

The Mafioso Cement Mixing Machine

by Ray Bradbury

Burnham Wood-Inever knew his realname-ledme into his splendid garage, which he had converted into a workplace/library.

On the shelves stood the complete works of F ScottFitzgerald,bound in rich leather, with gold edging.

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

BurnhamWood 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 which revolve on their axis every ten seconds, and churns cement slag on its way to pouring new roads."

"Touche ! "saidBurnhamWood. "It's my Mafioso Cement Mixer. Look around. There's a relationship between it and my library."

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

"The idea struck," saidBurnhamWood, "one desert night when a cement mixer passed me at high speed. Iwondered-wasit 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 create my own mixing machine, fuse my library with the great beast, then find a way to take the cement elephant back in time."

I skirted the great grey beast that tumbled and whispered voice, rotating and ready to travel.

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

BurnhamWood touched the F ScottFitzgeraldbooks on their shelf and placed one in my hands.

I opened the book. "The Last Tycoonby F. ScottFitzgerald.His last. He didn't live to finish it."

"Here then."BurnhamWood stroked his great colorless beast. "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 we played late nights while drinking far too much."

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

BurnhamWood produced a list. "Read. Those are the people my machine will take me to so I can do the job."

I stared at the list and began to read. "bySchulberg.Paramount, right?"

"Right."

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

"Correct."

"Will you visit all these people?"

"Yes."

"You have directors at various studios, producers, floozies that he once knew, bartenders all over creation on this list. 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 1937, 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 medicine that might cure him and let him to go back to MGM for another year. He might have hired Scotty for some-thing 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. They might tempt some of these moguls to move. Stand Close. Listen."

I stood close to the great rumbling grey beast. 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 that."

"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, Robert Taylor and Margaret Sullavan, MGM, 1938."

Burnham Wood nodded.

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

BurnhamWood nodded again.

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

"Infidelity, 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 glanced up at BurnhamWood 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 Timeso 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."

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

He stroked the machine again and it trembled and whis-pered. I could almost hear the siren of the years rushing and tum-bling inside.

"It's time," said BurnhamWood. "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."

BurnhamWood 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. He 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 writers, but here, within striking distance of Fitzgerald's Hollywood, I must try. That's it." BurnhamWood rubbed his hands together briskly, then 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 Things to Come, yes?"

"H.G. Wells," Burnham Wood laughed. "Beware the con-cussion!"

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 grey 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 to 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."