

I. March 1934

1.

FALLS CITY—*Falsity* in the charming local drawl—sprawled beneath the Spode Tower, at 14 stories high the tallest structure (excepting steeples) between Cincinnati and St. Louis. Its height gave upper-floor occupants sweeping views of the city lying along the broad silver slash of the Qwattata River. The unhurried wash of the river above and below the city set the Southern tempo that Falls City luxuriated in, though the half-mile stretch immediately passing it was a boiling rapids.

But in his office in the tower's crown, Robert Spode, Jr. saw only the letter lying on his desk.

He read it again:

— STEVEN KEY MEYERS —

March 7, 1934

Dear Bob,

It is with confidence in your generous character that I write to beg a favor.

You will remember when we raised your fine Tower several years ago that my son Harry was proving a trial to me. He has since left Vanderbilt Law School under a cloud. He is at heart a good young fellow, so quick in his parts that I retain my fondest hopes for his future.

But given the dismal business climate here in Memphis, not to mention the propinquity of the young lady in question, might I ask your help in finding Harry a job in Falls City? Whatever be the work, however humble, I promise he will perform his duties well. Occupation and a change of scene will help my boy grow up.

Please, Bob, make everlastingly grateful

Your humble
servant,
Vergil
Thrall

Pressing a button, Spode spoke into an intercom: “Miss Bryant, please take a letter.”

Miss Bryant came in and sat down, demurely crossing her legs. Getting to his feet, Spode frowned outdoors as he dictated.

“My Dear Vergil: It is a pleasure to hear from you, although a pleasure shadowed by your son’s—*um*—vicissitudes. As a father I sympathize. Fortunately my daughter Lucie since her marriage has ceased giving me cause for worry. I recommend marriage for your son.

“Paragraph. Although I wish I could help, given present business conditions—”

Miss Bryant cleared her throat. Looking at her, Spode remarked, “Thrall’s a good man. Wish we had a place for this cub of his, but distillery’s only place we’ve hired since the Crash, and it’s full up.”

“Things are so slow, Mr. Spode,” Miss Bryant said. “But I did hear that Charlie at the Spiral Garage found his day man siphoning gasoline and let him go.”

“*Oh!* That might do,” said Spode, nodding. “All right: By all means, send Harry to me, should he be willing to work as— What do we call it, Beth?”

She blushed at the working-hours lapse of formality.

“Parking attendant?”

“—parking attendant at the Spiral Garage. Compensation is slight—\$2 a day, plus tips, and as you might imagine, tips have fallen off since Wall Street brought these hard times upon us. Still, your son should be able to keep body and soul together.

“Paragraph. The Spode Tower continues to answer every purpose we had in mind for it, although had we foreseen the current business depression a smaller structure might have sufficed.

“I remain *et cetera, et cetera*. Type that up right away, please.”

Wreathed in the glow of benevolence, Spode admired his city of limestone, gazing past the pennants snapping above the Spiral Garage to where the breeze lifted plumes from the tailings overhanging the Spode cement mills and Spode quarries. Sunlight glanced off the water towers and warehouses of the Spode distillery, while the neighboring Spode pipe foundry belched gray; before the Depression, when it operated at capacity, the foundry’s inky smoke obscured the whole valley.

Nearer, a spider web of iron bridged the river with train tracks; the Falls City & Atlanta Railroad was not solely a Spode enterprise, but the family held large minority positions in it.

Away off to the west, Spode traced the fine neighborhoods stretching along the Qwattata, especially the bluffs surmounted by Indianola Farm, the old Spode slave plantation where he and his father still lived. The roof upheld by white columns was all that could be seen of the mansion, next door to the patterned brick chimneys of Override, where his daughter lived with her husband. A spyglass might have disclosed his ancient parent in his Bath chair, at 97 his Civil War regiment’s sole survivor, soaking up sun beside the boxwood hedges, leaning against his nurse like a suckling babe against its mother.

Miss Bryant carried in his letter and he signed it. However satisfying the view, there was work to be done.

2.

THE FOLLOWING MONDAY morning when the elevator operator heaved open the brass doors to his aerie, Spode saw Miss Bryant giggling.

