

STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT

Alfred Bester

Introduction

The Chase formula and the Search formula have been with us for a long time and will remain on the scene for a long time to come. They're sure-fire if handled with originality and can make your pulse pound like a Sousa march. I'm a little disappointed in the Hollywood writers, to say the least. Their idea of a chase seems to be one car pursuing another.

Chase and search aren't identical; you can have one without the other, but both together is best. Back in the carefree comic book days I even tried a tandem; started with an ordinary paper chase and then the paper trail turned into a trail of paper money. I wish I could remember the hero I did it for; "The Green Lantern"? "The Star-Spangled Kid"? "Captain Marvel"? I also wish I could remember how the story turned out.

You've probably noticed that I don't remember my work very well. Frankly, I never look at anything after it's been published, and anyway I'm not unique in that respect. I got it from the best authority, Jed Harris, that our wonderful popular composer, Jerome Kern, could never remember his own songs. In the course of a party, he'd be coaxed to the piano to play his tunes. Everybody would cluster around, but as he played they'd have to correct him. "No, no, Jerry! It doesn't go like that." And they'd be forced to sing his hits to him to refresh his memory.

"Star Light, Star Bright" is a search with a chase tempo. I don't know where I got the central idea but in those days science fiction authors were worrying a lot in print about misunderstood wild talents and child geniuses, so I guess it rubbed off on me. No, that can't be right. I'd tried the recipe many years before with a young nature counselor in a summer camp who is an idiot-genius and terribly misunderstood. But he solves a kidnapping despite the fact that I'd given him the ridiculous name of Erasmus Gaul.

The story-attack and the search techniques in "Star Light" were all from gimmick research. The Heirs of Buchanan swindle was a racket years ago and probably

still is, in one form or another. God knows, they never die. In our sophomore year my college roommate got taken for his month's allowance (\$20) by a couple of petty cons in Pennsylvania Station. Years later I read the identical racket in Greene's "The Art of Cony Catching" published circa 1592. No, they never die. Also, there's one born every minute.

I rather liked the story while I was writing it, but I don't like the fourth and third paragraphs from the end, counting backward from the end. They're the result of the same old battle which I lost this time to Tony Boucher of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, again over specifics. He wanted me to wrap up the story by showing precisely what happened to the victims. I wanted to slough it. I lost and had to add the paragraphs.

When I was defeated in the battle of specifics with Horace Gold over "Hobson's Choice," I took the story back and gave it to Tony, who ran it. When I lost the battle with Tony, I should have taken "Star Light" back and sent it to Horace in a plain brown wrapper. I didn't, and now I'm stuck with those two rotten paragraphs. Please read them with your eyes shut.

The man in the car was thirty-eight years old. He was tall, slender, and not strong. His cropped hair was prematurely grey. He was afflicted with an education and a sense of humor. He was

inspired by a purpose. He was armed with a phone book. He was doomed.

He drove up Post Avenue, stopped at No. 17 and parked. He consulted the phone book, then got out of the car and entered the house. He examined the mailboxes and then ran up the stairs to apartment 2-F. He rang the bell. While he waited for an answer he got out a small black notebook and a superior silver pencil that wrote in four colors.

The door opened. To a nondescript middle-aged lady, the man said, "Good evening. Mrs. Buchanan?"

The lady nodded.

"My name is Foster. I'm from the Science Institute. We're trying to check some flying saucer reports. I won't take a minute." Mr. Foster insinuated himself into the apartment. He had been in so many that he knew the layout automatically. He marched briskly down the hall to the front parlor, turned, smiled at Mrs. Buchanan, opened the notebook to a blank page, and poised the pencil.

"Have you ever seen a flying saucer, Mrs. Buchanan?"

"No. And it's a lot of bunk, I—"

"Have your children ever seen them? You do have children?"

"Yeah, but they—"

"How many?"

"Two. Them flying saucers never—"

"Are either of school age?"

"What?"

"School," Mr. Foster repeated impatiently. "Do they go to school?"

"The boy's twenty-eight," Mrs. Buchanan said. "The girl's twenty-four. They finished school a long—"

“I see. Either of them married?”

“No. About them flying saucers, you scientist doctors ought to—”

“We are,” Mr. Foster interrupted. He made a tic-tac-toe in the notebook, then closed it and slid it into a inside pocket with the pencil. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Buchanan,” he said, turned, and marched out.

Downstairs, Mr. Foster got into the car, opened the telephone directory, turned to a page and ran his pencil through a name. He examined the name underneath, memorized the address and started the car. He drove to Fort George Avenue and stopped the car in front of No. 800. He entered the house and took the self-service elevator to the fourth floor. He rang the bell of apartment 4-G. While he waited for an answer he got out the small black notebook and the superior pencil.

The door opened. To a truculent man, Mr. Foster said, “Good evening. Mr. Buchanan?”

“What about it?” the truculent man said.

Mr. Foster said, “My name is Davis. I’m from the Association of National Broadcasters. We’re preparing a list of names for prize competitors. May I come in? Won’t take a minute.”

Mr. Foster/Davis insinuated himself and presently consulted with Mr. Buchanan and his redheaded wife in the living room of their apartment.

“Have you ever won a prize in radio or television?”

“No,” Mr. Buchanan said angrily. “We never got a chance. Everybody else does but not us.”

“All that free money and iceboxes,” Mrs. Buchanan said. “Trips to Paris and planes and—”

“That’s why we’re making up this list,” Mr. Foster/Davis

broke in. "Have any of your relatives won prizes?"

"No. It's all a fix. Put-up jobs. They—"

"Any of your children?"

"Ain't got any children."

"I see. Thank you very much." Mr. Foster/Davis played out the tic-tac-toe game in his notebook, closed it and put it away. He released himself from the indignation of the Buchanans, went down to his car, crossed out another name in the phone book, memorized the address of the name underneath and started the car.

He drove to No. 215 East Sixty-Eighth Street and parked in front of a private brownstone house. He rang the doorbell and was confronted by a maid in uniform.

"Good evening," he said. "Is Mr. Buchanan in?"

"Who's calling?"

"My name is Hook," Mr. Foster/Davis said, "I'm conducting an investigation for the Better Business Bureau."

The maid disappeared, reappeared and conducted Mr. Foster/Davis/Hook to a small library where a resolute gentleman in dinner clothes stood holding a Limoges demitasse cup and saucer. There were expensive books on the shelves. There was an expensive fire in the grate.

"Mr. Hook?"

"Yes, sir," the doomed man replied. He did not take out the notebook. "I won't be a minute, Mr. Buchanan. Just a few questions."

"I have great faith in the Better Business Bureau," Mr. Buchanan pronounced. "Our bulwark against the inroads of—"

"Thank you, sir," Mr. Foster/Davis/Hook interrupted. "Have

you ever been criminally defrauded by a businessman?”

“The attempt has been made. I have never succumbed.”

“And your children? You do have children?”

“My son is hardly old enough to qualify as a victim.”

“How old is he, Mr. Buchanan?”

“Ten.”

“Perhaps he has been tricked at school? There are crooks who specialize in victimizing children.”

“Not at my son’s school. He is well protected.”

“What school is that, sir?”

“Germanson.”

“One of the best. Did he ever attend a city public school?”

“Never.”

The doomed man took out the notebook and the superior pencil. This time he made a serious entry.

“Any other children, Mr. Buchanan?”

“A daughter, seventeen.”

Mr. Foster/Davis/Hook considered, started to write, changed his mind and closed the notebook. He thanked his host politely and escaped from the house before Mr. Buchanan could ask for his credentials. He was ushered out by the maid, ran down the stoop to his car, opened the door, entered and was felled by a tremendous blow on the side of his head.

When the doomed man awoke, he thought he was in bed suffering from a hangover. He started to crawl to the bathroom when he realized he was dumped in a chair like a suit for the

cleaners. He opened his eyes. He was in what appeared to be an underwater grotto. He blinked frantically. The water receded.

He was in a small legal office. A stout man who looked like an unfrocked Santa Claus stood before him. To one side, seated on a desk and swinging his legs carelessly, was a thin young man with a lantern jaw and eyes closely set on either side of his nose.

