

These were the things Dagny had heard about Midas Mulligan; she had never met him. Seven years ago, Midas Mulligan had vanished. He left his home one morning and was never heard from again. On the next day, the depositors of the Mulligan Bank in Chicago received notices requesting that they withdraw their funds, because the bank was closing. In the investigations that followed, it was learned that Mulligan had planned the closing in advance and in minute detail; his employees were merely carrying out his instructions. It was the most orderly run on a bank that the country ever witnessed. Every depositor received his money down to the last fraction of interest due. All of the bank's assets had been sold piecemeal to various financial institutions. When the books were balanced, it was found that they balanced perfectly, to the penny; nothing was left over; the Mulligan Bank had been wiped out.

No clue was ever found to Mulligan's motive, to his personal fate or to the many millions of his personal fortune. The man and the fortune vanished as if they had never existed. No one had had any warning about his decision, and no events could be traced to explain it. If he had wished to retire--people wondered--why hadn't he sold his establishment at a huge profit, as he could have done, instead of destroying it? There was nobody to give an answer. He had no family, no friends. His servants knew nothing; he had left his home that morning as usual and did not come back; that was all.

There was--Dagny had thought uneasily for years--a quality of the impossible about Mulligan's disappearance; it was as if a New York skyscraper had vanished one night, leaving nothing behind but a vacant lot on a street corner. A man like Mulligan, and a fortune such as he had taken along with him, could not stay hidden anywhere: a skyscraper could not get lost; it would be seen rising above any plain or forest chosen for its hiding place; were it destroyed, even its pile of rubble could not remain unnoticed. But Mulligan had gone--and in the seven years since, in the mass of rumors, guesses, theories, Sunday supplement stories, and eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen him in every part of the world, no clue to a plausible explanation had ever been discovered.

Among the stories, there was one so preposterously out of character that Dagny believed it to be true: nothing in Mulligan's nature could have given anyone ground to invent it. It was said that the last person to see him, on the spring morning of his disappearance, was an old woman who sold flowers on a Chicago street corner by the Mulligan Bank. She related that he stopped and bought a bunch of the year's first bluebells. His face was the happiest face she had ever seen; he had the look of a youth starting out into a great, unobstructed vision of life lying open before him; the marks of pain and tension, the sediment of years upon a human face, had been wiped off, and what remained was only joyous eagerness and peace. He picked up the flowers as if on a sudden impulse, and he winked at the old woman, as if he had some shining joke to share with her. He said, "Do you know how much I've always loved it--being alive?" She stared at him, bewildered, and he walked away, tossing the flowers like a ball in his hand--a broad, straight figure in a sedate, expensive, business-

man's overcoat, going off into the distance against the straight cliffs of office buildings with the spring sun sparkling on their windows.

"Midas Mulligan was a vicious bastard with a dollar sign stamped on his heart," said Lee Hunsacker, in the fumes of the acrid stew. "My whole future depended upon a miserable half-million dollars, which was just small change to him, but when I applied for a loan, he turned me down flat—for no better reason than that I had no collateral to offer. How could I have accumulated any collateral, when nobody had ever given me a chance at anything big? Why did he lend money to others, but not to me? It was plain discrimination. He didn't even care about my feelings—he said that my past record of failures disqualified me for ownership of a vegetable pushcart, let alone a motor factory. What failures? I couldn't help it if a lot of ignorant grocers refused to co-operate with me about the paper containers. By what right did he pass judgment on my ability? Why did my plans for my own future have to depend upon the arbitrary opinion of a selfish monopolist? I wasn't going to stand for that. I brought suit against him."

"You did *what*?"

"Oh, yes," he said proudly. "I brought suit. I'm sure it would seem strange in some of your hidebound Eastern states, but the state of Illinois had a very humane, very progressive law under which I could sue him. I must say it was the first case of its kind, but I had a very smart, liberal lawyer who saw a way for us to do it. It was an economic emergency law which said that people were forbidden to discriminate for any reason whatever against any person in any matter involving his livelihood. It was used to protect day laborers and such, but it applied to me and my partners as well, didn't it? So we went to court, and we testified about the bad breaks we'd all had in the past, and I quoted Mulligan saying that I couldn't even own a vegetable pushcart, and we proved that all the members of the Amalgamated Service Corporation had no prestige, no credit, no way to make a living--and, therefore, the purchase of the motor factory was our only chance of livelihood—and, therefore, Midas Mulligan had no right to discriminate against us—and, therefore, we were entitled to demand a loan from him under the law. Oh, we had a perfect case all right, but the man who presided at the trial was Judge Narragansett, one of those old-fashioned monks of the bench who thinks like a mathematician and never feels the human side of anything. He just sat there all through the trial like a marble statue—like one of those blindfolded marble statues. At the end, he instructed the jury to bring in a verdict in favor of Midas Mulligan—and he said some very harsh things about me and my partners. But we appealed to a higher court—and the higher court reversed the verdict and ordered Mulligan to give us the loan on our terms. He had three months in which to comply, but before the three months were up, something happened that nobody can figure out and he vanished into thin air, he and his bank. There wasn't an extra penny left of that bank, to collect our lawful claim. We wasted a lot of money on detectives, trying to find him—as who didn't?—but we gave it up."

No—thought Dagny—no, apart from the sickening feeling it gave