret that he had begun seeing himself as a soldier back in the Civil War. “I got ya, Johnny Reb,” he would shriek, “I got ya! I’ll hang ya from the oak tree, Johnny Reb! I’ll shoot ya with my new-fangled gun and hang ya from the tree!” His enthusiasm was so great, if so delusional, that Moses, the Strong family’s oldest retainer, once remarked: “Dat Mister Strong, he’s as old as Methusal but he’s still the liveliest one in dis here family.”

As he approached his ninetieth birthday in 1935, Thaddeus suddenly fell silent and spent most of his days just staring into space. But one day, in a very soft voice, he asked for his son, the son he had never appreciated;

and when Jeremiah came to him and told him that he loved him, Thaddeus seemed to smile as if he was finally reconciled with the son he had never really known.

For Margaret, the reconciliation was tremendously heartening, for she hoped that in the middle of the Great Depression, all of the tension and anger that she had grown up with was about to disappear and the three generations, residing in the same house but alienated for so very long, might finally live together in peace.

But as it happened, in a fevered dream three days later, Thaddeus Strong saw himself putting on his splendid blue uniform from the Grand Army of the Republic, brushing off his epaulettes, putting his sword back into its scabbard, and finally rejoining his old battalion. Most poignantly, he saw himself meeting his fallen comrade-in-arms from Trenton, and he rejoiced that the guy had created yet another invention for him to steal. Thaddeus Strong passed away with a contented, greedy smile on his face.

Meanwhile, conditions in the Strong family worsened. With all her financial difficulties and Thaddeus's death, Margaret had failed to notice the mental and physical deterioration of her own father. He was only in his late fifties but he had never been particularly robust, and his slow disintegration perfectly paralleled his father's. Perhaps his only life had flowed from his father — tending to his father and being endlessly insulted and brow-beaten by him — and when his father melted away, so did Jeremiah. But it may also be that Jeremiah had been eaten away by the guilt he felt for what he had done to his daughter and grandson, and with the old man gone, Jeremiah had nothing to think about *except* his guilt. A year after his father died, Jeremiah suffered a massive

stroke and was no longer able to speak with any clarity.

Now, finally, Jeremiah knew that he had to tell his daughter what he had done. He understood what the doctors had told him, that his prognosis was dismal and that he might soon have another stroke which would do him in; so he called out to Margaret and she sat by the side of his bed. He said over and over again “Nebras-ka, Nebras-ka!” and Margaret, thinking she understood, reassured him that she would continue sending the remittances he had implored her to send.

But Jeremiah was of course not satisfied, and he struggled to tell her about his wretched Deal. “Son ... son!” was all he could get out, and Margaret, ever the supportive daughter, said “I know, father, don’t worry. You did the best you could to help my son and me.” And Jeremiah muttered again and again “No ... no,” but he could not explain what he meant, and Margaret smoothed his hair and told him “Please don’t blame yourself, father. You were the best father I could ever have had when I was sick — and I will always love you.”

Then, after promising him that she would be back that evening, she went into town, leaving Jeremiah despairing of ever telling her the truth of what he had done. Perhaps he could have explained it all if he had had more time, but that very night, the poor, hapless son of Thaddeus Strong passed away; and Margaret was never disabused of his story of what had happened on that cold, harsh winter’s night in Nebraska.

* * *

Ralph Tyler Smith was always a blessing to his parents. At the age of seven he had started to work on the rather large farm that they had purchased in 1924 with

Jeremiah's money. He was a handsome young man, whose sandy blond hair never quite matched his parents' dark brunette. He was never afraid of hard work, and like many farmers, he was very straightforward and plain-spoken, but he also knew his place and rarely spoke unless he was spoken to.

The farm brought in a decent income in the 1920s and Ralph especially loved to work with the barnyard animals, but in the Great Depression and especially during the drought in the mid-1930s, farming became much less profitable and the Smiths had to sell most of their cows and goats. This almost broke Ralph's heart, though he never let his parents know how sad he felt. And in the late 1930s, as an older teenager, Ralph would sometimes accompany his father to Omaha and some of the industrial towns in Illinois to buy the most advanced farming equipment the Smiths could afford. With no farm workers except his family, Mr. Smith was determined to farm as efficiently as he possibly could, and Ralph proved to be a great blessing in this as in so much else.