“Can you hear me?” the stout man asked.

The doomed man grunted.

“Can we talk?”

Another grunt.

“Joe,” the stout man said pleasantly, “a towel.”

The thin young man slipped off the desk, went to a corner basin and soaked a white hand towel. He shook it once, sauntered back to the chair where, with a suddenness and savagery of a tiger, he lashed it across the sick man’s face.

“For God’s sake!” Mr. Foster/Davis/Hook cried.

“That’s better,” the stout man said. “My name’s Herod. Walter Herod, attorney-at-law.” He stepped to the desk where the contents of the doomed man’s pockets were spread, picked up a wallet and displayed it. “Your name is Warbeck. Marion Perkin Warbeck. Right?”

The doomed man gazed at his wallet, then at Walter Herod, attorney-at-law, and finally admitted the truth. “Yes,” he said. “My name is Warbeck. But I never admit the Marion to strangers.”

He was again lashed by the wet towel and fell back in the chair, stung and bewildered.

“That will do, Joe,” Herod said. “Not again, please, until I tell you.” To Warbeck he said, “Why this interest in the Buchanans?” He waited for an answer, then continued pleasantly, “Joe’s been tailing you. You’ve averaged five Buchanans a night. Thirty, so far.

What's your angle?"

"What the hell is this? Russia?" Warbeck demanded indignantly. "You've got no right to kidnap me and grill me like the MVD. If you think you can—"

"Joe," Herod interrupted pleasantly. "Again, please."

Again the towel lashed Warbeck. Tormented, furious and helpless, he burst into tears.

Herod fingered the wallet casually. "Your papers say you're a teacher by profession, principal of a public school. I thought teachers were supposed to be legit. How did you get mixed up in the inheritance racket?"

"The what racket?" Warbeck asked faintly.

"The inheritance racket," Herod repeated patiently. "The Heirs of Buchanan caper. What kind of parlay are you using? Personal approach?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Warbeck answered. He sat bolt upright and pointed to the thin youth. "And don't start that towel business again."

"I'll start what I please and when I please," Herod said ferociously. "And I'll finish you when I goddamned well please. You're stepping on my toes and I don't buy it. I've got seventy-five thousand a year I'm taking out of this and I'm not going to let you chisel."

There was a long pause, significant for everybody in the room except the doomed man. Finally he spoke. "I'm an educated man," he said slowly. "Mention Galileo, say, or the lesser Cavalier poets, and I'm right up there with you. But there are gaps in my education and this is one of them. I can't meet the situation. Too many unknowns."

"I told you my name," Herod answered. He pointed to the thin young man. "That's Joe Davenport."

Warbeck shook his head. “Unknown in the mathematical sense. X quantities. Solving equations. My education speaking”

Joe looked startled. “Jesus!” he said without moving his lips. “Maybe he *is* legit.”

Herod examined Warbeck curiously. “I’m going to spell it out for you,” he said. “The inheritance racket is a long-term con. It operates something like so: There’s a story that James Buchanan—”

“Fifteenth President of the U.S.?”

“In person. There’s a story he died intestate leaving an estate for heirs unknown. That was in 1868. Today at compound interest that estate is worth millions. Understand?”

Warbeck nodded. “I’m educated,” he murmured.

“Anybody named Buchanan is a sucker for this setup. It’s a switch on the Spanish Prisoner routine. I send them a letter. Tell ‘em there’s a chance they may be one of the heirs. Do they want me to investigate and protect their cut in the estate? It only costs a small yearly retainer. Most of them buy it. From all over the country. And now you—”

“Wait a minute,” Warbeck exclaimed. “I can draw a conclusion. You found out I was checking the Buchanan families. You think I’m trying to operate the same racket. Cut in... cut in? Yes? Cut in on you?”

“Well,” Herod asked angrily, “aren’t you?”

“Oh God!” Warbeck cried. “That this should happen to me. Me! Thank You, God. Thank You. I’ll always be grateful.” In his happy fervor he turned to Joe. “Give me the towel, Joe,” he said. “Just throw it. I’ve got to wipe my face.” He caught the flung towel and mopped himself joyously.

“Well,” Herod repeated. “Aren’t you?”

“No,” Warbeck answered, “I’m not cutting in on you. But I’m grateful for the mistake. Don’t think I’m not. You can’t imagine how flattering it is for a schoolteacher to be taken for a thief.”

He got out of the chair and went to the desk to reclaim his wallet and other possessions.

“Just a minute,” Herod snapped.

The thin young man reached out and grasped Warbeck’s wrist with an iron clasp.

“Oh stop it,” the doomed man said impatiently. “This is a silly mistake.”

“I’ll tell you whether it’s a mistake and I’ll tell you if it’s silly,” Herod replied. “Just now you’ll do as you’re told.”

“Will I?” Warbeck wrenched his wrist free and slashed Joe across the eyes with the towel. He darted around behind the desk, snatched up a paperweight and hurled it through the window with a shattering crash.

“Joe!” Herod yelled.

Warbeck knocked the phone off its stand and dialed Operator. He picked up his cigarette lighter, flicked it and dropped it into the wastepaper basket. The voice of the operator buzzed in the phone. Warbeck shouted, “I want a policeman!” Then he kicked the flaming basket into the center of the office.

“Joe!” Herod yelled and stamped on the blazing paper.

Warbeck grinned. He picked up the phone. Squawking noises were coming out of it. He put one hand over the mouthpiece. “Shall we negotiate?” he inquired.

“You sonofabitch,” Joe growled. He took his hands from his eyes and slid toward Warbeck.

“No!” Herod called. “This crazy fool’s hollered copper. He’s legit, Joe.” To Warbeck he said in pleading tones, “Fix it. Square it.

We'll make it up to you. Anything you say. Just square the call."

The doomed man lifted the phone to his mouth. He said, "My name is M.P. Warbeck. I was consulting my attorney at this number and some idiot with a misplaced sense of humor made this call. Please phone back and check."

He hung up, finished pocketing his private property and winked at Herod. The phone rang, Warbeck picked it up, reassured the police and hung up. He came around from behind the desk and handed his car keys to Joe.

"Go down to my car," he said. "You know where you parked it. Open the glove compartment and bring up a brown manila envelope you'll find."

"Go to hell," Joe spat. His eyes were still tearing.

"Do as I say," Warbeck said firmly.

"Just a minute, Warbeck," Herod said. "What's this? A new angle? I said we'd make it up to you, but—"

"I'm going to explain why I'm interested in the Buchanans," Warbeck replied. "And I'm going into partnership with you. You've got what I need to locate one particular Buchanan... you and Joe. My Buchanan's ten years old. He's worth a hundred times your make-believe fortune."

Herod stared at him.

Warbeck placed the keys in Joe's hand. "Go down and get that envelope, Joe," he said. "And while you're at it you'd better square that broken window rap. Rap? Rap."

The doomed man placed the manila envelope neatly on his lap. "A school principal," he explained, "has to supervise school classes. He reviews work, estimates progress, irons out student problems and so on. This must be done at random. By samplings, I

mean. I have nine hundred pupils in my school. I can't supervise them individually."

Herod nodded. Joe looked blank.

"Looking through some fifth-grade work last month," Warbeck continued, "I came across this astonishing document." He opened the envelope and took out a few sheets of ruled composition paper covered with blots and scrawled writing. "It was written by a Stuart Buchanan of the fifth grade. His age must be ten or thereabouts. The composition is entitled: *My Vacation*. Read it and you'll understand why Stuart Buchanan must be found."

He tossed the sheets to Herod who picked them up, took out a pair of horn-rim spectacles and balanced them on his fat nose. Joe came around to the back of his chair and peered over his shoulder.

My Vacatoin

by

Stuart Buchanan

This sumer I vissited my frends. I have 4 frends and they are verry nice. First there is Tommy who lives in the contry and he is an astronnimer. Tommy bilt his own tellescop out of glass 6 inches acros wich he grond himself. He loks at the stars every nihgt and he let me lok even wen it was raining cats & dogs...

