

The man who came into Homer Jackson's office was wearing his left shoe on his right foot and his right shoe on his left.

He gave Homer quite a start.

The man was tall and had a gangling look about him~ but he was smartly dressed--except for his shoes. And his shoes were all right, too; it was just the way he wore them.

"Am I addressing Mr. Homer Jackson?" he asked with a formality to which Homer was entirely unaccustomed.

"That's me," said Homer.

He squirmed a bit uncomfortably in his chair. He hoped this wasn't one of Gabby Wilson's jokes.

Gabby had an office just down the hall and loved to pester

Homer plenty. When Gabby cooked up a joke, he did a massive job on it; he left out not a single detail. And some of

Gabby's jokes got pretty rough.

But the man seemed to be dead serious and perhaps a little anxious.

"Mr. Homer Jackson, the suburban realtor?" he persisted.

"~that's right," said Homer.

"Specializing in lake properties and country acreages?"

"In your man." Homer began to feel uncomfortable. This man was spreading it on a trifle thick and Homer thought he could see Gabby's hand in it.

"I'd like to talk with you. I have a matter of small business."

"Fire away," said Homer, motioning toward a chair.

The man sat down carefully, bolt upright in the chair.

"My name is Oscar Steen," he said. "We're building development on what is known as the Saunders place. We call it Happy Acres."

Homer nodded. "I'm acquainted with the place. It's the 1 good holding on the lake. You were fortunate to get it."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson. We think that it is nice."

"How are you getting on?"

"We have just finished it. But now comes the most important part. We must get people onto the property."

"Well," said Homer, "things are a little tough right now

Money has tightened up and the interest rates are higher

Washington is no help and besides that "

"We wondered if you'd be interested in handling it

US."

Homer choked a little, but recovered quickly. "Well, now don't know. Those houses may be hard to sell. You'd have to get a solid figure for them and the prices will run high. The stone wall you put around the place and those fancy gates all, I would suspect you have high-class houses. You have gone and made it into an exclusive section. There'll be only a small class of buyer who might be interested."

"Mr. Jackson," said Steen, "we have a new approach. won't have to sell them. We're only leasing them."

"Renting them, you mean."

"No, sir, leasing them."

"Well, it all comes out to the same thing in the end. You have to get a lot for them." "Five thousand."

"Five thousand is an awful lot of money. At least, out there is. Five thousand a year comes to over four hundred a month and "

"Not for a year," corrected Steen. "For ninety-nine."

"For what !"

"Ninety-nine. We're leasing at five thousand dollars ninety-nine full years."

"But, man, you can't do that! Why, that's absolutely crazy!

Taxes would eat up "

"We're not so interested in making money on the houses as we are in creating business for our shopping centre."

"You mean you have a shopping centre in there, too ?"

Steen allowed himself a smile. "Mr. Jackson, we obtain the property and then we build the wall to have some privacy so there can be no snoopers."

"Yes, I know," said Homer. "It's smart to do it that way.

Good publicity. Whets the public's interest. Gives you a chance to have a big unveiling. But that twelve-foot wall "

"Fourteen, Mr. Jackson."

"All right, then, fourteen. And it's built of solid stone. I know--I watched them put it up. And no one builds walls of solid stone any more. They just use stone facing. The way you built that wall set you back a hunk "

"Mr. Jackson, please. We know what we are doing. In this shopping centre, we sell everything from peanuts to Cadillacs.

But we need customers. So we build houses for our customers.

We desire to create a good stable population of rather weU-to-do families."

Jumping to his feet in exasperation, Homer paced up and down the office.

"But, Mr. Steen, you can't possibly build up enough business at your shopping centre by relying solely on the people in your development. For instance, how many houses have you ?"

"Fifty."

"Fifty families are a mere drop in the bucket for a shopping centre. Even if every one of those fifty families bought all their needs from you--and you can't be sure they will--but if they did, you'd still have little volume. And you won't pick up any outside trade--not behind that wall, you won't."

He stopped his pacing and went back to his chair.

"I don't know why I'm upset about it," he told Steen. "It's no skin off my nose. Yes, rH handle the development, but I can't handle leasing at my usual five per cent."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," said Steen. "You keep the entire five thousand."

Homer gasped like a fish hauled suddenly from water.

"On one condition," added Steen. "One has to be so careful.

We have a bank, you see. Part of the shopping centre service."

"A bank," Homer said feebly.

"Chartered under the state banking regulations."

"And what has a bank to do with me ?"

"You'll take ten per cent," said Steen. "The rest will be credited to your account in the Happy Acres Bank. Every time you lease a unit, you get five hundred cash; forty-five hundred goes into your bank account."

"I don't quite see "

"There are advantages."

"Yes, I know," Homer said. "It builds up your business.

You're out to make that shopping centre go."

"That might be one factor. Another is that we can't have you getting rich in front of all your friends and neighbours. There'd be too much talk about it and we don't want that kind of publicity. And there are tax advantages as well." "Tax advantages ?"

"Mr. Jackson, if you lease all fifty houses, you will have earned a quarter million dollars. Have you figured what the income tax might be on a quarter million dollars ?" "It would be quite a lot."

"It would be a crying shame," said Steen. "The bank could be a help."

"I don't quite see how."

"You leave that to us. Leave everything to us. You just lease the houses."

"Mr. Steen, rye been an honest man for years in an occupation where there's opportunity "

"Honesty, Mr. Jackson. Of course we know you're honest.

That's why we came to you. Have you got your car here ?"

"It's parked outside."

"Fine. Mine is at the station getting serviced. Let's drive out and look the houses over."

The houses were all that anyone could wish. They were planned with practical imagination and built with loving care.

There was, Homer admitted to himself, more honest workman ship in them than he had seen for many years in this era of mass-production building. They had that quiet sense of quality material, of prideful craftsmanship, of solidity, .of dignity and tradition that was seldom found any more.

They were well located, all fifty of them, in the wooded hills that stretched back from the lake, and the contractor had not indulged in the ruthless slashing out of trees. Set in natural surroundings with decent amounts of space around them, they stood, each one of them, in comparative privacy.

In the spring, there would be wild flowers, and in the autumn, the woods would flame with colour and there would be birds and squirrels and rabbits. And there was a stretch of white sand beach, the last left on the whole lake.

Homer began mentally to write the ad he'd put in the Sunday paper and found that he looked forward with some anticipation to setting down the words. This was one he could pull out all the stops on, use all the purple prose he wanted.

"I like it, Mr. Steen," he said. "I think they won't be too hard to move."

"That is good," Steen replied. "We are prepared to give you an exclusive contract for a period of ten years. Renewable, of course."

"But why ten years ? I can get this tract handled in a year or two, if it goes at all."

"You are mistaken. The business, I can assure you, will be continuing."

They stood on the brick walk in front of one of the houses and looked toward the lake. There were two white sails on the water, far toward the other shore, and a row-boat bobbed in the middle distance, with the black smudge of a hunched fisherman squatted in the stem.

Homer shook his head in some bewilderment. "I don't understand."

"There'll be some subletting," Steen told him smoothly.

"When fifty families are involved, there are always some who move."

"But that's another story. Subletting "

Steen pulled a paper from his pocket and handed it to Homer. "Your contract. You'll want to look it over. Look it over closely. You're a cautious man and that's the kind we want."

Homer drove along the winding, wooded road back to the shopping centre with Steen.

The centre was a lovely place. It stretched along the entire south side of the property, backed by the fourteen-foot wall, and was a shining place of brand-new paint and gleaming glass and metal.

Homer stopped the car to look at it.

"You've got everything," he said.

"I think we have," said Steen proudly. "We've even got our own telephone exchange." "Isn't that unusual ?"

"Not at all. What we have set up here amounts to a model village, a model living space. We have our own water system and our sewage plant. Why not a telephone exchange ?"

Homer let it pass. There was no sense arguing. It all was just this side of crazy, anyhow. No matter how fouled up it was, Steen seemed satisfied.

Maybe, Homer told himself, he knows what he is doing.

But Homer doubted it.

"One thing more," said Steen. "It is just a minor matter, but you should know about it. We have a car agency, you see. Many agencies, in fact. We can supply almost any make of car "

"But how did you do "

"We know our way around. Any make of car a person would want. And anyone who leases must buy a car from us."

"Mister," Homer said, "I've heard a lot of fast ones in the auto business, but this one beats them all. If you think I'll sell cars for you "

"There's nothing wrong with it," said Steen. "We have some good connections. Any car one wants at a fair and honest price.

And we are prepared to give good value on their trade-ins, too.

It would never do to have old rattle-traps in a high-class development like this."

"And what else ? I think you'd better tell me how many other tie-in deals you have."

"Not a single one. The automobile is all."

Homer put the car in gear and drove slowly toward the gate.

The uniformed gateman saw them coming and swung the gates wide open. He waved to them cheerily as they went past his kiosk.

"I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole," Homer told his wife, Elaine, "if there weren't so much money in it. But things have been kind of slow with this higher interest rate and all and this deal would give me a chance "

"If it's Mr. Steen wearing his shoes on the wrong feet,"

Elaine said. "I don't think you need to worry. You remember Uncle Eb ?"

"Sure. He was the one who wore his vest inside out."

"Pure stubbornness, that's what it was with Uncle Eb. He put it on inside out one day and someone laughed at him. So Uncle Eb said that was the way to wear a vest. And that's the way he wore it to his dying day."

"Well, sure," said Homer, "that might be it, of course. But wearing a vest inside out wouldn't hurt your chest. Shoes on the wrong feet would hurt something terrible."

"This poor Mr. Steen might be a cripple of some sort.

Maybe he was born that way."

If you lease all those houses, we can go to Europe like we've always planned. As far as I'm concerned, he can barefoot if he wants."

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"And we need a car," Elaine said, beginning on her catalog "And drapes for the living-room. And I haven't had a new dl in ages. And it's shameful to be using our old silver. We sho have replaced it years ago. It's the old stuff Ethel gave us w we were married "

"All right," said Homer. "If I lease the houses, if the (holds up, if I don't get in jail~we'll go to Europe." He knew when he was licked.

He read the contract carefully. It was all right. It said black and white, that he got the whole five thousand.

Maybe, he told himself, he should have a lawyer see it.

Condon could tell him in a minute if it was ironclad. Bul shrank from showing it. There seemed something sinful, ahr shameful, about his getting all that money.

He checked on the Happy Acres Bank. A charter had issued and all regulations had been met.

He checked on building permits and they were in order,;

So what was a man to do 9.

Especially when he had a wife who had yearned loudly ten years to go to Europe.

Homer sat down and wrote an ad for the real estate see of the Sunday paper. On second thought he dismissed purple prose that he had planned to use. He employed the 1 key technique. The ad wasn't long. It didn't cost too mud read:

\$4.1611!!!

WOULD YOU PAY ONLY \$4.16

a month to live in a house

that would sell for \$35,000

to \$50,000?

If so, call or see
JACKSON REAL ESTATE
Specializing in Lake Property and Country Acreages

The first prospect was a man named H. F. Morgan. He came into the office early Sunday morning. He was belligerent. He slammed the folded want ad section down on Homer's desk. He had ringed Homer's ad with a big red-pencil mark.

"This isn't true !" yelled Morgan. "What kind of come-on is this?"

"It's substantially true," Homer answered quietly. "That's what it figures out to."

"You mean I just pay \$4.16 a month?"

"Well," hedged Homer, "it's not quite as simple as all that.

You lease it for ninety-nine years."

"What would I want with a house for ninety-nine years ? I won't live that long."

"Actually, it's better than owning a house. You can live there a lifetime, just as if you owned the place, and there are no taxes and no maintenance. And if you have children, they can go on living there."

"You mean this is on the level 7"

Homer emphatically nodded. "Absolutely."

"What's wrong with this house of yours ?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. It's a new house among other new houses in an exclusive neighbourhood. You have a shopping centre just up the road that's as good as any city "

"You say it's new ?"

"Right. There are fifty houses. You can pick out the one you want. But I wouldn't take too long to decide, because these will go like hot cakes."

"I got my car outside."

"All right," said Homer, reaching for his hat. "I'll take my car and show you the way. The houses are unlocked. Look at them and choose the one you want."

Out on the street, Homer got into his car and sat down on something angular. He cursed because it hurt. He lifted himself and reached down and picked up the thing he'd sat on.

It was nothing he had ever seen before and he tossed it to the other side of the seat. It was, he thought, something like one of those clip-together plastic blocks that were made for children but how it had gotten in his car, he could not imagine.

He wheeled out into the street and signalled for the Morgan car to follow.

There were Mrs. Morgan and Jack, a hell-raising eight-year-old, and Judy, a winsome five-year-old, and Butch, the Boxer pup. All of them, Homer saw, were taken by surprise at the sight of Happy Acres. He could tell by the way Mrs. Morgan clasped her hands together and by the way suspicion darkened

Morgan's face. One could almost hear him thinking that no one was crazy enough to offer a deal like this.

Jack and Butch, the pup, went running in the woods and

Judy danced gaily on the lawn and, Homer told himself, he had them neatly hooked.

Homer spent a busy day. His phone was jammed with calls.

House-hunting families, suspicious, half-derisive, descended on the office.

He did the best he could. He'd never had a crowd like that before.

He directed the house-hunting families out to Happy Acres:

He patiently explained to callers that it was no hoax, that they were houses to be had. He urged all of them to hurry and make up their minds.

"They won't last long," he told them, intoning unctuously that most ancient of all real estate selling gimmicks.

After church, Elaine came down to the office to help him with the phone while he talked to the prospects who dropped in.

Late in the afternoon, he drove out to Happy Acres. The place was an utter madhouse. It looked like a homecoming or a state fair or a monster picnic. People were wandering around, walking through the

houses. One had three windows broken.

The floors were all tracked up. Water faucets had been left running. Someone had turned on a hose and washed out a flowerbed.

He tried to talk with some of them, but he made no headway.

He went back to the office and waited for the rush to start.

There wasn't any rush.

A few phone calls came in and he assured the callers it was on the level. But they were still hard to convince. He went home beat.

He hadn't leased a house.

Morgan was the first one who came back. He came back alone, early Monday morning. He was still suspicious.

"Look," he said, "I'm an architect. I know what houses cost.

What's the catch ?"

"The catch is that you pay five thousand cash for a ninety-nine-year lease."

"But that's no catch. That's like buying it. The normal house when it stands a hundred years, has long since lost its value."

"There's another catch," said Homer. "The builder won't lease to you unless you buy a new car from him." "That's illegal?" shouted Morgan.

"I wouldn't know. Nobody's forcing you to take the offer."

"Let's forget about the car for the moment," Morgan urged.

"What I want to know is, how can the builder put up a place like that for five thousand dollars ? I know for a fact that he can't."

"So do I. But if he wants to lose a lot of money, who are we to stop him ?"

Morgan pounded on the desk. "What's the gimmick, Jackson ?"

"The builder wears his shoes on the wrong feet, if that means anything to you."

Morgan stared at him. "I think you're crazy, too. What would that have to do with it ?"

"I don't know," said Homer. "I just mentioned it, thinking it might help you."

"Well, it doesn't."

Homer sighed. "It's got me puzzled, too."

Morgan picked up his hat and jammed it on his head. "I'll be seeing you," he said. It sounded like a threat.

"I'll be right here," said Homer as Morgan went out slamming the door.

Homer went down to the drugstore for a cup of coffee.

When he got back, a second visitor was waiting for him. The man sat stiffly in a chair and tapped nervous fingers on his briefcase, held primly in his lap. He looked as if he'd eaten something sour.

"Mr. Jackson," he said, "I represent the County Realtors' Association."

"Not interested," said Homer. "I've gotten along for years without joining that outfit. I can get along a few years more."

"I'm not here to solicit membership. I am here about that ad of yours in the paper yesterday."

"Good ad, I thought. It brought in a lot of business."

"It's exactly the kind of advertising that our association frowns upon. It is, if you will pardon the expression, nothing but a come-on."

"Mr. by the way, what is your name ?"

"Snyder," said the man.

"Mr. Snyder, if you happen to be in the market for a place out in this area at the ridiculously low cost of \$4.16 a month, I shall be glad to show you any one of fifty houses. If you have a moment, I can drive you out."

The man's mouth snapped together like a trap. "You know what I mean, Jackson. This is fraudulent advertising and you know it is. It is misrepresentation. We mean to show it is."

Homer pitched his hat on top of the filing cabinet and sat in his chair.

"Snyder," he said, "you're cluttering up the place. You've done your duty--you've warned me. Now get out of here."

It wasn't exactly what he had meant to say and he was surprised at himself for saying it. But now that it was said, there was no way of recalling it and he rather liked the feel of strength and independence that it gave him.

"There is no use flying off the handle," said Snyder. "We could talk this over."

"You came in and made your threat," Homer retorted.

"There's nothing to talk over. You said you were going to get me, so come ahead and get me."

Snyder got to his feet savagely. "You'll regret this, Jackson."

"Maybe so," admitted Homer. "Sure you don't need a house?"

"Not from you," said Snyder, and went stalking out.

Must have hurt their week-end sales, Homer told himself, watching Snyder go stumping down the street.

He sat quietly, thinking. He'd known there would be trouble, but there had been no way he could have passed up the deal.

Not with Elaine set on that trip to Europe.

And now he was committed. He could not back out even if he wished. And he wasn't sure that he wanted to. There could be a lot of money in it.

The car deal he didn't like, but there was nothing he could do about it. And by handling it right, he might keep in the clear.

Maybe, he thought, he should go out and talk to Steen about it.

Gabby Wilson, his insurance-selling neighbour down the hall, came in and flopped into a chair. Gabby was a loudmouth.

"Howsa boy?" he yelled. "Hear you got that Happy Acres deal. How's about cutting in your old pal on the insurance end?" "Go chase yourself," invited Homer irritably.

"Heard a good story the other day. It seems this wrecking outfit got a job to tear down a building. And the straw boss got his orders wrong and tore down another building." Gabby slapped his knee and roared with laughter. "Can you imagine the look on that contractor's face when he heard the news?"

"It cost him a lot of money," Homer said. "He had a fight to, be good and sore."

"You don't think it's funny?"

"No, I don't."

"How you getting on with this Happy Acres gang?"

"Fine, so far," said Homer.

"Cheap outfit," Gabby told him. "I been checking round."

They got some two-bit contractor from out in the sticks somewhere to do the job for them. Didn't even buy their material from the dealers here. The contractor brought his own crew with him. The developers didn't spend a nickel locally.

"Unpatriotic of them."

"Not smart, either. Houses probably will fall down in a year or two."

"I don't care particularly. Just so I get them leased."

"Do anything so far?"

"Got some interest in them. Here comes a prospect now."

It was Morgan. He had parked in front and was getting out of a new and shiny car, a gleam with chrome. Gabby beat a swift retreat.

Morgan came into the office. He sat down in a chair and pulled out his cheque-book.

"I bought the car," he said. "How do you want this cheque made out?"

Six weeks later, Homer dropped in at the shopping centre office. Steen was sitting with his feet up on the desk. He was wearing black shoes instead of the brown ones he had worn before. They still were on the wrong feet.

Mr. Jackson," he said easily.

"I finally got rid of them. All the houses are leased."

"That's fine." Steen reached into a drawer, took out a small and tossed it across the desk to Homer.
"Here. This belongs to you."

Homer picked it up. It was a bank book. He opened it and saw a neat row of \$4,500 entires marching down the page.

"You made yourself a mint," said Steen.

"I wish I had fifty more," Homer told him. "Or two hundred more. This thing is catching on. I could lease them in a week.

I've got a waiting list longer than my arm."

"Well, why don't you go ahead and lease them ?"

"I can't lease them a second time."

"Funny thing," said Steen. "There's no one living in those houses. They are all standing empty."

"But that can't be !" objected Homer. "There might be a few still empty--a few that the people haven't occupied yet. But most of them have moved in. They're living in those houses."

"That's not the way it looks to me."

"What's happened to those people then? Where have they "

"Mr. Jackson!"

"Yes?"

"You haven't trusted me. You didn't trust me from the start.

I don't know why. You thought the deal was queer. You were scared of it. But I've played fair with you. You'll have to admit I have."

Homer stroked the bank book. "More than fair."

"I know what I am doing, Mr. Jackson. I'm not anybody's fool. I have the angles figured out. String along with me. I need a man like you."

"You mean lease all those houses a second time !" Homer asked uneasily.

"A second time," said Steen. "And a third. And fourth.

Lease them as often as you like. Keep right on leasing them. No one will mind at all."

"But the people will mind--the people that I lease those houses to," Homer pointed out.

"Mr. Jackson, let me handle this. Don't you worry about a solitary thing. You just keep those houses moving."

"But it isn't right."

"Mr. Jackson, in some six weeks' time, you've made a quarter million dollars. I suppose that's what's wrong with you. I suppose you figure that's enough "

"Well, no. With income tax and all "

"Forget the income tax. I told you that this bank of ours had tax advantages."

"I don't get it," Homer said. "This is no way to do business."

"But it is," said Steen. "I challenge you to find a better way to do business. There's no end to it. You can become a multimillionaire "

"In jail."

"I've told you we weren't doing wrong. If you don't want to handle it "

"Let me think it over," Homer pleaded. "Give me a day or two."

"Noon tomorrow," said Steen decisively. "If you don't tell me you are willing to go ahead by noon tomorrow, I'll look for someone else."

Homer got up. He thrust the bank book in his pocket. "I'll be in to see you."

Steen put his feet back on the desk. "Fine. I'll be expecting you."

Out on the concourse, Homer walked along the gleaming shop fronts. And the shops, he saw, were no more than halfstaffed and entirely innocent of buyers. He went into a drugstore to buy a cigar and was waited on by a girl of just slightly more than high-school age. He failed to recognize her.

"You live around here ?" he asked.

"No, sir. In the city."

He went into a hardware store and into a grocery supermarket. He saw no one he knew. And that was queer. He'd lived in the area for almost thirteen years and thought he knew.

He recalled what Gabby had said about the contractor from ~mewhcre out of town. Maybe, for some zany reason, Steen had a policy against employing local people. Still, he'd employed Homer.

Itw~s a crazy set-up, Homer told himself. None of it made sense-and least of all, the leasing of the houses a second time around.

Perhaps he should get out of it. He'd made a fair amount of money. Right now, most likely, he could get out slick and clean.

If he stayed, there might be trouble.

He lighted up the cigar and went back to his car. Wheeling out of the parking lot, he headed for the road that led into the housing development.

He drove slowly, looking closely at each house. All of them seemed empty. The windows stared blindly without drapes or curtains. The lawns had not been cut for weeks. There was no sign of anyonemand there should be children and pets playing.

Almost everyone he'd leased to had had children and dogs and cats. The place should be jumping, he told himself, and instead it was silent and deserted.

He stopped the car and went into a house. It was bare and empty. There was sawdust in the corners and wood shavings here and there. There were no scuff marks on the floor, no handprints on the wall. The windows had not been washed; the trade-mark paper still was sticking to them. He went out puzzled.

He inspected two more houses. They were the same.

Steen had been right, then. Stcen, with his shoes on the wrong feet, and with something else,--with his different way of talking now. Six weeks ago, when Steen had come into Homer's office, he had been stiff and formal, awkward, yet striving for preciseness. And now he was easy in his manner, now he put his feet up on the desk, now he talked slangily.

There was no one living in the houses, Homer admitted to himself. No one had ever lived in them. He had leased all fifty of them and no one had moved in.

And it had a fishy smell--it had a terribly fishy smell.

On his way out, he stopped at Steen's office. The place was locked up.

The old gateman opened the gate and waved at him from the window of his kiosk.

Back in his own office, Homer took out of a drawer the list of leases he had drawn. He phoned Morgan, the first name on the lease.

"That number has been changed," the operator told him.

She gave him the new number and he dialled it.

"Happy Acres," said a singsong operator-voice.

"Huh 7"

"Happy Acres," the voice sang. "Whom did you wish, sir ?"

"The Morgan residence."

He waited and it was Morgan who answered.

"Homer Jackson. Just checking. How do you like the house ?"

"Are you getting on okay ?"

"Perfectly," Morgan told him happily. "I've been meaning to come in and thank you for putting me onto this."

"Everything is really all right ?"*

"Couldn't be better. I hardly ever go into my office now. I stay out here and work in the amusement room. I go fishing and I take walks. The wife and kids are just as pleased as I am."

Morgan lowered his voice. "How do you guys manage this?"

"I've tried to figure it out and I can't."

"It's a secret," Homer replied, thinking on his feet. "The answer to the housing problem."

"Not that I care," Morgan said. "Just curious, you know."

"I'll be dropping in one day. I'll bring you something."

"Glad to see you," said Homer.

He called the Happy Acres number and asked for another family. He went halfway through the list. He

talked mostly to the women, although some of the men were home. They were not only happy, but enthusiastic. They asked him jokingly how he got away with it.

When he finished, he was glassy-eyed.

He went down to the drugstore for a cup of coffee.

When he returned, he'd made up his mind.

He took out his waiting list and began making calls.

"There just happens to be a vacancy in Happy Acres if you are interested." They were.

He reminded them about the cars. They said they'd take care of that matter first thing in the morning.

By supper-time, he'd leased twenty of the houses by making twenty phone calls.

"There's something wrong," Homer said to his wife. "But there's money in it."

"It's just that you don't understand," said Elaine. "There may be a perfectly good reason why Mr. Steen can't explain it all to you."

"But it means we have to give up our trip to Europe. And after we had got our passports and all."

"We can go to Europe later. You'll never get a chance like this again."

"It worries me," said Homer.

"Oh, you're always worried over things that never happen.

Mr. Steen is satisfied and the people you have leased to are, so why are you worrying?"

"But where are these people? They aren't living in the houses and yet they talk as if they were. And some of them asked me how I got away with it or words to that effect. They asked it as if they admired me for being slick in some kind of shady deal, and if it turns out that I am smart, I'd like to know just how I managed "

"Forget it," Elaine said. "You aren't smart and you never were. If I didn't keep behind you, pushing all the time "

"Yes, dear," said Homer. He'd heard it all before.

"And quit your worrying."

He tried to, but he couldn't.

The next morning, he drove to Happy Acres and parked across the road from the gate. From seven o'clock until nine, he counted forty-three cars coming out of the development. Some of the people in them he recognized as those he had leased the houses to. Many of them waved to him.

At 9:30, he drove in through the gate and went slowly down the road.

The houses still were empty.

When he got back to the office, there were people waiting for him. The block was clogged with cars that gleamed with newness.

He did a rushing business. No one, it turned out, was interested in seeing the houses. Most of them had seen them earlier. All they wanted was a lease. He filled out the forms as rapidly as he could and raked in the cheques and cash.

Some other people showed up. Word had got around, they said, that there were vacancies in the Happy Acres tract. Yes, he said, there were. Just a few of them. He reminded them about the cars.

The last man in line, however, did not want to lease a house.

"My name is Fowler," he said. "I represent the Contractors' and Builders' Association. Maybe you can help me."

"I've got another house, if that is what you want," said

Homer.

"I don't need a house. I have one, thanks."

"Pay you to sell it and get in on this deal. The newest thing in housing. A completely new concept."

Fowler shook his head. "All I want to know is, how do I get hold of Steen?"

"No trouble at all," said Homer. "You just go out to Happy Acres. He has an office there."

"I've been out there a dozen times. He is never in. Usually the office is locked."

"I never have any trouble finding him, although I don't see him often. I'm too busy handling the property."

"Can you tell me how he does it, Mr. Jackson?"

"How he does what ? How he is always out?"

"No. How he can sell a house for five thousand dollars."

"He doesn't sell. He leases."

"Don't pull that one on me. It's the same as selling. And he can't build for anywhere near that kind of money. He's losing a good twenty thousand or more on every house out there."

"If a man wants to lose his money "

"Mr. Jackson," said Fowler, "that is not the point at all. The point is that it's unfair competition."

"Not if he leases," Homer pointed out. "If he sold, it might be."

"If this keeps on, it'll put every contractor in the area out of business."

"That," said Homer, "would be no more than simple justice in a lot of cases. They throw up a shack with plenty of glitter and charge a fancy price and "

"Nevertheless, Mr. Jackson, none of them intend to be put out of business."

"And you're going to sue," guessed Homer.

"We certainly intend to."

"Don't look at me. I only lease the places."

"We intend to get out an injunction against your leasing them."

"You make the second one," Homer informed him, annoyed.

"The second what ?"

"The real estate boys sent a guy like you out here several weeks ago. He made a lot of threats and nothing's happened yet. He was bluffing, just like you."

"Let me set your mind at rest," said Fowler. "I'm not doing any bluffing."

He got up from his chair and stalked stiffly out.

Homer looked at his watch. It was long past lunchtime. He went down to the drugstore for a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

The place was empty and he had the counter to himself.

He sat hunched over the lunch and thought about it, trying to get all the queer goings-on straightened out into some sort of logic. But the only thing he could think about was that Steen wore his shoes on the wrong feet.

Wearily, still worried, Homer went back to the office. There were people waiting, with their new cars parked outside. He leased houses right and left.

Apparently the word was spreading. The house-seekers drifted in all afternoon. He leased four more houses before it was time to close.

It was funny, he thought, very, very funny how the word had got around. He hadn't advertised in the last three weeks and they still were coming in.

Just as he was getting ready to lock up, Morgan strode in breezily. He had a package underneath his arm.

"Here you are, pal," he said. "I told you I'd bring you something. Caught them just an hour or two ago."

The package was beginning to get soggy. Homer took it gingerly.

"Thanks very much," he said in a doubtful voice.

"Think nothing of it. I'll bring you more in a week or two."

As soon as Morgan left, Homer closed the blinds and unwrapped the package warily.

Inside were brook trout--trout fresh-caught, with the ferns in which they had been wrapped not even wilting yet.

And there was no trout stream closer than a couple of hundred miles !

Homer stood and shivered. For there was no point in pretending ignorance, no point in repeating smugly to himself that it was all right. Even at five thousand a deal, there still was something wrong--very badly wrong.

He had to face it. They were beginning to close in on him.

Fowler had sounded as if he might mean business and the Real

Estate Association undoubtedly was lying in ambush, waiting for him to make one little slip. And when he made that slip, they'd snap the trap shut.

To protect himself, he had to know what was going on. He could no longer go at it blind.

Knowing, he might be able to go on. He might know when to quit. And that time, he told himself, might have been as early as this afternoon.

He stood there, with the fish and ferns lying in the wet wrapping paper on the desk, and envisioned a long street of houses, and behind that long street of houses, another identical street of houses, and behind the second street, another--street after street, each behind the other, each exactly like the other, fading out of sight on a flat and level plain.

And that was the way it must be--except there was no second street of houses. There was just the one, standing lone and empty, and yet, somehow, with people living in them.

Lease them a second time, Steen had said, and a third time and a fourth. Don't you worry about a thing. Let me handle it.

Leave the worry all to me. You just keep on leasing houses.

And Homer leased one house and the people moved, not into the house he'd leased them, but into the second identical house immediately behind it, and he leased the first house yet again and the people moved into the third, also identical, also directly behind the first and second house, and that was how it was.

Except it was just a childish thing he had dreamed up to offer an explanation--any explanation--for a thing he couldn't understand. A fairy tale.

He tried to get the idea back on the track again, tried to rationalize it, but it was too weird.

A man could trust his sense, couldn't he? He could believe what he could see. And there were only fifty houses--empty houses, despite the fact that people lived in them. He could trust his ears and he had talked to people who were enthusiastic about living in those empty houses.

It was crazy, Homer argued with himself. All those other folks were >razy--Steen and all the people living in the houses.

He wrapped up the fish and retied the package clumsily. No matter where they came from, no matter what lunacy might prevail, those trout surely would taste good. And that, the taste of fresh-caught trout, was one of the few true, solid things left in the entire world.

There was a creaking sound and Homer jumped in panic, whirling swiftly from the desk.

The door was being opened! He'd forgotten to lock the door!

The man who came in wore no uniform, but there was no doubt that he was a cop or detective.

"My name is Hankins," he said. He showed his badge to Homer.

Homer shut his mouth tight to keep his teeth from chattering.

"I think you may be able to do something for me," Hankins said.

"Surely," Homer chattered. "Anything you say."

"You know a man named Dahl?"

"I don't think I do."

"Would you search your records?"

"My records?" Homer echoed wildly.

"Mr. Jackson, you're a businessman. Surely you keep records--the names of persons to whom you sell property and other things like that."

"Yes," said Homer, all in a rush. "Yes, I keep that sort of record. Of course. Sure."

With shaking hands, he pulled out a desk drawer and brought out the folder he'd set up on Happy Acres. He looked through it, fumbling at the papers.

"I think I may have it," he said. "Dahl, did you say the name was?"

"John H. Dahl," said Hankins.

"Three weeks ago, I leased a house in Happy Acres to a John H. Dahl. Do you think he might be the one?"

"Tall, dark man. Forty-three years old. Acts nervous."

Homer shook his head. "I don't remember him. There have been so many people."

"Have you one there for Benny August ?"

Homer searched again. "B. J. August. The day after Mr. Dahl."

"And perhaps a man named Drake ? More than likely signs himself Hanson Drake." Drake was also there.

Hankins seemed well pleased. "Now how do I get to this

Happy Acres place ?"

With a sinking feeling, Homer told him how.

He gathered up his fish and walked outside with Hankins. He stood and watched the officer drive away. He wouldn't want to be around, he suspected, when Hankins returned from Happy Acres. He hoped with all his heart that Hankins wouldn't look him up.

He locked up the office and went down to the drugstore to buy a paper before going home.

He unfolded it and the headlines leaped at him:

THREE HUNTED IN STOCK SWINDLE

Three photographs on column cuts were ranged underneath the headline. He read the names in turn. Dahl. August. Drake.

He folded the paper tightly and thrust it beneath his arm and he felt the sweat begin to trickle.

Hankins would never find his men, he knew. No one would ever find them. In Happy Acres, they'd be safe. It was, he began to see, a ready-made hideout for aU kinds of hunted men.

He wondered how many of the others he had leased the houses to might be hunted, too. No wonder, he thought, the word had spread so quickly. No wonder his office had been filled all day with people who'd already bought the cars.

And what was it all about ? How did it work? Who had figured it all out ?

And why did he, Homer Jackson, have to be the one who'd get sucked into it ?

Elaine took a searching look at him as he came in the door.

"You've been worrying," she scolded.

Homer lied most nobly. "Not worrying. Just a little tired."

"Scared to death" would have been closer to the truth.

At 9 o'clock next morning, he drove to Happy Acres. He was inside the door before he saw that Steen was busy. The man who had been talking to Steen swung swiftly from the desk.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

Homer saw that the man was Hankins.

Steen smiled wearily. "Mr. Hankins seems to think that we're obstructing justice."

"I can't imagine," Homer said, "why he should think that."

Hankins was on the edge of rage. "Where are these people ?

What have you done with them ?"

Steen said: "I've told you, Mr. Hankins, that we only lease the property. We cannot undertake to go surety for anybody who may lease from us."

"You've hidden them!"

"How could we hide them, Mr. Hankins? Where could we hide them? The entire development is open to you. You can search it to your heart's content."

"I don't know what is going on," said Hankins savagely,

"but I'm going to find out. And once I do, both of you had better have your explanations ready."

"I think" Steen commented "that Mr. Hankins' determination and deep sense of duty are very splendid things. Don't you, Mr. Jackson?"

"I do, indeed," said Homer, at loss as to what to say.

"You'll be saying that out of the other side of your mouth before I'm through with you," Hankins promised them.

He went storming out the door.

"What a nasty man," Steen remarked, unconcerned.

"I'm getting out," said Homer. "I've got a pocket full of cheques and cash. As soon as I turn them over, I am pulling out.

You can find someone else to do your dirty work."

"Now I am sorry to hear that. And just when you were doing well. There's a lot of money to be made." "It's too risky."

"I grant you that it may appear a little risky, but actually it's not. Men like Hankins will raise a lot of dust but what can they really do? We are completely in the clear."

"We're leasing the same houses over and over again."

"Why, certainly," said Steen. "How else would you expect me to build up the kind of clientele I need to give me business volume in this shopping centre? You yourself have told me that fifty families were by no means enough. And you were right, of course. But you lease the houses ten times and you have five hundred families, which is not bad. Lease each one a hundred times and you have five thousand... And incidentally, Mr. Jackson, by the time you lease each of them a hundred times, you will have made yourself twenty-five million dollars, which is not a bad amount for a few years' work.

"Because," Steen concluded, "you see, despite what you may have thought of me, I'm squarely on the level. I gave you the straight goods. I told you I was not interested in money from the houses, but merely from the shopping centre."

Homer tried to pretend that he was unimpressed. He kept on emptying cheques and wads of money from his pockets. Steen reached out for the cheques and began endorsing them. He stacked the money neatly.

"I wish you would reconsider, Mr. Jackson," he urged. "I have need of a man like you. You've worked out so satisfactorily, I hate to see you go."

"Come clean with me," said Homer, "and I might stay. Tell me all there is to tell--how it all works and what all the angles are and what you plan to do."

Steen laid a cautionary finger across his lips. "Hush! You don't know what you're asking."

"You mean you see no trouble coming?"

"Some annoyance, perhaps. Not real trouble."

"They could throw the book at us if they could prove we were hiding people wanted by the law."

Steen sighed deeply. "Mr. Jackson, how many fugitives have you sheltered in the last six weeks?"

"Not a one," said Homer.

"Neither have I." Steen spread his arms wide. "So we have nothing to fear. We've done no wrong. At least," he amended, "none that they can prove."

He picked up the money and the cheques and handed them to Homer.

"Here," he said. "You might as well take it to the bank. It's your money."

Homer took the money and the cheques and stood with them in his hand, thinking about what Steen had said about not doing any wrong. Maybe Steen was right. Maybe Homer was getting scared when there was no need to be. What could they be charged with?

Fraudulent advertising? There had been no specific claims that had not been performed.

For tying in the auto sales? Just possibly, although he had not made an auto sale a condition of transaction; he had merely mentioned that it would be very nice if they bought a car from Happy Acres Auto Sales.

For selling at less than cost? Probably not, for it would be a fine point of law to prove a lease a sale. And selling or leasing below cost in any case was no crime.

For leasing the same house more than once? Certainly not until it could be proved that someone had suffered damage and it was most unlikely that it could be proved.

For doing away with people? But those people could be reached by telephone, could drive out through the gate. And they were well and happy and enthusiastic.

"Perhaps", Steen said gently, "you have changed your mind.

Perhaps you'll stay with us."

"Perhaps I will," said Homer.

He walked down the concourse to the bank. It was an impressive place. The foyer was resplendent in

coppery metal and with brightly polished mirrors. There were birds in hanging cages and some of the birds were singing.

There were no customers, but the bank was spick and span. An alert vice-president sat behind his polished desk without a thing to do. An equally alert teller waited shiny-faced behind the wicket window.

Homer walked to the window and shoved through the money and the cheques. He took his passbook from his pocket and handed it across.

The teller looked at it and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Jackson, but you have no account with us."

"No account !" cried Homer. "I have a quarter of a million !"

His heart went plunk into his boots, and if he'd had Sten there, he'd have broken him to bits.

"No," said the teller calmly, "you've made an error. That is all."

"Error !" gasped Homer, hanging onto the window to keep from keeling over.

"An understandable error," the teller said sympathetically.

"One that anyone could make. Your account is not with us, but with the Second Bank."

"Second Bank," wheezed Homer. "What are you talking about? This is the only bank there is."

"Look, it says Second Bank right here." He showed Homer the passbook. It did say Second Happy Acres State Bank.

"Well, now," said Homer, "that's better. Will you tell me how I get to this Second Bank?"

"Gladly, sir. Right over there. Just go through that door."

He handed back the passbook and the money.

"That door, you say ?" inquired Homer.

"Yes. The one beside the drinking fountain."

Homer clutched the passbook and the money tightly in his hand and headed for the door. He opened it and stepped inside and got it shut behind him before he realized that he was in a closet.

It was just a tiny place, not much bigger than a man, and it was as black as the inside of a cat.

Sweat started out on Homer and he searched frantically for the doorknob and finally found it.

He pushed the door open and stumbled out. He strode wrathfully back across the foyer to the teller's window. He rapped angrily on the ledge and the teller turned around.

"What kind of trick is this?" yelled Homer. "What do you think you're pulling ? What is going on here ? That is nothing but a closet."

"I'm sorry, sir," the teller said. "My fault. I forgot to give you this."

He reached into his cash drawer and handed Homer a small object. It looked for all the world like the replica of a bizarre radiator ornament.

Juggling the object in his hand, Homer asked, "What has this got to do with it ?"

"Everything," the teller said. "It will get you to the Second Bank. Don't lose it. You'll need it to get back." "You mean I just hold it in my hand ?"

"That is all you do, sir," the teller assured him.

Homer went back to the door, still unconvinced. It was all a lot of mumbo-jumbo, he told himself. These guys were just the same as Gabby Wilson--full of smart pranks. And if that teller was making a fool of him, he promised himself, he'd mop up the floor with him.

He opened the door and stepped into the closet, only it was no closet. It was another bank.

The metal still was coppery and the mirrors were a-gUtter and the birds were singing, but there were customers. There were three tellers instead of the single one in the first bank and the bland, smooth vice-president at his shiny desk was industriously at work.

Homer stood quietly just outside the door through which he'd come from the other bank. The customers seemed not to have noticed him, but as he looked them over, he was startled to discover that there were many whose faces were familiar.

Here, then, were the people who had leased the houses, going about their business in the Second Bank.

, He put the miniature radiator ornament in his pocket and headed for the window that seemed to be least busy. He waited in line while the man ahead of him finished making a deposit.

Homer could only see the back of the man's head, but the head seemed to be familiar. He stood there

raking through the memories of the people he had met in the last six weeks.

Then the man turned around and Homer saw that it was

Dahl. It was the same face he had seen staring at him from the front page of the paper only the night before.

"Hello, Mr. Jackson," said Dalai. "Long time no see."

Homer gulped. "Good day, Mr. Dahl. How do you like the house?"

"Just great, Mr. Jackson. It's so quiet and peaceful here, I can't tear myself away from it."

I bet you can't, thought Homer.

"Glad to hear you say so," he said aloud, and stepped up to the window.

The teller glanced at the passbook. "Good to see you, Mr.

Jackson. The president, I think, would like to see you, too.

Would you care to step around after I finish your deposit?"

Homer left the teller's window, feeling a little chilly at the prospect of seeing the president, wondering what the president might want and what new trouble it portended.

A hearty voice told him to come in when he knocked on the door.

The president was a beefy gentleman and extremely pleasant.

"I've been hoping you'd come in," he said. "I don't know if you realize it or not, but you're our biggest depositor."

He shook Homer's hand most cordially and motioned him to a chair. He gave him a cigar and Homer, a good judge of tobacco, figured it for at least a fifty-center.

The president, puffing a little, sat down behind his desk.

"This is a good set-up here," said Homer, to get the conversation started.

"Oh, yes," the president said. "Most splendid. It's just a test, though, you know."

"No, I hadn't known that."

"Yes, surely. To see if it will work. If it does, we will embark on much bigger projects--ones that will prove even more economically feasible. One never knows, of course, how an idea will catch on. You can run all the preliminary observations and make innumerable surveys and still never know until you try it out."

"That's true," said Homer, wondering what in the world the president was talking about.

"Once we get it all worked out," the president said, "we can turn it over to the natives."

"I see. You're not a native here?"

"Of course not. I am from the city."

And that, thought Homer, was a funny thing to say. He watched the man closely, but there was nothing in his face to indicate that he had misspoken--no flush of embarrassment, no sign of flurry.

"I'm especially glad to have a chance to see you," Homer told him. "As a matter of fact, I had been thinking of switching my account and"

The president's face took on a look of horror. "But why?"

Certainly you've been told about the tax advantages."

"I think that the matter got some mention. But, I must confess, I don't understand."

"Why, Mr. Jackson, it is simple. No mystery at all. So far as the authorities of your country are concerned"

"My country?"

"Well, of course. I think it might logically be argued, even in a court of law, that this place we're in is no longer the United

States of America. But even if it should be a part of your great nation--I doubt that such a contention would hold up if put to the decision--why, even so, our records are not available to the agents of your country. Don't tell me you fail to see the implications of a situation such as that." "The income tax," Homer said.

"Correct," said the president, smiling very blandly.

"That is interesting. Interesting, indeed." Homer rose and held out his hand to the president. "I'll be in again."

"Thank you," said the president. "Drop in any time you wish."

On the street outside the bank, the sun was shining brightly.

The shopping centre stretched along the mall and there were people here and there, walking on the concourse or shopping in the stores. A few cars were parked in the lot and the world of this Second Bank looked exactly like the First Bank's world, and if a man had not known the difference

Good Lord, thought Homer, what was the difference ? What had really happened ? He'd walked through the door and there was the other bank. He'd walked through a door and found the missing people--the people who had not been living in the empty houses of the First Bank's world.

Because that other world where the houses still stood empty was no more than a show window ? It might simply be a street lined with demonstration homes. And here was that second street of houses he'd dreamed up the other night. And beyond this second street, would there be another street and another and another?

He stumbled along the concourse, shaken, now that he realized there really was that second street of houses. It was an idea that was hard to take in stride. He didn't take it in his stride. His mind balked and shied away from it and he told himself it wasn't true. But it was true and there was no way to rationalize it, to make it go away. There was a second street!

He walked along and saw that he was near the gate. The gate he saw, was the same as ever, with its expanse of massive iron.

But there was no gateman.

And a car was coming up the road, heading directly for the gate, and it was moving fast, as if the driver did not see the gate

Homer shouted and the car kept on. He started waving his arms, but the driver paid not the least attention.

The crazy fool, thought Homer. He'll hit the gate and...

And the car hit the gate, slammed into it, but there was sound, no crash, no screech of rending metal. There was simply nothing.

The gate was there, undented. And there was no car. The car had disappeared.

Homer stalked the gate.

Ten feet away, he stopped.

The road came up to the gate; beyond it was no road. Beyond the gate was wilderness. The road came up and ended and then wilderness began.

Cautiously, Homer walked out into the road and peered through the gate.

Just a few feet away, a giant oak towered into the air and behind it was the forest, wild and hoary and primeval, and the forest was the happy sound, the abandoned sound of water running in a brook.

Fish, thought Homer. Maybe that brook is where the trout came from.

He moved toward the gate for a closer look and reached out his hands to grasp the ironwork. Even as he did, the forest went away and the gate as well as he stood in the old familiar

entrance to Happy Acres, with the gate wide open, with the state highway running along the wall and the road from the

development running out to meet it.

"Good morning, sir," said the gateman. "Maybe you ought to move over to one side. A car is apt to hit you." "Huh?" Homer asked blankly.

"A car. This is a road, you know."

Homer turned around and brushed past the gateman. He hustled down the concourse, aiming for Steen's office.

But the office was locked. Homer shook the door. He rapped wildly on the glass. He pounded on the frame. Absolutely nothing happened.

Turning from the door, he stared out across the development with incredulous eyes--the vacant concourse, the empty houses among the trees, the faint patches of shining lake peeking through the clearings.

He jammed his hands into his pockets and his fingers touched the little radiator ornament. He took it

out and looked at it. He'd seen it before--not the little replica, but the ornament itself.

He had seen it, he remembered, on the new cars parked outside his office by the people seeking leases. He had seen it on the car that had crashed the gate and disappeared.

He walked slowly to the parking lot and drove home.

"I don't think I'll go back to the office today," he told Elaine.

"I don't feel so good."

"You've been working too hard," she told him accusingly.

"You look all worn out."

"That's a fact," he admitted.

"After lunch, you lie down. And see that you get some sleep."

"Yes, dear," he said.

So it began to fall into a pattern, he thought, lying on his bed and staring at the ceiling. Finally it was clear enough so a man could begin to make some head and tail of it.

It was unbelievable, but there was no choice---one could not disbelieve in it. It was there to see. And if one looked at it any other way, it made no sense at all.

Someone--Steen, perhaps, or maybe someone else for whom Steen was serving as a front--had found out how to build one house, yet have many houses, houses stretching back street after street from the first house, all shadows of the first house, but substantial just the same--substantial enough for families to live in.

Dimensional extensions of that first house. Or houses stretching into time. Or something else as weird.

But however they might do it, it was a swell idea. For you could build one house and sell it, or lease it, time and time again. Except that one was crazy to get hold of an idea that was as good as that and then let someone else make all the money from the leasing of the houses.

And there was no question that Steen was crazy. That idea he had about the shopping centre was completely batty--although, stop to think of it, if one had five thousand houses and leased each of them ten times and had a monopoly on all the shops and stores--why, it would pay off tremendously.

And the bank president's slant on sovereignty had certain angles, too, that should not be overlooked.

A new idea in housing, Steen had told him. It was all of that.

It was a new idea that would apply to many things--to industry and farming and mining and a lot of other ventures. A man could make one car and there would be many others. A man could build a manufacturing plant and he would have many plants.

It was like a carbon copy, Homer thought--an economic carbon copy. And a man apparently could make as many carbons as he wished. Possibly, he speculated, once you knew the principle, there was no limit to the carbons. Possibly the ghostly parade of Happy Acres houses stretched limitless, forever and forever. There might be no end to them.

He fell asleep and dreamed of going down a line of ghostly houses, counting them frantically as he ran along, hoping that he'd soon get to the end of them, for he couldn't quit until he did get to the end. But they always stretched ahead of him, as far as he could see, and he could find no end to them.

He woke, damp with perspiration, his tongue a dry and bitter wad inside a flannel mouth. He crept out of bed and went to the bathroom. He held his head under a cold faucet. It helped, but not much.

Downstairs, he found a note that Elaine had propped against the radio on the breakfast table: Gone to play bridge at Mabel's.

Sandwiches in refrigerator.

It was dark outside. He'd slept the daylight hours away. A wasted day, he berated himself--a completely wasted day. He hadn't done a dollar's worth of work.

He found some milk and drank it, but left the sandwiches where they were.

He might as well go to the office and get a little work done, compensate in part for the wasted day. Elaine wouldn't return until almost midnight and there was no sense in staying home alone.

He got his hat and went out to where he'd parked the car in the driveway. He got into it and sat down on something angular and hard. He hoisted himself wrathfully and searched the seat with a groping hand to find the thing he'd sat on.

His fingers closed about it and then he remembered. He'd sat on it on that day Morgan had showed up in answer to the ad.

It had been rolling around ever since, unnoticed in the seat.

It was smooth to the touch and warm--warmer than it should be--as if there were a busy little motor humming away inside it.

And suddenly it winked.

He caught his breath and it flashed again.

Exactly like a signal.

Instinct told him to get rid of it, to heave it out the window but a voice suddenly spoke out of it--a thick, harsh voice that mouthed a sort of chant he could not recognize.

"What the hell?" chattered Homer, fearful now. "What's going on?"

The chanting voice ceased and a heavy silence fell, so thick and frightening that Homer imagined he could feel it closing in on him.

The voice spoke again. This time, it was one word, slow and laboured, as if the thick, harsh tongue drove itself to create a new and alien sound.

The silence fell again and there was a sense of waiting. Homer huddled in the seat, cold with fear.

For now he could guess where the cube had come from.

Steen had ridden in the car with him and it had fallen from his pocket.

The voice took up again: "Urrr--urr--urrth--mum!"

Homer almost screamed.

Rustling, panting sounds whispered from the cube.

Earthman? Homer wondered wildly. Was that what it had tried to say?

And if that was right, it' the cube in fact had been lost by Steen, then it meant that Steen was not a man at all.

He thought of Steen and the way he wore his shoes and suddenly it became understandable why he might wear his shoes that way. Perhaps, where Steen came from, there was no left or right, maybe not even shoes. No man could expect an alien, a being from some distant star, to get the hang of all Earth's customs--not right away, at least. He recalled the first day

Steen had come into the office and the precise way he had talked and how stiffly he'd sat down in the chair. And that other day, six weeks later, when Steen had talked slangily and had sat slouched in his chair, with his feet planted on the desk.

Learning, Homer thought. Learning all the time. Getting to know his way around, getting the feel of things, like a gawky country youth learning city ways.

But it sure was a funny thing that he'd never learned about the shoes.

The cube went on gurgling and panting and the thick voice muttered and spat out alien words. One could sense the tenmness and confusion at the other end.

Homer sat cold and rigid, with horror seeping into him drop by splashing drop, while the cube blurred over and over a single phrase that meant not a thing to him.

Then, abruptly, the cube went dead. It lay within his hand, cooling, silent, just a thing that looked and felt like a cliptgether plastic block for children.

From far off, he heard the roar of a car as it left the curb and sped offin the night. From someone's backyard, a cat meowed for attention. Nearby, a bird cheeped sleepily.

Homer opened the glove compartment and tossed the cube in among the rags and scraper and the dog-eared road map and the other odds and ends.

He felt the terror and the loathing and the wild agony begin to drain out of his bones and he sat quietly in the car, trying to readjust his mind to this new situation--that Steen must be an alien.

He dipped his hand into his pocket and found the replica of the radiator ornament. And that was the key, he knew--not, only the key to the many streets of homes, but the key to Steen and the alien world.

They hadn't meant for him to keep the ornament, of course. ffhe had returned the way he'd entered the world of the Second

Bank, the teller more than likely would have demanded that he give it back. But he'd returned another

way, an unexpected way, and it still was in his pocket.

And the radiator ornament, of course, was the reason that

Steen had insisted that anyone who leased a house must also buy a car. For the ornament was a key that bridged one world and another. Although, thought Homer, it was rather drastic to insist that a man should buy a car simply so he'd have the correct radiator ornament.

But that might be the way, he told himself, that an alien mind would work.

He was calmer now. The fear still lingered, but pushed back, buried just a little.

Exactly how is a man supposed to act, he asked himself, when he learns there are aliens in the land? Run screeching through the streets, rouse all the citizens, alert the law, go baying on the trail? Or does he continue about his business?

Might he not, he wondered, take advantage of his knowledge, turn it to his own benefit?

He was the only human being on all of Earth who knew.

Steen might not like it known that he was an alien. Perhaps it would be worth a lot to Steen not to have it known.

Homer sat and thought about it. The more he thought, the more reasonable it seemed that Steen might be ready to lay plenty on the line to keep the fact a secret.

Not that I don't have it coming to me, Homer told himself.

Not that he hasn't caused me a heap of worry and trouble.

He put his hand into his pocket. The miniature ornament was there. There was no need to wait. Now was as good as any time.

He turned the ignition key and the motor came to life. He backed out of the driveway and took the road to Happy Acres.

The development was dark and quiet. Even the usual advertising signs were turned off in the shop fronts.

He parked in front of Steen's office and got out. Opening the trunk, he found the jack handle in the dark.

He stood staring toward the gate. There was no sign of the gateman. But that was a chance he'd have to take. If the old fool tried to interfere, he could handle him.

For a moment, in front of the door to Steen's office, he hesitated, trying to reassure himself. Certainly there would be another closet, some way to get to those other worlds, inside the office.

He struck savagely at the glass in the door with the jack handle. The glass splintered and rained down, with crashing, tinkling sounds.

Homer waited, tense, listening, watching. Nothing stirred. The old gateman, if he was around, apparently had not heard the crash.

Carefully, Homer reached through the broken glass and manipulated the night lock. The door swung easily open. He walked inside and closed the door behind him.

In the empty office, Homer paused until his eyes became accustomed to the deeper darkness. He moved forward, groping with his hands, and found the desk. He could make out the dim bulk of a filing case. There should be a door somewhere.

Perhaps not a door into the street, but a door into a hideout-some room where Steen could disappear to eat and rest and sleep; some place that might have a touch of his alien home about it.

Homer moved from the desk to the filing cabinet and felt along the wall. Almost immediately, he found a door.

He took a firmer grip on the jack handle and twisted on the knob. He walked through the door and there was the room, lighted a garish green by a lantern suspended from the ceiling.

There was sound and the sense of movement. Homer's hair stood straight on end and he felt his skin trying very hard to roll up his back. The hairy monster reached out a paw and grabbed him by the shoulder just as Homer swung around to dive back through the door.

The monster's paw was heavy and very strong. It was hairy and it tickled. Homer opened his mouth to scream, but his tongue dried up and his throat closed and he couldn't make a sound. The jack handle slipped from his numb fingers and clattered to the floor.

For a long moment, he stood there in the grip of the hairy monster and he supposed it had a face, but he could not see the face, for the hair grew all over it and drooped down where its face should be. The monster was a large one, with massive chest and shoulders that tapered down to a slim, athletic waist. Frightened as he was, Homer still could not keep from thinking that it looked a lot like an English sheepdog with a wrestler's body.

And all the while, there was something rolling on the floor and moaning.

Then the hairy monster said, in halting, stumbling syllables:

"You Mister Jackson, you are not ?" Homer made a croaking sound.

"I apologize," the monster told him. "I very poor at your words. I work on your planet survey, but not so good with words."

He motioned at the thing moaning and rolling on the floor

"That was good with words."

The hairy hand dropped from Homer's shoulder.

"That," it said, gesturing at the floor again, "your Mister Steen."

"What is wrong with him?" Homer blurted out. "Is he sick or something ?"

"He die himself," the monster said.

"You mean he's dying and you're just standing there "

"No, no. He--howdo you word it right ?--he unlive himself."

"You mean he's killing himself? Committing suicide ?"

"Yes," the monster said. "He does it very well. Do you nc agree ?"

"But you can't "

"He take great pride in it. He make spectacular. He jus starting now. He work up to grand finale. You must stay an, watch. It be something to remember."

"No, thank you," Homer said faintly.

Homer turned to go, but the monster put out a hairy paw an, stopped him.

"You must not be afraid of us. I stay half myself, allright

Could change entirely into human, but much trouble. Goc enough this way ?"

"It's all tight," said Homer.

Carbon Copy

"We owe you debt," the monster said. "This Mister Steen of yours got things all scrambled up."

"I'll say he did," said Homer feelingly.

"He just a stumblebum. Bungler. He likewise is a joker."

"Joker?"

"Clown ? Wise guy ? You know--lie made the joke. Sometimes very sly joke, but stupid just the same."

The monster leaned forward to peer into Homer's face.

"Your planet, it has its jokers, too ?"

"Yes, indeed," Homer said. "There's one down the hall from me. His name is Gabby Wilson."

"So you understand then. A joker not too bad if that is all he is. But take a joker who makes mistakes and that is most bad.

You have name for it. Smart aleck ?" "That's the name," said Homer.

"We make projects for the planets, for very many planets.

We try to make each project fit the planet. The kind that will help the planet, the kind it needs the most." "Like foreign aid," Homer supplied.

"So this bungler," said the monster, his voice rising in forthright and honest wrath, "this smart aleck, this nincompoop, this Mister Steen of yours, what do you think he does ?"

He came to Earth as project manager--and he brings wrong plan! He is like that other times, going off not cocked. But this, it is too much. Final straw."

"You mean this Happy Acres business was never meant for Earth, but for some other planet ?"

The monster draped his arm around Homer's shoulder in a gesture of understanding and affection. "That exactly what he do. No need of Happy Acres here. You still have room enough for all your people. No need to double up."

"But, sir," said Homer earnestly, "it is a swell idea. It has possibilities."

"Other things you need much worse, my friend. We have better plan for you."

Homer couldn't decide whether he liked the way the monster talked about the better plan.

"What other plan ?" he asked.

"That is topmost secret. To make project big success, it must be done so that the natives think they the ones who do it. And that", the monster said, gesturing toward the floor, "is where this silly obscenity failed in second place. He let you find out what was going on."

"But there were all the other people, too," Homer protested.

"All the people in the shops. The bank president and the gateman and "

"All of them is us," the monster explained. "Them the crew that came with Mister Steen."

"But they were so human-looking! They looked exactly like US !"

"They play it straight. This ape, he ham it up."

"But they dressed like us and they wore shoes "

"The shoes was more joke," the monster said furiously.

"Your Mister Steen, he know how to make himself a human like the rest of them. But he wear his shoes wrong to get you humans'--your humans'--there is a word for it." "Goat 7"

"That is it! He wear them wrong to get your humans' goat. And he make outrageous deal with you and he watch you worry and he rejoice greatly and think himself superior and smart because he that kind of clown. That, I tell you, is no way to treat anyone. That is no true-blue friendship.

But your Mister Steen, he was plain jerk. Let us go and watch him suffer."

"No," said Homer, horrified.

"You no like this dying?"

"It's inhuman."

"Of course, inhuman. We not humans, us. It is a way we have, a social law. He make himself a fool. He make bonehead blunder. He must dead himself. He must do it good. Great honour, do it good. He bungle everything in life, he must not bungle dying. He forever heel if he do."

Homer shivered, listening to the anguish of the alien on the floor, sick at stomach and giddy in the green flood & alien light.

"Now it is to end," said the alien. "We wipe out project. It was nonsensical mistake. We will take it all away."

"You can't mean that!" argued Homer. "We need it. We could make use of it. Just show us the principle." "No," the monster said.

"But if you wipe out the project, there'll be all these people "

"Sorry."

"They'll murder me ! I was the one who leased the houses to them "

"Too bad," the monster said.

"And all that money in the bank! A quarter of a million dollars, more than a quarter of a million dollars! It will be wiped out !"

"You have human money in bank ?"

"I did. I suppose that's too bad, too."

"We can pay you off. Mister Steen make a lot of money. He store it over there."

He pointed to the far wall. "You see that pile of bags? You take all that you can carry."

"Money ?" Homer asked.

"Good money."

"All I can carry?" insisted Homer, nailing it down tight.

"And you will let me leave ?"

"We do you wrong," the monster said. "This fix it just a little?"

"I'll tell the world," said Homer, with enthusiasm.

Steen was becoming noisier. He had changed into his alien form and now he rolled upon the floor, knotted up and writhing.

Homer walked wide around him to get to the farther wall.

He rifled down the bags and they were fairly heavy. He could take two at least, he figured. He hoisted two on his back, then piled on the third. He barely made it back across the room.

The monster watched him with some admiration. "You like money, huh?"

"You bet," Homer panted. "Everyone likes money."

He set the bags down by the door.

"You sure you not stay and watch? It get good directly. It be amusing, maybe even interesting."

Homer held down a rising shudder. "No, thank you very much."

The monster helped him get the bags on his shoulder. "I hold the door for you."

"Thank you," said Homer. "Good day to you and thanks for everything."

"Good-bye, my friend," the monster said.

He held the door and Homer walked on through.

He came back into the office he'd left an hour before, the glass in the door shattered and his car still parked outside.

Homer hurried.

In less than five minutes, he went roaring out the gate, with the bags of money locked inside the trunk.

There was little time, he realized. What he did had to be done fast. For when the monster wiped out Happy Acres, there would be a battalion of families marooned there in the woods and they'd come boiling out with a single thought in mind--to get their hands on Homer Jackson.

He tried to imagine what it might be like, and then tried to stop thinking what it might be like, but couldn't.

There would be a lot of people there without any houses.

They'd wake up in the wild, wet woods, with their furniture and belongings scattered all about them. And all those bright new cars would be in among the trees. And the people would be plenty sore.

Not that he blamed them much.

He was sore himself.

That lousy Steen, he said. Like that contractor Gabby told about--the one who went out on a wrecking job and demolished the wrong house.

The dashboard clock said slightly after midnight. Elaine would be home by now and they could start right out.

Homer turned into the driveway and braked to a halt. There was a light in the kitchen window. He ran up the walk and burst into the house.

"Oh, there you are," said Elaine. "I wondered where you were. What's wrong with you?"

"We're getting out of here," Homer babbled.

"Have you gone stark crazy? Getting out!"

"Now for once," said Homer, "don't give me an argument.

We're getting out of here. Tonight. I've got three sacks of money out there in the car "

"Money! How did you get three sacks "

"It's legal," Homer pleaded. "There's nothing wrong with it.

I didn't rob a bank. There's no time to explain. Let us just get going."

She got icy calm. "Where are we going, Homer?"

"We can decide that later. