

THE MAFIOSO  
CEMENT-MIXING  
MACHINE



2003

BURNHAM WOOD, I never knew his real name, led me into his splendid garage, which he had converted into a workplace/library.

On the shelves stood the complete works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, bound in rich leather, with gold epaulettes.

My hands itched as I studied this incredible collection, part of a literary experiment he was planning.

Burnham Wood turned from his amazing library, winked, and pointed at the far end of his vast garage.

"There!" he said. "My ironic machine with a peculiar name. What?"

With no particular emotion I said, "It looks like one of

those trucks that revolve on their axis every ten seconds, churning cement slag on its way to pouring new roads."

"Touché!" said Burnham Wood. "It's my Mafioso Cement Mixer. Look around. There's a relationship between it and this library."

I glanced at the books but found no relationship. Burnham Wood patted the side of his machine, which stood, rumbling, like a great gray elephant. The Mafioso Machine shivered and stopped.

"The idea struck," said Burnham Wood, "one desert night when a cement mixer passed me at high speed. I wondered if it was on its way to make concrete boots for lost Italian gangsters. I laughed, but the idea haunted me and woke me in the middle of the night months later. I had to fuse my library with this great monster, find a way, I thought, to travel this cement elephant back in time."

I skirted the great gray beast as it tumbled and whispered, rotating and ready to travel.

"The Mafioso Cement-Mixing Machine?" I said. "Explain."

Burnham Wood touched the F. Scott Fitzgerald books on their shelf and placed one in my hands.

I opened the book. "*The Last Tycoon*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald. His last. He didn't live to finish it."

"Here then." Burnham Wood stroked his great machine. "Shall I tell you what's inside? All the seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years of time, going back fifty years. We're going to run those hours and days to help

Scotty get some extra time to finish this novel. It was going to be his best but wound up a half-broken record played late nights while we drank far too much."

"And," I said, "just how are you going to do this?"

Burnham Wood produced a list. "Read. Those are the destinations my machine will visit to do the job."

I stared at the list and began to read.

"B. P. Schulberg, Paramount, right?"

"Right."

"Irving Thalberg, MGM? Darryl Zanuck, Fox?"

"Correct."

"Will you visit all these people?"

"Yes."

"You have directors at various studios, producers, floozies he once knew, bartenders all over creation. What will you do with them?"

"Find ways to move them, bribe them, or, when necessary, beat them up."

"What about Irving Thalberg? He died in 1936, right?"

"And if he'd lived a bit longer he might have been a good influence on Scotty."

"What are you going to do about a dead man?"

"When Thalberg died there was no sulfanilamide in the world. I'd like to sneak into his hospital room the week before his death and give him the medicines that might cure him and let him go back to MGM for another year. He might have hired Scotty for something better than the things they gave him."



"That's quite a list," I said. "You sound like you're going to move these people like chess pieces."

Burnham Wood showed me a flush of hundred-dollar bills. "I'm going to spread these around. Some of these moguls might be tempted to move. Stand close. Listen."

I stood close to the great rumbling machine. From its interior I heard far cries and gunshots.

"It sounds like a revolution," I said.

"Bastille," said Burnham Wood.

"Why would that be inside?"

"*Marie Antoinette*, MGM—Fitzgerald worked on it."

"My God, yes. Why would he write a thing like that?"

"He loved film, but he loved money even more. Listen again."

This time the gunfire was louder, and when the bombardment ceased I said, "*Three Comrades*, Germany, MGM, 1936."

Burnham Wood nodded.

There was a ripple of many women laughing. When it quieted I said, "*The Women*, Norma Shearer, Rosalind Russell, MGM, 1939."

Burnham Wood nodded again.

There were more cries of laughter, bursts of music. I recited the names I remembered from old film books.

"*Possessed*, Joan Crawford. *Madame Curie*, Greer Garson, screenplay by Huxley and F. Scott Fitzgerald. My God," I said. "Why did he bother with all that and why are all those sounds inside your machine?"