"What the hell?" Herod looked up, annoyed.

"Read on. Read on," Warbeck said.

cats & dogs. We cold see the stars becaze Tommy made a thing for over the end of the tellescop wich shoots up like a serchlite and makes a hole in the skie to see rite thru the rain and everythinng to the stars.

“Finished the astronomer yet?” Warbeck inquired.

“I don’t dig it.”

“Tommy got bored waiting for clear nights. He invented something that cuts through clouds and atmosphere... a funnel of vacuum so he can use his telescope all weather. What it amounts to is a disintegration beam.”

“The hell you say.”

“The hell I don’t. Read on. Read on.”

Then I went to AnnMary and staid one hole week. It was fun. Becaze AnnMary has a spinak chainger for spinak and beats and strinbeans—

“What the hell is a ‘spinak chainger?’”

“Spinach. Spinach changer. Spelling isn’t one of Stuart’s specialties. ‘Beats’ are beets. ‘Strinbeens’ are string beans.”

beats and strinbeens. Wen her mother made us eet them AnnMary presed the buton and they staid the same outside onnly inside they became cake. Chery and strowbery. I asted AnnMary how & she sed it was by Enhv.

“This, I don’t get.”

“Simple. Anne-Marie doesn’t like vegetables. So she’s just as smart as Tommy, the astronomer. She invented a matter-transmuter. She transmutes spinach into cake. Cherry or strawberry. Cake she eats with pleasure. So does Stuart.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Not me. The kids. They’re geniuses. Geniuses? What am I saying? They make a genius look imbecile. There’s no label for these children.”

“I don’t believe it. This Stuart Buchanan’s got a tall imagination. That’s all.”

“You think so? Then what about $E=nh\nu$? That’s how Anne-Marie transmutes matter. It took time but I figured $E=nh\nu$ out. It’s Planck’s quantum equation $E = nh\nu$. But read on. Read on. The best is yet to come. Wait till you get to lazy Ethel.”

My friend Gorge builds modell airplanes very good and small. Gorg’s hands are clumsy but he makes small men out of moddelling clay and he tels them and they bild for him.

“What’s this?”

“George, the plane-maker?”

“Yes.”

“Simple. He makes miniature androids... robots... and they build the planes for him. Clever boy, George, but read about his sister, lazy Ethel.”

His sister Ethel is the lazyist girl I ever saw. She is big & fat and she hates to walk. So wen her mothar sends her too the store Ethel thinks to the store and thinks home with all the pakejes and has to hang around Gorg's room hiding untill it wil look like she walked both ways. Gorge and I make fun of her becaze she is fat and lazy but she gets into the movees for free and saw Hoppalong Casidy sixteen times.

The End

Herod stared at Warbeck.

“Great little girl, Ethel,” Warbeck said. “She’s too lazy to walk, so she teleports. Then she has a devil of a time covering up. She has to hide with her pakejes while George and Stuart make fun of her.”

“Teleports?”

“That’s right. She moves from place to place by thinking her way there.”

“There ain’t no such thing!” Joe said indignantly.

“There wasn’t until lazy Ethel came along.”

“I don’t believe this,” Herod said. “I don’t believe any of it.”

“You think it’s just Stuart’s imagination?”

“What else?”

“What about Planck’s equation? $E = nh\nu$?”

“The kid invented that, too. Coincidence.”

“Does that sound likely?”

“Then he read it somewhere.”

“A ten-year-old boy? Nonsense.”

“I tell you, I don’t believe it,” Herod shouted. “Let me talk to the kid for five minutes and I’ll prove it.”

“That’s exactly what I want to do... only the boy’s disappeared.”

“How do you mean?”

“Lock, stock, and barrel. That’s why I’ve been checking every Buchanan family in the city. The day I read this composition and sent down to the fifth grade for Stuart Buchanan to have a talk, he disappeared. He hasn’t been seen since.”

“What about his family?”

“The family disappeared too.” Warbeck leaned forward intensely. “Get this. Every record of the boy and the family disappeared. Everything. A few people remember them vaguely, but that’s all. They’re gone.”

