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The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Calm Man, by Frank Belknap Long

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\*\*\* START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CALM MAN \*\*\*

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*Dip the pen of a Frank Belknap Long into a bottle of ink and the result is always bound to be a scintillating piece of brilliant imaginative science fiction. And he's done it again in the tortured story of Sally.*

## the calm man

*by ... Frank Belknap Long*

**Sally watched the molten gold glow in the sky. Then knew she would not see her son and her husband ever again on Earth.**

Sally Anders had never really thought of herself as a wallflower. A girl could be shy, couldn't she, and still be pretty enough to attract and hold men?

Only this morning she had drawn an admiring look from the milkman and a wolf cry from Jimmy on the

corner, with his newspapers and shiny new bike. What if the milkman was crowding sixty and wore thick-lensed glasses? What if Jimmy was only seventeen?

A male was a male, and a glance was a glance. Why, if I just primp a little more, Sally told herself, I'll be irresistible.

Hair ribbons and perfume, a mirror tilted at just the right angle, an invitation to a party on the dresser—what more did a girl need?

"Dinner, Sally!" came echoing up from the kitchen. "Do you want to be late, child?"

Sally had no intention of being late. Tonight she'd see him across a crowded room and her heart would skip a beat. He'd look at her and smile, and come straight toward her with his shoulders squared.

There was always one night in a girl's life that stands above all other nights. One night when the moon shone bright and clear and the clock on the wall went *tick tock, tick tock, tick tock*. One night when each tick said, "You're beautiful! Really beautiful!"

Giving her hair a final pat Sally smiled at herself in the mirror.

In the bathroom the water was still running and the perfumed bath soap still spread its aromatic sweet odor through the room. Sally went into the bathroom and turned off the tap before going downstairs to the kitchen.

"My girl looks radiant tonight!" Uncle Ben said, smiling at her over his corned beef and cabbage.

Sally blushed and lowered her eyes.

"Ben, you're making her nervous," Sally's mother said, laughing.

Sally looked up and met her uncle's stare, her eyes defiant. "I'm not bad-looking whatever you may think," she said.

"Oh, now, Sally," Uncle Ben protested. "No sense in getting on a high horse. Tonight you may find a man who just won't be able to resist you."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," Sally said. "You'd be surprised if I did, wouldn't you?"

It was Uncle Ben's turn to lower his eyes.

"I'll tell the world you've inherited your mother's looks, Sally," he said. "But a man has to pride himself on something. My defects of character are pretty bad. But no one has ever accused me of dishonesty."

Sally folded her napkin and rose stiffly from the table.

"Good night, Uncle," she said.

When Sally arrived at the party every foot of floor space was taken up by dancing couples and the reception room was so crowded that, as each new guest was announced, a little ripple of displeasure went through the men in midnight blue and the women in Nile green and lavender.

For a moment Sally did not move, just stood staring at the dancing couples, half-hidden by one of the potted palms that framed the sides of the long room.

Moonlight silvered her hair and touched her white throat and arms with a caress so gentle that simply by

closing her eyes she could fancy herself already in his arms.

Moonlight from tall windows flooding down, turning the dancing guests into pirouetting ghosts in diaphanous blue and green, scarlet and gold.

*Close your eyes, Sally, close them tight! Now open them! That's it ... Slowly, slowly ...*

He came out of nothingness into the light and was right beside her suddenly.

He was tall, but not too tall. His face was tanned mahogany brown, and his eyes were clear and very bright. And he stood there looking at her steadily until her mouth opened and a little gasp flew out.

He took her into his arms without a word and they started to dance ...

They were still dancing when he asked her to be his wife.

"You'll marry me, of course," he said. "We haven't too much time. The years go by so swiftly, like great white birds at sea."

They were very close when he asked her, but he made no attempt to kiss her. They went right on dancing and while he waited for her answer he talked about the moon ...

"When the lights go out and the music stops the moon will remain," he said. "It raises tides on the Earth, it inflames the minds and hearts of men. There are cyclic rhythms which would set a stone to dreaming and desiring on such a night as this."

He stopped dancing abruptly and looked at her with calm assurance.

"You *will* marry me, won't you?" he asked. "Allowing for a reasonable margin of error I seriously doubt if I could be happy with any of these other women. I was attracted to you the instant I saw you."

A girl who has never been asked before, who has drawn only one lone wolf cry from a newsboy could hardly be expected to resist such an offer.

*Don't resist, Sally. He's strong and tall and extremely good-looking. He knows what he wants and makes up his mind quickly. Surely a man so resolute must make enough money to support a wife.*

"Yes," Sally breathed, snuggling close to him. "Oh, yes!"

She paused a moment, then said, "You may kiss me now if you wish, my darling."

He straightened and frowned a little, and looked away quickly. "That can wait," he said.

They were married a week later and went to live on an elm-shaded street just five blocks from where Sally was born. The cottage was small, white and attractively decorated inside and out. But Sally changed the curtains, as all women must, and bought some new furniture on the installment plan.

The neighbors were friendly folk who knew her husband as Mr. James Rand, an energetic young insurance broker who would certainly carve a wider swath for himself in his chosen profession now that he had so charming a wife.

Ten months later the first baby came.

Lying beneath cool white sheets in the hospital Sally looked at the other women and felt so deliriously happy she wanted to cry. It was a beautiful baby and it cuddled close to her heart, its smallness a miracle in itself.

The other husbands came in and sat beside their wives, holding on tight to their happiness. There were flowers and smiles, whispers that explored bright new worlds of tenderness and rejoicing.

Out in the corridor the husbands congratulated one another and came in smelling of cigar smoke.

"Have a cigar! That's right. Eight pounds at birth. That's unusual, isn't it? Brightest kid you ever saw. Knew his old man right off."

He was beside her suddenly, standing straight and still in shadows.

"Oh, darling," she whispered. "Why did you wait? It's been three whole days."

"Three days?" he asked, leaning forward to stare down at his son. "Really! It didn't seem that long."

"Where were you? You didn't even phone!"

"Sometimes it's difficult to phone," he said slowly, as if measuring his words. "You have given me a son. That pleases me very much."

A coldness touched her heart and a despair took hold of her. "It pleases you! Is that all you can say? You stand there looking at me as if I were a&mdash;a patient ..."

"A patient?" His expression grew quizzical. "Just what do you mean, Sally?"

"You said you were pleased. If a patient is ill her doctor hopes that she will get well. He is pleased when she does. If a woman has a baby a doctor will say, 'I'm so pleased. The baby is doing fine. You don't have to worry about him. I've put him on the scales and he's a bouncing, healthy boy.'"

"Medicine is a sane and wise profession," Sally's husband said. "When I look at my son that is exactly what I would say to the mother of my son. He is healthy and strong. You have pleased me, Sally."

He bent as he spoke and picked Sally's son up. He held the infant in the crook of his arm, smiling down at it.

"A healthy male child," he said. "His hair will come in thick and black. Soon he will speak, will know that I am his father."

He ran his palm over the baby's smooth head, opened its mouth gently with his forefinger and looked inside.

Sally rose on one elbow, her tormented eyes searching his face.

"He's your child, your son!" she sobbed. "A woman has a child and her husband comes and puts his arms around her. He holds her close. If they love each other they are so happy, so very happy, they break down and cry."

"I am too pleased to do anything so fantastic, Sally," he said. "When a child is born no tears should be shed by its parents. I have examined the child and I am pleased with it. Does not that content you?"

"No, it doesn't!" Sally almost shrieked. "Why do you stare at your own son as if you'd never seen a baby before? He isn't a mechanical toy. He's our own darling, adorable little baby. *Our child!* How can you be

so *inhumanly* calm?"

He frowned, put the baby down.

"There is a time for love-making and a time for parenthood," he said. "Parenthood is a serious responsibility. That is where medicine comes in, surgery. If a child is not perfect there are emergency measures which can be taken to correct the defect."

Sally's mouth went suddenly dry. "Perfect! What do you mean, Jim? Is there something *wrong* with Tommy?"

"I don't think so," her husband said. "His grasp is firm and strong. He has good hearing and his eyesight appears to be all that could be desired. Did you notice how his eyes followed me every moment?"

"I wasn't looking at his eyes!" Sally whispered, her voice tight with alarm. "Why are you trying to frighten me, Jim? If Tommy wasn't a normal, healthy baby do you imagine for one instant they would have placed him in my arms?"

"That is a very sound observation," Sally's husband said. "Truth is truth, but to alarm you at a time like this would be unnecessarily cruel."

"Where does that put you?"

"I simply spoke my mind as the child's father. I had to speak as I did because of my natural concern for the health of our child. Do you want me to stay and talk to you, Sally?"

Sally shook her head. "No, Jim. I won't let you torture me any more."

Sally drew the baby into her arms again and held it tightly. "I'll scream if you stay!" she warned. "I'll become hysterical unless you leave."

"Very well," her husband said. "I'll come back tomorrow."

He bent as he spoke and kissed her on the forehead. His lips were ice cold.

For eight years Sally sat across the table from her husband at breakfast, her eyes fixed upon a nothingness on the green-blue wall at his back. Calm he remained even while eating. The eggs she placed before him he cracked methodically with a knife and consumed behind a tilted newspaper, taking now an assured sip of coffee, now a measured glance at the clock.

The presence of his young son bothered him not at all. Tommy could be quiet or noisy, in trouble at school, or with an A for good conduct tucked with his report card in his soiled leather zipper jacket. It was always: "Eat slowly, my son. Never gulp your food. Be sure to take plenty of exercise today. Stay in the sun as much as possible."

Often Sally wanted to shriek: "Be a father to him! A real father! Get down on the floor and play with him. Shoot marbles with him, spin one of his tops. Remember the toy locomotive you gave him for Christmas after I got hysterical and screamed at you? Remember the beautiful little train? Get it out of the closet and wreck it accidentally. He'll warm up to you then. He'll be broken-hearted, but he'll feel close to you, then you'll know what it means to have a son!"

Often Sally wanted to fly at him, beat with her fists on his chest. But she never did.

*You can't warm a stone by slapping it, Sally. You'd only bruise yourself. A stone is neither cruel*

*nor tender. You've married a man of stone, Sally.*

He hasn't missed a day at the office in eight years. She'd never visited the office but he was always there to answer when she phoned. "I'm very busy, Sally. What did you say? You've bought a new hat? I'm sure it will look well on you, Sally. What did you say? Tommy got into a fight with a new boy in the neighborhood? You must take better care of him, Sally."

There are patterns in every marriage. When once the mold has set, a few strange behavior patterns must be accepted as a matter of course.

"I'll drop in at the office tomorrow, darling!" Sally had promised right after the breakfast pattern had become firmly established. The desire to see where her husband worked had been from the start a strong, bright flame in her. But he asked her to wait a while before visiting his office.

A strong will can dampen the brightest flame, and when months passed and he kept saying 'no,' Sally found herself agreeing with her husband's suggestion that the visit be put off indefinitely.

Snuff a candle and it stays snuffed. A marriage pattern once established requires a very special kind of re-kindling. Sally's husband refused to supply the needed spark.

Whenever Sally had an impulse to turn her steps in the direction of the office a voice deep in her mind seemed to whisper: "No sense in it, Sally. Stay away. He's been mean and spiteful about it all these years. Don't give in to him now by going."

Besides, Tommy took up so much of her time. A growing boy was always a problem and Tommy seemed to have a special gift for getting into things because he was so active. And he went through his clothes, wore out his shoes almost faster than she could replace them.

Right now Tommy was playing in the yard. Sally's eyes came to a focus upon him, crouching by a hole in the fence which kindly old Mrs. Wallingford had erected as a protection against the prying inquisitiveness of an eight-year-old determined to make life miserable for her.

A thrice-widowed neighbor of seventy without a spiteful hair in her head could put up with a boy who rollicked and yelled perhaps. But peep-hole spying was another matter.

Sally muttered: "Enough of that!" and started for the kitchen door. Just as she reached it the telephone rang.

Sally went quickly to the phone and lifted the receiver. The instant she pressed it to her ear she recognized her husband's voice—or thought she did.

"Sally, come to the office!" came the voice, speaking in a hoarse whisper. "Hurry—or it will be too late! Hurry, Sally!"

Sally turned with a startled gasp, looked out through the kitchen window at the autumn leaves blowing crisp and dry across the lawn. As she looked the scattered leaves whirled into a flurry around Tommy, then lifted and went spinning over the fence and out of sight.

The dread in her heart gave way to a sudden, bleak despair. As she turned from the phone something within her withered, became as dead as the drifting leaves with their dark autumnal mottlings.

She did not even pause to call Tommy in from the yard. She rushed upstairs, then down again, gathering up her hat, gloves and purse, making sure she had enough change to pay for the taxi.

The ride to the office was a nightmare ... Tall buildings swept past, facades of granite as gray as the leaden skies of mid-winter, beehives of commerce where men and women brushed shoulders without touching hands.

Autumnal leaves blowing, and the gray buildings sweeping past. Despite Tommy, despite everything there was no shining vision to warm Sally from within. A cottage must be lived in to become a home and Sally had never really had a home.

One-night stand! It wasn't an expression she'd have used by choice, but it came unbidden into her mind. If you live for nine years with a man who can't relax and be human, who can't be warm and loving you'll begin eventually to feel you might as well live alone. Each day had been like a lonely sentinel outpost in a desert waste for Sally.

She thought about Tommy ... Tommy wasn't in the least like his father when he came racing home from school, hair tousled, books dangling from a strap. Tommy would raid the pantry with unthinking zest, invite other boys in to look at the Westerns on TV, and trade black eyes for marbles with a healthy pugnacity.

Up to a point Tommy *was* normal, *was* healthy.

But she had seen mirrored in Tommy's pale blue eyes the same abnormal calmness that was always in his father's, and the look of derisive withdrawal which made him seem always to be staring down at her from a height. And it filled her with terror to see that Tommy's mood could change as abruptly and terrifyingly cold ...

Tommy, her son. Tommy, no longer boisterous and eager, but sitting in a corner with his legs drawn up, a faraway look in his eyes. Tommy seeming to look right through her, into space. Tommy and Jim exchanging silent understanding glances. Tommy roaming through the cottage, staring at his toys with frowning disapproval. Tommy drawing back when she tried to touch him.

*Tommy, Tommy, come back to me!* How often she had cried out in her heart when that coldness came between them.

Tommy drawing strange figures on the floor with a piece of colored chalk, then erasing them quickly before she could see them, refusing to let her enter his secret child's world.

Tommy picking up the cat and stroking its fur mechanically, while he stared out through the kitchen window at rusty blackbirds on the wing ...

"This is the address you gave me, lady. Sixty-seven Vine Street," the cab driver was saying.

Sally shivered, remembering her husband's voice on the phone, remembering where she was ... "*Come to the office, Sally! Hurry, hurry&mdash;or it will be too late!*"

Too late for what? Too late to recapture a happiness she had never possessed?

"This is it, lady!" the cab driver insisted. "Do you want me to wait?"

"No," Sally said, fumbling for her change purse. She descended from the taxi, paid the driver and hurried across the pavement to the big office building with its mirroring frontage of plate glass and black onyx tiles.

The firm's name was on the directory board in the lobby, white on black in beautifully embossed lettering. White for hope, and black for despair, mourning ...

The elevator opened and closed and Sally was whisked up eight stories behind a man in a checkered suit.

"Eighth floor!" Sally whispered, in sudden alarm. The elevator jolted to an abrupt halt and the operator swung about to glare at her.

"You should have told me when you got on, Miss!" he complained.

"Sorry," Sally muttered, stumbling out into the corridor. How horrible it must be to go to business every day, she thought wildly. To sit in an office, to thumb through papers, to bark orders, to be a machine.

Sally stood very still for an instant, startled, feeling her sanity threatened by the very absurdity of the thought. People who worked in offices could turn for escape to a cottage in the sunset's glow, when they were set free by the moving hands of a clock. There could be a fierce joy at the thought of deliverance, at the prospect of going home at five o'clock.

But for Sally was the brightness, the deliverance withheld. The corridor was wide and deserted and the black tiles with their gold borders seemed to converge upon her, hemming her into a cool magnificence as structurally somber as the architectural embellishments of a costly mausoleum.

She found the office with her surface mind, working at cross-purposes with the confusion and swiftly mounting dread which made her footsteps falter, her mouth go dry.

*Steady, Sally! Here's the office, here's the door. Turn the knob and get it over with ...*

Sally opened the door and stepped into a small, deserted reception room. Beyond the reception desk was a gate, and beyond the gate a large central office branched off into several smaller offices.

Sally paused only an instant. It seemed quite natural to her that a business office should be deserted so late in the afternoon.

She crossed the reception room to the gate, passed through it, utter desperation giving her courage.

Something within her whispered that she had only to walk across the central office, open the first door she came to to find her husband ...

The first door combined privacy with easy accessibility. The instant she opened the door she knew that she had been right to trust her instincts. This was his office ...

He was sitting at a desk by the window, a patch of sunset sky visible over his right shoulder. His elbows rested on the desk and his hands were tightly locked as if he had just stopped wringing them.

He was looking straight at her, his eyes wide and staring.

"Jim!" Sally breathed. "Jim, what's wrong?"

He did not answer, did not move or attempt to greet her in any way. There was no color at all in his face. His lips were parted, his white teeth gleamed. And he was more stiffly controlled than usual—a control so intense that for once Sally felt more alarm than bitterness.

There was a rising terror in her now. And a slowly dawning horror. The sunlight streamed in, gleaming redly on his hair, his shoulders. He seemed to be the center of a flaming red ball ...

*He sent for you, Sally. Why doesn't he get up and speak to you, if only to pour salt on the wounds you've borne for eight long years?*



*Poor Sally! You wanted a strong, protective, old-fashioned husband. What have you got instead?*

Sally went up to the desk and looked steadily into eyes so calm and blank that they seemed like the eyes of a child lost in some dreamy wonderland barred forever to adult understanding.

For an instant her terror ebbed and she felt almost reassured. Then she made the mistake of bending more closely above him, brushing his right elbow with her sleeve.

That single light woman's touch unsettled him. He started to fall, sideways and very fast. Topple a dead weight and it crashes with a swiftness no opposing force can counter-balance.

It did Sally no good to clutch frantically at his arm as he fell, to tug and jerk at the slackening folds of his suit. The heaviness of his descending bulk dragged him down and away from her, the awful inertia of lifeless flesh.

He thudded to the floor and rolled over on his back, seeming to shrink as Sally widened her eyes upon him. He lay in a grotesque sprawl at her feet, his jaw hanging open on the gaping black orifice of his mouth ...

Sally might have screamed and gone right on screaming&mdash;if she had been a different kind of woman. On seeing her husband lying dead her impulse might have been to throw herself down beside him, give way to her grief in a wild fit of sobbing.

But where there was no grief there could be no sobbing ...

One thing only she did before she left. She unloosed the collar of the unmoving form on the floor and looked for the small brown mole she did not really expect to find. The mole she knew to be on her husband's shoulder, high up on the left side.

She had noticed things that made her doubt her sanity; she needed to see the little black mole to reassure her ...

She had noticed the difference in the hair-line, the strange slant of the eyebrows, the crinkly texture of the skin where it should have been smooth ...

Something was wrong ... horribly, weirdly wrong ...

Even the hands of the sprawled form seemed larger and hairier than the hands of her husband. Nevertheless it was important to be sure ...

The absence of the mole clinched it.

Sally crouched beside the body, carefully readjusting the collar. Then she got up and walked out of the office.

Some homecomings are joyful, others cruel. Sitting in the taxi, clenching and unclenching her hands, Sally had no plan that could be called a plan, no hope that was more than a dim flickering in a vast wasteland, bleak and unexplored.

But it was strange how one light burning brightly in a cottage window could make even a wasteland seem small, could shrink and diminish it until it became no more than a patch of darkness that anyone with courage might cross.

The light was in Tommy's room and there was a whispering behind the door. Sally could hear the whispering as she tiptoed upstairs, could see the light streaming out into the hall.

She paused for an instant at the head of the stairs, listening. There were two voices in the room, and they were talking back and forth.

Sally tiptoed down the hall, stood with wildly beating heart just outside the door.

"She knows now, Tommy," the deepest of the two voices said. "We are very close, your mother and I. She knows now that I sent her to the office to find my 'stand in.' Oh, it's an amusing term, Tommy—;an Earth term we'd hardly use on Mars. But it's a term your mother would understand."

A pause, then the voice went on, "You see, my son, it has taken me eight years to repair the ship. And in eight years a man can wither up and die by inches if he does not have a growing son to go adventuring with him in the end."

"Adventuring, father?"

"You have read a good many Earth books, my son, written especially for boys. *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*. What paltry books they are! But in them there is a little of the fire, a little of the glow of *our* world."

"No, father. I started them but I threw them away for I did not like them."

"As you and I must throw away all Earth things, my son. I tried to be kind to your mother, to be a good husband as husbands go on Earth. But how could I feel proud and strong and reckless by her side? How could I share her paltry joys and sorrows, chirp with delight as a sparrow might chirp hopping about in the grass? Can an eagle pretend to be a sparrow? Can the thunder muffle its voice when two white-crested clouds collide in the shining depths of the night sky?"

"You tried, father. You did your best."

"Yes, my son, I did try. But if I had attempted to feign emotions I did not feel your mother would have seen through the pretense. She would then have turned from me completely. Without her I could not have had you, my son."

"And now, father, what will we do?"

"Now the ship has been repaired and is waiting for us. Every day for eight years I went to the hill and worked on the ship. It was badly wrecked, my son, but now my patience has been rewarded, and every damaged astronavigation instrument has been replaced."

"You never went to the office, father? You never went at all?"

"No, my son. My stand-in worked at the office in my place. I instilled in your mother's mind an intense dislike and fear of the office to keep her from ever coming face to face with the stand-in. She might have noticed the difference. But I had to have a stand-in, as a safeguard. Your mother *might* have gone to the office despite the mental block."

"She's gone now, father. Why did you send for her?"

"To avoid what she would call a scene, my son. That I could not endure. I had the stand-in summon her on the office telephone, then I withdrew all vitality from it. She will find it quite lifeless. But it does not matter now. When she returns we will be gone."

"Was constructing the stand-in difficult, father?"

"Not for me, my son. On Mars we have many androids, each constructed to perform a specific task. Some are ingenious beyond belief—;or would seem so to Earthmen."

There was a pause, then the weaker of the two voices said, "I will miss my mother. She tried to make me happy. She tried very hard."

"You must be brave and strong, my son. We are eagles, you and I. Your mother is a sparrow, gentle and dun-colored. I shall always remember her with tenderness. You want to go with me, don't you?"

"Yes, father. Oh, yes!"

"Then come, my son. We must hurry. Your mother will be returning any minute now."

Sally stood motionless, listening to the voices like a spectator sitting before a television screen. A spectator can see as well as hear, and Sally could visualize her son's pale, eager face so clearly there was no need for her to move forward into the room.

She could not move. And nothing on Earth could have wrenched a tortured cry from her. Grief and shock may paralyze the mind and will, but Sally's will was not paralyzed.

It was as if the thread of her life had been cut, with only one light left burning. Tommy was that light. He would never change. He would go from her forever. But he would always be her son.

The door of Tommy's room opened and Tommy and his father came out into the hall. Sally stepped back into shadows and watched them walk quickly down the hall to the stairs, their voices low, hushed. She heard them descend the stairs, their footsteps dwindle, die away into silence ...

*You'll see a light, Sally, a great glow lighting up the sky. The ship must be very beautiful. For eight years he labored over it, restoring it with all the shining gifts of skill and feeling at his command. He was calm toward you, but not toward the ship, Sally—the ship which will take him back to Mars!*

How is it on Mars, she wondered. My son, Tommy, will become a strong, proud adventurer daring the farthest planet of the farthest star?

You can't stop a boy from adventuring. Surprise him at his books and you'll see tropical seas in his eyes, a pearly nautilus, Hong Kong and Valparaiso resplendent in the dawn.

*There is no strength quite like the strength of a mother, Sally. Endure it, be brave ...*

Sally was at the window when it came. A dazzling burst of radiance, starting from the horizon's rim and spreading across the entire sky. It lit up the cottage and flickered over the lawn, turning rooftops to molten gold and gilding the long line of rolling hills which hemmed in the town.

Brighter it grew and brighter, gilding for a moment even Sally's bowed head and her image mirrored on the pane. Then, abruptly, it was gone ...

**Transcriber's Note:** This etext was produced from *Fantastic Universe* May 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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