But a new war was beginning in Europe, and in 1940 the US government instituted a draft, the first peacetime draft in American history. Ralph was but seventeen at the time, and because the draft initially called for young men twenty-one years or older, the Smiths were grateful that their son was temporally spared. But when Pearl Harbor was bombed, America entered the war, and the age of the draft was lowered to eighteen. Ralph immediately saw that he had to join the army.

Ralph's parents began to cast about for a reason for him not to be drafted, for example, that he was the sole support of his aging parents. The draft board in Omaha might have bought that argument but Ralph did not: his country

had been attacked and he was going to serve, no matter what. Tearfully, Ralph's parents bade farewell to their son, who immediately enlisted and was told by a commanding officer that because of the effective way he used all sorts of farm equipment, he was needed in the East, whence he would probably be shipped overseas.

It was a sad, painful moment when Ralph got on a train to Chicago on the old Union Pacific line, and then switched to a train that went straight through to New York. On the way Ralph saw how many other young men from the Midwest were traveling eastward, and he began to see how monumental an undertaking this was all going to be.

Ralph's basic training began in late December, 1941, and it was, to put it mildly, a dark, grim, lonely Christmas for him and his fellow soldiers. But because Ralph was good with tools, he was not immediately shipped out and, in the spring of 1942, was assigned to a special engineer's unit that was being formed in Washington, DC, before going overseas.

So it was that in April, 1942, Ralph boarded a train crowded with military personnel and headed south toward Washington. He could have gone at the end of the week when he was ordered to report to headquarters in Washington, but instead, he caught a train five days earlier, for he had given himself a special mission before reporting for active duty.

Ralph had often been told about the sad case of a lady who had fallen gravely ill in North Platte many years earlier. As the years went by, he had seen the very generous remittances that had come from the lady's family in Princeton, New Jersey — remittances that had made it possible for his family to make it through the Great

Depression in some measure of comfort. Ralph's mother, a nurse who was now retired, had often said her blessings for this family and told her son how grateful she was for their unusual generosity.

Ralph had never met the gentleman who had originally sent his family those checks or the daughter who had been saved and who had continued to send them, but Ralph knew that before he left the country, perhaps for good, he *had* to visit Princeton and thank this angelic lady for all the good she had done.

Princeton Junction was on the direct line between New York and Washington; there was a small station on the siding where the train would stop, and then a very small connecting line that would go directly into the town. Ralph gathered himself together as the train approached the Junction, and with excitement and even some trepidation got on the small connecting train that took him into Princeton.

It was hard for him to find a taxicab to take him to Miss Strong's house, gasoline having been rationed as soon as the war began; and when he finally found one, the driver upon hearing his destination, responded sarcastically: "Oh, yeah, the palace." It was almost 5:30 when Ralph arrived at the house on Rosedale Road, and he was rather afraid that he might be interfering with Miss Strong's dinner.

At first, her aged servant Moses did not wish to admit Ralph, even though he was a clean-cut young man in an olive-drab private's uniform, but Ralph insisted, saying that he had come all the way from Nebraska to meet Miss Strong and that he and his family had greatly benefitted from her generosity. When Moses told Margaret who was

there, she came running to the door, warmly invited him in, and led him into the sitting room.

“I ... I am really here to thank you,” Ralph began quite nervously. “You and your father have done so much for my family.”

“Oh no,” said Margaret, “it was your mother who saved my life. I can never thank *you* enough.”

And Ralph replied, quite modestly, “Ma’am, you and your father have thanked us more than enough with all the money you’ve sent us over the years.”