At the wall opposite her slouched a young man in a dark, close-fitting suit. Merely by adjusting his cuff – but doing so with a dazzling smile – he raised a blush on her face that, as her boss entered, she tried to finesse by reaching a hand to her bun.

Spode strode into his office. Miss Bryant followed and helped divest him of hat and coat.

“Who’s that boy out there?” he asked.

“Mr. Harry Thrall to see you.”

“Send him in.”

The young man grinned his way into the presence a few moments later. Spode recognized him as the sort that ladies like – possibly an advantage for a parking attendant. Not the sort he himself took to, however. He was perhaps 23, 24, slender, with intensely black hair slicked down with some art, and good features that shone with the conviction that, by golly, they *were* good, weren’t they? They supported an insinuating manner, easy and confident.

“Mr. Spode, sir? I’m Harry Thrall.”

Spode extended his hand. He judged a man by the firmness of his handshake. Harry darted fingers into his hand, giving Spode a sensation of warmth that had him suppressing a shudder as they sat down.

“My father said to give you this.”

“Thank you,” said Spode, rocking forward to take the proffered envelope. Opening it, he read:

Dear Bob:

This accompanies my son Harry. I am grateful for your assistance, and stand personal surety as to Harry's ability and energy.

If ever I might be of service to you, do not hesitate to contact

Your humble
servant,
Vergil
Thrall

Spode couldn't help snorting. Thrall was a capable contractor, and he felt every confidence his Tower would not soon be toppling over, but that any return of services might be required wasn't likely.

“Well, well,” he said. He did not care for Harry's handshake. Nor for his manner. Nor for his person. But Harry, he thought, would have his uses. Everyone has his uses. “Glad to be of help. Your father's in good health, I trust?”

“Oh yes, sir.”

“Please give him my regards.”

“Well, I imagine he told you what we have in mind for you? We have a parking garage over on Fifth Avenue—Fifth and Jeff Davis: The Spiral. That’s two blocks upriver, one block south. Go over there and see Charlie.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Spode.” Harry smiled, the shift of his jaw forming dimples. *Dimples!* “Thank you, sir.”

3.

THE SPIRAL GARAGE was only a five-minute walk from the Spode Tower, but it took Harry several hours to arrive.

First he returned to River House, his hotel, the best in Falls City (and another Spode property). He hoped to see again the maid who showed him memorable kindness upon his arrival the previous afternoon.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t on duty. The difficulty was that, consulting his wallet over breakfast, Harry found that the temptations he succumbed to on his arrival—even on a Sunday evening, Falls City offered an illicit saloon that lubricated his way to a poker table—had put it into an embarrassing condition, and he needed assistance in removing his suitcase from the hotel, as he had no money to pay his bill.

So he returned and freshened up, and had the extraordinary good fortune of making the acquaintance of one Miss Etta when she knocked on

his door to make up his room. The fetching Miss Etta proved amenable to his suggestion that they improve their acquaintance.

The upshot was that Harry strolled out of the dining room after lunch, having signed the meal to his room, stopped at the desk to extend his stay another night and darted up the alley to find his suitcase behind a trash can, just where Miss Etta said it would be, and carried it off with him to the Spiral Garage. Too bad for her, she also loaned him a dollar, which meant she wouldn't be seeing him again.

A prophecy of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, the Spiral Garage was a pioneering structure built in 1919, the creation of a cranky old architect named J.J. Gaffney. Its concrete ramps spiraled to a height of 30 feet, branching off to floors that accommodated 25 automobiles each.

Patrons dropped off their cars at the entrance and went on their way. Charlie or another attendant would park them upstairs—driving past Mr. Spode's cream-colored Packard in its niche just inside the entrance—and return downstairs at the double via the manlift, a continuously moving cable: grab the cable and step onto one of the chocks fitted into it and fly downwards. When a patron returned, the attendant flew aloft like an angel on the upwards cable to fetch the car again.

Though business wasn't what it was in the Twenties, solo lunchtime duty ran Charlie off his feet. So when Harry appeared, he gave him the big hello, put him into blue coveralls and demonstrated the easy trick of stepping onto the manlift. Eyeing the suitcase, he also told him about Mrs. Good's boarding

house farther down Jeff Davis, promising she would offer credit until payday.