“Jesus!” Joe said. “They scrambled, huh?”

“The very word. Scrambled. Thank you, Joe.” Warbeck cocked an eye at Herod. “What a situation. Here’s a child who makes friends with child geniuses. And the emphasis is on the child. They’re making fantastic discoveries for childish purposes. Ethel teleports because she’s too lazy to run errands. George makes robots to build model planes. Anne-Marie transmutes elements because she hates spinach. God knows what Stuart’s other friends are doing. Maybe there’s a Matthew who’s invented a time machine so he can catch up on his homework.”

Herod waved his hands feebly. “Why geniuses all of a sudden? What’s happened?”

“I don’t know. Atomic fallout? Fluorides in drinking water? Antibiotics? Vitamins? We’re doing so much juggling with body chemistry these days that who knows what’s happening? I want to find out but I can’t. Stuart Buchanan blabbed like a child. When I

started investigating, he got scared and disappeared.”

“Is he a genius, too?”

“Very likely. Kids generally hang out with kids who share the same interests and talents.”

“What kind of a genius? What’s his talent?”

“I don’t know. All I know is he disappeared. He covered up his tracks, destroyed every paper that could possibly help me locate him and vanished into thin air.”

“How did he get into your files?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe he’s a crook type,” Joe said. “Expert at breaking and entering and such.”

Herod smiled wanly. “A racketeer genius? A mastermind? The kid Moriarty?”

“He could be a thief-genius,” the doomed man said, “but don’t let running away convince you. All children do that when they get caught in a crisis. Either they wish it had never happened or they wish they were a million miles away. Stuart Buchanan may be a million miles away, but we’ve got to find him.”

“Just to find out is he smart?” Joe asked.

“No, to find his friends. Do I have to diagram it? What would the army pay for a disintegration beam? What would an element-transmuter be worth? If we could manufacture living robots how rich would we get? If we could teleport how powerful would we be?”

There was a burning silence, then Herod got to his feet. “Mr. Warbeck,” he said, “you make me and Joe look like pikers. Thank you for letting us cut in on you. We’ll pay off. We’ll find that kid.”

It is not possible for anyone to vanish without a trace... even a probable criminal genius. It is sometimes difficult to locate that trace... even for an expert experienced in hurried disappearances. But there is a professional technique unknown to amateurs.

“You’ve been blundering,” Herod explained kindly to the doomed man. “Chasing one Buchanan after the other. There are angles. You don’t run after a missing party. You look around on his back-trail for something he dropped.”

“A genius wouldn’t drop anything.”

“Let’s grant the kid’s a genius. Type unspecified. Let’s grant him everything. But a kid is a kid. He must have overlooked something. We’ll find it.”

In three days Warbeck was introduced to the most astonishing angles of search. They consulted the Washington Heights post office about a Buchanan family formerly living in that neighborhood, now moved. Was there any change-of-address-card filed? None.

They visited the election board. All voters are registered. If a voter moves from one election district to another, provision is usually made that a record of the transfer be kept. Was there any such record on Buchanan? None.

They called on the Washington Heights office of the gas and electric company. All subscribers for gas and electricity must transfer their accounts if they move. If they move out of town, they generally request the return of their deposit. Was there any record of a party named Buchanan? None.

It is a state law that all drivers must notify the license bureau of change of address or be subject to penalties involving fines, prison or worse. Was there any such notification by a party named Buchanan at the Motor Vehicle Bureau? There was not.

They questioned the R-J Realty Corp., owners and operators

of a multiple dwelling in Washington Heights in which a party named Buchanan had leased a four-room apartment. The R-J lease, like most other leases, required the names and addresses of two character references for the tenant. Could the character references for Buchanan be produced? They could not. There was no such lease in the files.

“Maybe Joe was right,” Warbeck complained in Herod’s office. “Maybe the boy is a thief-genius. How did he think of everything? How did he get at every paper and destroy it? Did he break and enter? Bribe? Burgle? Threaten? How did he do it?”

“We’ll ask him when we get to him,” Herod said grimly. “All right. The kid’s licked us straight down the line. He hasn’t forgotten a trick. But I’ve got one angle I’ve been saving. Let’s go up and see the janitor of their building.”

“I questioned him months ago,” Warbeck objected. “He remembers the family in a vague way and that’s all. He doesn’t know where they went.”

“He knows something else, something the kid wouldn’t think of covering. Let’s go get it.”

They drove up to Washington Heights and descended upon Mr. Jacob Ruysdale at dinner in the basement apartment of the building. Mr. Ruysdale disliked being separated from his liver and onions, but was persuaded by five dollars.

“About that Buchanan family,” Herod began.

“I told him everything before,” Ruysdale broke in, pointing to Warbeck.

“All right. He forgot to ask one question. Can I ask it now?” Ruysdale reexamined the five-dollar bill and nodded.

“When anybody moves in or out of a building, the superintendent usually takes down the name of the movers in case they damage the building. I’m a lawyer. I know this. It’s to protect

the building in case suit has to be brought. Right?”

Ruysdale's face lit up. “By Godfrey!” he said. “That's right, I forgot all about it. He never asked me.”

“He didn't know. You've got the name of the company that moved the Buchanans out. Right?”

Ruysdale ran across the room to a cluttered bookshelf. He withdrew a tattered journal and flipped it open. He wet his fingers and turned pages.

“Here it is,” he said. “The Avon Moving Company. Truck No. G-4.”

The Avon Moving Company had no record of the removal of a Buchanan family from an apartment in Washington Heights. “The kid was pretty careful at that,” Herod murmured. But it did have a record of the men working truck G-4 on that day. The men were interviewed when they checked in at closing time. Their memories were refreshed with whiskey and cash. They recalled the Washington Heights job vaguely. It was a full day's work because they had to drive the hell and gone to Brooklyn. “Oh God! Brooklyn!” Warbeck muttered. What address in Brooklyn? Something on Maple Park Row. Number? The number could not be recalled.

“Joe, buy a map.”

They examined the street map of Brooklyn and located Maple Park Row. It was indeed the hell and gone out of civilization and was twelve blocks long. “That's *Brooklyn* blocks,” Joe grunted. “Twice as long as anywhere. I know.”

Herod shrugged. “We're close,” he said. “The rest will have to be legwork. Four blocks apiece. Cover every house, every apartment. List every kid around ten. Then Warbeck can check them, if they're under an alias.”

“There's a million kids a square inch in Brooklyn.” Joe

protested.

“There’s a million dollars a day in it for us if we find him. Now let’s go.”

Maple Park Row was a long, crooked street lined with five-story apartment houses. Its sidewalks were lined with baby carriages and old ladies on camp chairs. Its curbs were lined with parked cars. Its gutter was lined with crude whitewash stickball courts shaped like elongated diamonds. Every manhole cover was a home plate.

“It’s just like the Bronx,” Joe said nostalgically. “I ain’t been home to the Bronx in ten years.”

He wandered sadly down the street toward his sector, automatically threading his way through stickball games with the unconscious skill of the city-born. Warbeck remembered that departure sympathetically because Joe Davenport never returned.

The first day, he and Herod imagined Joe had found a hot lead. This encouraged them. The second day they realized no heat could keep Joe on the fire for forty-eight hours. This depressed them. On the third day they had to face the truth.

“He’s dead,” Herod said flatly. “The kid got him.”

“How?”

“He killed him.”

“A ten-year-old boy? A child?”

“You want to know what kind of genius Stuart Buchanan has, don’t you? I’m telling you.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Then explain Joe.”

“He quit.”

“Not on a million dollars.”

“But where’s the body?”

“Ask the kid. He’s the genius. He’s probably figured out tricks that would baffle Dick Tracy.”

“How did he kill him?”

“Ask the kid. He’s the genius.”

“Herod, I’m scared.”

“So am I. Do you want to quit now?”

“I don’t see how we can. If the boy’s dangerous, we’ve got to find him.”

“Civic virtue, heh?”

“Call it that.”

“Well, I’m still thinking about the money.”

They returned to Maple Park Row and Joe Davenport’s four-block sector. They were cautious, almost furtive. They separated and began working from each end toward the middle; in one house, up the stairs, apartment by apartment, to the top, then down again to investigate the next building. It was slow, tedious work. Occasionally they glimpsed each other far down the street, crossing from one dismal building to another. And that was the last glimpse Warbeck ever had of Walter Herod.

He sat in his car and waited. He sat in his car and trembled. “I’ll go to the police,” he muttered, knowing perfectly well he could not. “The boy has a weapon. Something he invented. Something silly like the others. A special light so he can play marbles at night, only it murders men. A machine to play checkers, only it hypnotizes men. He’s invented a robot mob of gangsters so he can play cops-and-robbers and they took care of Joe and Herod. He’s a child genius. Dangerous. Deadly. What am I going to do?”

The doomed man got out of the car and stumbled down the street toward Herod’s half of the sector. “What’s going to happen

when Stuart Buchanan grows up?” he wondered. “What’s going to happen when all the rest of them grow up? Tommy and George and Anne-Marie and lazy Ethel? Why don’t I start running away now? What am I doing here?”

It was dusk on Maple Park Row. The old ladies had withdrawn, folding their camp chairs like Arabs. The parked cars remained. The stickball games were over, but small games were starting under the glowing lamp posts... games with bottle caps and cards and battered pennies. Overhead, the purple city haze was deepening, and through it the sharp sparkle of Venus following the sun below the horizon could be seen.

“He must know his power,” Warbeck muttered angrily. “He must know how dangerous he is. That’s why he’s running away. Guilt. That’s why he destroys us, one by one, smiling to himself, a crafty child, a vicious, killing genius...”

Warbeck stopped in the middle of Maple Park Row.

“Buchanan!” he shouted. “Stuart Buchanan!”

The kids near him stopped their games and gaped.

“Stuart Buchanan!” Warbeck’s voice cracked hysterically. “Can you hear me?”

His wild voice carried farther down the street. More games stopped. Ringaleevio, Chinese tag, Red-Light and Boxball.

“Buchanan!” Warbeck screamed. “Stuart Buchanan! Come out come out, wherever you are!”

The world hung motionless.

In the alley between 217 and 219 Maple Park Row playing hide-and-seek behind piled ash barrels, Stuart Buchanan heard his name and crouched lower. He was aged ten, dressed in sweater, jeans, and sneakers. He was intent and determined that he was not going to be caught out “it” again. He was going to hide until he could make a dash for home-free in safety. As he settled

comfortably among the ashcans, his eye caught the glimmer of Venus low in the western sky.

“Star light, star bright,” he whispered in all innocence, “first star I see tonight. Wish I may, wish I might, grant me the wish I wish tonight.” He paused and considered. Then he wished. “God bless Mom and Pop and me and all my friends and make me a good boy and please let me be always happy and I wish that anybody who tries to bother me would go away... a long way away... and leave me alone forever.”

In the middle of Maple Park Row, Marion Perkin Warbeck stepped forward and drew breath for another hysterical yell. And then he was elsewhere, going away on a road that was a long way away. It was a straight white road cleaving infinitely through blackness, stretching onward and onward into forever; a dreary, lonely, endless road leading away and away and away.

Down that road Warbeck plodded, an astonished automaton, unable to speak, unable to stop, unable to think in the timeless infinity. Onward and onward he walked into a long way away, unable to turn back. Ahead of him he saw the minute specks of figures trapped on that one-way road to forever. There was a dot that had to be Herod. Ahead of Herod there was a mote that was Joe Davenport. And ahead of Joe he could make out a long, dwindling chain of mites. He turned once with a convulsive effort. Behind him, dim and distant, a figure was plodding, and behind that another abruptly materialized, and another... and another...

While Stuart Buchanan crouched behind the ash barrels and watched alertly for the “it.” He was unaware that he had disposed of Warbeck. He was unaware that he had disposed of Herod, Joe Davenport and scores of others.

He was unaware that he had induced his parents to flee Washington Heights, that he had destroyed papers and documents, memories and peoples, in his simple desire to be left alone. He was unaware that he was a genius.

His genius was for wishing.