Margaret and Ralph spent the next twenty minutes or so talking about the Smith family, about Ralph’s mother, and most of all about the fact that Ralph would soon be going to Washington and then sent overseas. “I am so grateful to you,” said Margaret, “for joining our armed forces. All that I can do is throw an occasional charity fete to raise funds for the war effort. We’ll be throwing one this very Friday, on the grounds in back.” She laughed. “I think the estate is big enough to house an entire regiment.”

Just then Moses entered to announce that dinner was about to be served. Ralph said that he did not want to impose and that he would somehow find his way back to town, but Margaret would not hear of it. “Nonsense,” she said, “you *must* stay for dinner. Two dear friends of mine will be joining us, and we can certainly make room for a fourth at table.”

Ralph was charmed by her graciousness, and he and Margaret walked into the grand dining room where, on the wall, looking down imperiously on the two of them, was the larger-than-life portrait of Thaddeus Strong. At first Ralph could not believe his eyes, for the man in

his very formal clothing resembled the man whose photo he had seen in the locket that he had found as a little boy, the locket that his mother said contained the photo of her grandfather. But the closer Ralph got to the painting, the clearer it became to him that the man in the painting *was* the man whose photo he had found in the locket.

Staring up at the painting, Ralph said very hesitantly:
“Ma’am, may I ask who that gentleman is?”

“Oh, yes,” said Margaret, “that was my grandfather. He was a queer old bird, but I did love him dearly.”

Ralph sat down at the dinner table, but all sorts of thoughts began to gnaw at him: “How was this possible? Could his mother have been mistaken?” He felt he had to pursue this, so he said to Margaret Strong: “I know that you were in Nebraska when you were very ill and my mother took care of you.”

“Yes,” said Margaret, “I don’t know whether your mother ever told you what happened, but I had just given birth to a baby — a baby boy. Your mother was a very good nurse, but ... unfortunately, the baby died.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” said Ralph. “I’m sure that must have been very difficult for you.”

“Yes,” said Margaret, “1923 was a difficult year for all of us.”

1923 lit up like a flame in Ralph’s mind. “If it isn’t too painful,” he said, “may I ask you when this sad event occurred?”

Margaret seemed slightly annoyed by Ralph’s question, but she replied, “It was in early February, I think.”

Ralph knew only too well that his birthday was February 8, 1923 — and when he looked at Margaret’s beautiful blond hair, so very like his own, it was impossible for him not to put things together and wonder whether, perhaps, this kindly, gracious lady might be his mother and whether he had, through some strange fluke, been stolen from her by the woman whom he had always known as his mother.

Then it struck him that he might have finally found a reason for the remittances that had been sent out to North Platte for so many years: that Margaret and her father had been taking care of her son all along. But Margaret seemed to have no sense of who Ralph was, so he discarded that theory very quickly. He would have longed to pursue all of this with her when her two other dinner guests arrived.

One was Margaret’s friend, Mary Ann Shepherd, but the other was a rakishly handsome, yet somehow unpleasant-looking, middle-aged fellow, who seemed displeased that there was another man at table.

Margaret introduced Mary Ann and then, in a formal but jovial voice, introduced the unpleasant one: “This is my dear friend, Mr. Frederick Shepherd.” Mr. Shepherd rather grudgingly extended his hand to Ralph and almost snapped at him: “Call me Fritz. *Everyone* calls me Fritz.” Then Margaret introduced Ralph to the others, saying that he was a soldier about to go off to war. Fritz shook hands with Ralph, barely looking at him, which made Ralph wonder why a kindly woman like Margaret would have anything to do with a cold fish like Fritz.

As they were eating dinner, Margaret explained enthusiastically that, six months earlier, Fritz had moved to Princeton from Peoria, the town where Mary Ann’s father

had come from, and as a distant cousin of Mary Ann's, he had introduced himself to her so that she could show him a bit of Princeton.

"Yes," said Fritz, all but ogling Margaret, "and by far the most beautiful part of the town that I saw was you." Margaret blushed and even giggled slightly, though Fritz's way of presenting himself made Ralph feel slightly nauseous.

"Isn't it wonderful?" said Margaret, staring appreciatively at Mary Ann. "She was always saying that she wanted to introduce me to someone nice, and when she finally did, it proved to be *her own cousin*."

Ralph might have wanted to share in Margaret's happiness, but there was something about Fritz that he did not like, and although Ralph had not completely teased out the relationship between Margaret and himself, he was starting to feel rather protective of this kindly lady, especially as the dinner went on and it was becoming clear to him that Margaret was very serious about Fritz and was in fact thinking of marrying him. So Ralph said to him: "I gather, sir, that you now live around here. May I ask you what you do?"

Fritz seemed not terribly happy to answer this question, and he said, rather superciliously: "This will perhaps interest you, seeing that you will one day be a veteran. I have come East to create an entire village for returning soldiers. It will feature many comfortable dwellings, and even a hospital for those who return wounded."

Margaret smiled appreciatively. "Isn't he wonderful?" she said, and Ralph was almost forced to agree.

"And the best part," said Fritz, "is that dear Margaret

will be making a small contribution to make this village a reality. So, even though I haven't told her this, I am announcing tonight that I will be naming this village Margaretville!"

Now, Ralph and his parents had met up with many confidence men during the Depression, folks who promised to do wondrous things if farmers would only give them all of their money: in hard times, there were always folks who could exploit the poor. So Ralph felt it to be almost his duty to ask: "That sounds like a very expensive project. How much would an entire village cost?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Fritz, "several million to start with. That'll be something of a down payment."

And Margaret gushed: "Fritz is so generous that he's going to pay most of it out of his own pocket. I'll only have to invest about \$500,000, which should not be a problem."

"But remember," said Mary Ann, "you said you might not have that kind of money."

"Yes," said Margaret, "but I can always sell the house. Most of the family is gone and there's only Aunt Clothilde. I'm sure I can find someplace for her to live."

"Put her in the old folks' home," Fritz barked out, and Margaret could not help reflecting that one of the reasons she loved Frederick Shepherd was that his answer was *exactly* what grandpa Thaddeus would have said.

For Ralph, this whole situation seemed only too familiar: a smooth-talking con man finds a wealthy unattached lady, milks her of her money, and then skips town. But despite all his misgivings, Ralph thought he might be wrong and Fritz might *possibly* be an honest man, so he

said to this would-be master builder: “I understand that you’ve recently come from Peoria, Illinois. I’ve been there buying farm equipment, and one of the places I always love to visit is Brinmuller’s Ice Cream Parlor. It’s really great, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Fritz, “I was there just before I left. Their chocolate ice cream is excellent.”

Ralph had visited Peoria several times in 1939 and 1940. He had eaten at several establishments while he was there, and he knew very well that there was not and had never been a Brinmuller’s Ice Cream Parlor, or a restaurant with a name even close to Brinmuller. It was a name that Ralph had just made up, and Fritz had fallen for it.

Having convinced himself that Fritz was not even remotely legitimate, Ralph excused himself at the end of the meal, thanked Margaret for her hospitality, and said that he needed to return to town and find a hotel where he could stay for the next three nights. Margaret at first suggested that he stay in her home, but Fritz seemed uncomfortable with that idea and Ralph said that he certainly did not want to abuse Margaret’s hospitality any further.

So Margaret asked her chauffeur to drive Ralph to the Nassau Inn in town, but insisted that Ralph have dinner with her at least one more time before he left for Washington on Friday.

On the way back, Ralph began thinking about the way he was going to thwart this con man and save this wonderful woman, the woman who might well be his mother.

* * *

Ralph settled into his comfortable room at the old colonial inn, but he could not sleep. He had wanted to talk to Margaret and even question her about the son that she had lost some nineteen years earlier: the more Ralph thought about it, the more convinced he was that he might be her son, and this dear, kindly woman might well be his mother. But he could only stay in Princeton for three short days, and now there was something more important for him to do: he had to make sure that she was not about to give away her entire fortune and even her home to a man who was out to defraud her and then disappear, leaving her impoverished and devastated.

At length, Ralph decided on a plan, perhaps the only one in his power. Seeing that Mary Ann Shepherd was Margaret's best friend, and indeed the one who had introduced Margaret and Fritz, Ralph resolved to seek out Miss Shepherd and ask for her help.

Ralph showed up at her door at 10:00 the next morning, and he was delighted that she was home, though she was of course surprised to see him. Ralph apologized for his unexpected visit but insisted that he had to speak to her about her friend Margaret Strong. Mary Ann, concerned as always for her friend, let him in.

Ralph had no time for small talk, so he quickly made the point that he was worried about the "investment" her friend was about to make because he was afraid that she was being swindled. Naturally, Mary Ann was appalled that this total stranger was impeaching her cousin, but Ralph immediately replied that he doubted whether Frederick Shepherd really was the man he claimed to be, explaining about how he had made up the nonexistent ice cream parlor that Fritz claimed to have visited.

At first Mary Ann could not credit a word that Ralph was

saying; but seeing how serious he was in his effort to protect Margaret, Miss Shepherd took out a genealogical table of her family that her late father had commissioned and looked for a Frederick Shepherd. None existed. Mary Ann then suggested that perhaps Frederick had not been born when the table was created, and she remembered that Fritz had said that his father's name was Josiah Shepherd. She looked for that name and again no such person could be found. Finally she took out an old family bible, one that would surely have listed Josiah Shepherd or his son, but neither Josiah nor Frederick was inscribed — and, indeed, it turned out that there were only a few elderly Shepherds still living in Peoria.

Mary Ann was absolutely beside herself. After all, it was she who, in trying to do a favor for her best friend, had introduced Margaret to a man who was clearly an imposter. Mary Ann had never been as enchanted with Fritz as the lonely Margaret had been, and now she felt desolated because she had done her friend a terrible wrong. So she thanked Ralph for his concern and said she would act on his information at once. And when Ralph suggested that she should immediately speak to Margaret Strong, Mary Ann replied: “Speak to Margaret? No! I’m going to speak to the police!”

Ralph spent the rest of Wednesday and most of Thursday wandering around Princeton, grimly speculating on what he had done. What if he were wrong? What if Fritz were in fact a perfectly legitimate businessman and he had brought the police down on him? And what if he had broken the heart of the woman he was increasingly sure was his mother?

And when on Thursday evening he took a taxi out to the Strong house for his farewell dinner, he was greeted at the door by Moses, who said, very sorrowfully:

“Miss Margaret is feeling mighty low tonight, *mighty low*.” Inside he found Margaret in the dining room, barely able to control her tears. Profusely apologizing to Ralph for her appearance, she announced that Frederick Shepherd was no longer in her life, that he had been arrested by the Princeton police, and that they suspected him of being a criminal who was wanted in Pennsylvania and New Jersey for romancing wealthy women and then absconding with their money. It turned out that he was not from Illinois at all, a fact that Margaret learned from her friend Mary Ann — and that lie *alone* was enough to make Margaret sever any ties she once had with him.

With tears flowing down her cheeks, she practically shrieked out: “Aren’t there *any* decent men left in the world?”

Ralph would have loved to say yes. He would have loved to speak about all the good, hard-working, decent farmers he had known, the people he had grown up with — and then slowly reveal to her that he was her son. But it suddenly hit him that Margaret was accusing Fritz of only wanting her money, and now he was going to say that he was her son who, she would probably suspect, was *also* after her money. He could not do it: he could not make her feel, even for an instant, that he was just one more greedy, destructive man, just like all the men that she had known in her life.

So Ralph simply said: “You know, I grew up on a farm. The men that I knew worked from dawn to dusk and got old and grey from their work — and sometimes all their work wasn’t enough and they lost their farms anyway.

“But they were good, honest men. They never hurt anyone and they were devoted to their families and their friends. Maybe they weren’t as elegant or as smart or as sophisti-

cated as the folks around here, but they had a kind of devotion and generosity that I know you would admire.”

Margaret slowly stopped crying, looked up at Ralph, and almost smiled. “You’re right,” she said — and then she added with some bitterness: “I wish I had never been born in Princeton. I wish I had been born on a farm out in the middle of nowhere. I doubt if I’ve *ever* known a truly good person in this town.”

And Ralph replied, very softly: “Oh, there are some good people here — there are good people everywhere. Like your friend, Mary Ann, or like ... you.”

Margaret looked appreciatively at Ralph, who sat down beside her, and they spent the next two hours talking about the life that she had known in Princeton and comparing it with the simple but earnest life that Ralph had known in Nebraska.

At the end of that somber evening, Ralph said that he should return to town, but Margaret absolutely insisted that he stay overnight in her guest house because, as she put it, “You’ll be going off to war soon and I want you to have a good night’s rest before you go.” Ralph thanked her and thanked her again for her kindness, and he tried to reassure her that life would look much better to her as time went by. In his heart, though, he could not help but think how supremely lovely it would be if he could call Margaret Strong his mother.

The next morning, Margaret and her domestics began to prepare for the charity fete they were having on the beautiful grounds outside the house. She called it her Victory Party: it was, she said, the one thing she could do to support the war effort and, looking at Ralph in a very kindly way, she added “and to support you.”

The guests were starting to arrive, but when Ralph went looking for Margaret's chauffeur to drive him back to town, Margaret insisted on driving him herself. Starting the old Packard was a challenge as usual, but finally the two of them set out for the Princeton train station.

The local train was already there, and Ralph knew he had to hurry to make his connection to the main line to Washington. There was mercifully no time for farewells or explanations, and only the shortest moment to say thank you to the woman who had become, in many ways, the dearest person in his life.

But as they got out of her car, Margaret said: "Ralph."



He turned to her and looked deeply in her eyes: this was perhaps his *last chance on Earth* to tell her the truth.

"Ralph," she said, "I would like you to know that, if I had ever had a son, I would have wanted him to be exactly like you." Then she

kissed him very tenderly on the forehead.

The train's whistle blew — it was time to leave. Ralph barely had a chance to murmur "Thank you." He looked at the train, looked back at Margaret, and then ran to get on board the train just before it left.

By the time he reached Trenton, Ralph was burning with desire to leave the train, find a public telephone, and call the gentle, vulnerable woman who, he was certain, was his mother.

As soon as the train stopped, he leapt from his seat and got as far as the steps leading down from the coach; but there he stopped, and the voice of an angel said to him:

“Ralph, you are going to war. You may never come back. *What are you doing?*”

“Your mother— that simple, trusting soul — has never even known her son. She lost her son years ago: *must she lose him again?*”

Ralph thought a bit, and then he returned to his seat. He could never resolve all of this now. He could never explain things to his real mother, or sort things out with the parents who had brought him up all those years — not now, he couldn't.

If he returned from the war, if he and his mother and his adoptive parents were all still alive, *then* there would be time. But now he could only cause grief to the very people he loved the most.



Ralph reflected one final time on the locket he found and its photo of the relentless munitions manufacturer, whose regal clothing and bearing and whose very portrait bespoke the staggering number of lives his inventions had destroyed. Then the conductor called “All aboard!” and the train started up. Even then, even in 1942, the train seemed obsolete: an imposing, unstoppable mass of steam and iron and strength — the aging representative of a very different century built on very different principles.

The train moved inexorably across the old railroad bridge into Pennsylvania, carrying Ralph on to the next part of his journey ...

* * *

After the train left the Princeton station, Margaret sat in her car for the longest time, watching the little train disappear into the woods across Lake Carnegie. “What a nice young man,” she thought.

Finally, after almost twenty minutes of reflection and reminiscence, she started her car, fiddling as always with the gears, and drove slowly back to her Victory Party.

And there was the house on Rosedale Road — the Old House which would now be hers for the rest of her life. Like the good hostess she was, she put aside the curious events of that week and began to entertain her guests, striving as always to make everyone feel at home.

But as she circulated among her friends, all of them commented on how *young* she looked. Margaret could not see it, of course; but the truth was that, after all those years, her smile had *finally* returned from the Great American Desert and had at last been restored to the still perfect features of her ever loving, ever hopeful face.