Harry's sole disappointment that day was the scarcity of tips. Men felt a nickel was ample, however dismayed his expression at sight of the lowly coin. And the ladies, instead of tipping, let their eyes go out of focus as they screwed their lips into a smiling, "Thank you."

Still, at day's end as Harry rode the trolley down Jeff Davis beside his suitcase his pocket was jingling with 60 cents.

4.

MRS. GOOD, CHARMED by him—and by his father's personal acquaintance with Robert Spode, Jr.—gave Harry a comfortable room and promised patience with the rent.

Falls City, it turned out, suited Harry. Work at the Spiral Garage involved little that resembled labor. Washing cars came closest, but on a fine day, with sun flooding the bay where he did that task, even that was easy, particularly with young women passing by and taking notice of his taking notice of them.

After work he pursued them at the movies—he loved movies—or in the parks or at the vaudeville theaters down Third Avenue. Soon he had a favorite tavern or two. After the season opened, on his days

off he attended games of the city's minor-league baseball team, *The Night Riders*.

And soon he was undertaking daily explorations of the countryside. The midafternoon doldrums were his boss's naptime, when Charlie would set his office door ajar and lean against it in such a way that his feet were visible, alertly positioned under the desk, but anybody opening it would wake him up before he could be seen to be sleeping.

That became Harry's time to borrow cars for a quick look around Falls City and its environs.

One afternoon he was driving a Plymouth along Falls Road, which hewed close to the river beneath bluffs surmounted by great houses. Flowering trees—pear, apple and cherry, dogwood in white or pink—brightened the riverbank.

A yellow Auburn Phaeton convertible rushed up behind him and with a blare of its horn swerved past. The glimpse he got told him only that the driver was a young woman. She half raised her hand in passing, but stopped the motion when, Harry guessed, she realized the Plymouth's driver was not who she expected to see.

Stepping on it, he drew abreast.

"Thought I knew you," he called over from the other lane. "*Sorry!*"

Slowing up, she frowned at him—frowned very prettily beneath her bell-shaped hat. But the frown relented at his steady smile; her blue eyes widened and she giggled.

"Thought *you* were Edna Chance."

"She drive a car like this?"

"*Very* like," she returned. "You steal it?"

“Who wants to know?”

“You must be new here,” she called.

“Just washed it for her,” Harry said, “back at the Spiral Garage.”

“Oh *really?*” she said, her voice sliding up an octave. “Did Daddy hire you?”

“That depends. Who’s your Daddy?”

Laughing, she accelerated, in front of him making a squealing, two-wheeled turn through gateposts bearing a wrought-iron arch that spelled *Override*.

Next afternoon, returning downstairs on the manlift, Harry saw ascending on the other cable a woman! A petite young beauty who, equally startled to see him, still had the wit to shift her weight from one hip to the other and flash a naughty look. Leaning out to look up her dress, Harry heard her laugh.

At the bottom he stepped across and flew upwards in her wake. Too late. He got back to earth again as the Auburn turned onto Fifth Avenue amidst honks and screeching brakes.

He woke up Charlie.

“Charlie, Charlie— Who’s the girl drives the Auburn?”

“She here?” said Charlie, leaping to his feet.

“No, just left. Got her car herself.”

“Everything OK?”

“Yeah, sure. Just wondered who she is.”

Charlie sat down again.

“That’s Mr. Spode’s girl Lucie—Lucie Spode White?”

“So she’s married?”

“*Yeah*, she’s married. Married a White.”

“Is that good?”

“Boy next door,” Charlie said noncommittally. “Old lumber family. See a guy driving along in a fire truck shiny as an apple, that’s him—his hobby. But look, her Daddy don’t like her parking her car by herself or riding the cable, so next time you see her, stop her.”

“Sure thing.”

Charlie sighed, re-positioning his door.

“Then again, she’s got a mind of her own, that one.”

“That’s the idea I got, seeing her,” replied Harry.

“So there you are. The prospect of all that money completely devastated my morals.”

Dashiell Hammett
\$106,000 Blood Money

“Them rich dames are easier to make than paper dolls.”

Raymond Chandler
Farewell, My Lovely

All That Money

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