"I'm tearing them up, I'm destroying the scripts. It's all packed inside with the mix. *A Diamond as Big as the Ritz*, *This Side of Paradise*, *Tender Is the Night*. All of them are in there. When you mix all that junk with the really good stuff you've got a chance of laying out a new road somewhere in the past to make a new future."

I reread the list. "Those are the names of producers and directors and fellow writers over a period of years; some at MGM, a few at Paramount, and more in New York City as late as the summer of 1939. What's the sum?"

I glanced up at Burnham Wood and saw that he was trembling with anticipation, glancing at the machine.

"I'm going to run back with my metaphorical cement mixer and pour shoes for all those idiot people and transport them to some sea of eternity and drop them in. I'll clear the way for Scotty, give him a gift of Time so that, please God, finally *The Last Tycoon* will be finished, done, and published."

"No one can do that!"

"I will, or die trying. I'm going to pick them up, one by one, on special days in all those years. I'm going to kidnap them out of their environments and deliver them to other towns in other years, where they'll have to make their way, blindly, having forgotten where they came from and the stupid burden they laid on Scotty."

I brooded, eyes shut. "Good Lord, this reminds me of a George Arliss film I saw when I was a kid. *The Man Who Played God*."

Burnham Wood laughed quietly. "George Arliss, yes. I do feel somewhat like the Creator. I dare to be the Savior of our dear, drunken, foolish, childish Fitzgerald."

He stroked the machine again, and it trembled and whispered. I could almost hear the siren of the years rushing and tumbling inside.

"It's time," said Burnham Wood. "I'm going to climb in, turn the rheostats, and do a disappearing act. An hour from now, go to the nearest bookstore or check the books on my shelf and see if there's any change. I don't know if I'll ever return, I may get locked in some year a long while back. I may get as lost as the people I plan to kidnap."

"I hope you don't mind my saying," I said, "but I don't think you can mess with time, no matter how dearly you might wish to be the coeditor of F. Scott Fitzgerald's last book."

Burnham Wood shook his head. "I lie in bed many nights and worry over the deaths of many of my favorite authors. Poor sad Melville, dear lost Poe, Hemingway, who should have been killed in that African plane crash, but it only killed his ability to be a fine writer. I can do nothing about those, but here, in striking distance of Hollywood, I must try. That's it." Burnham Wood brisked his hands and reached out and shook mine. "Wish me luck."

"Luck," I said. "Is there anything I can say to stop you?"

"Don't," he said. "My great American elephant beast here will tumble time inside its guts, not cement, but the hours, days, and years—a literary device."



He climbed into his Mafioso Cement-Mixing Machine, did some adjustments on a computerized bank, then turned to study me.

"What will you do an hour from now?" he asked.

"Buy a new copy of *The Last Tycoon*," I said.

"Great!" cried Burnham Wood. "Stand back. Beware the concussion!"

"That's from *Shape of Things to Come*, yes?"

"H. G. Wells." Burnham Wood laughed. "Beware the concussion!"

The lid clanged shut. The great Mafioso Cement-Mixing Machine rumbled, turned in the years, and the garage was suddenly empty.

I waited a long while, hoping that another concussion might cause the great gray beast to suddenly reappear, but the garage remained empty.

At the bookstore, an hour later, I asked for a particular book.

The salesman handed me a copy of *The Last Tycoon*.

I opened it and turned the pages.

A loud cry came from my gaping mouth.

"He did it!" I shouted. "He did it! There are fifty more pages and the end is not the end that I read when the book was published many years ago. He did it, by God, he did it!"

Tears sprang from my eyes.

"That will be twenty-four dollars and fifty cents," said the salesman. "What gives?"

"You'll never know," I said. "But *I* know and all blessings to Burnham Wood."

"Who's he?"

"The man who played God," I replied.

Fresh tears burned my eyes, and I pressed the book to my heart and walked from the store muttering, "Oh yes, the man who played God."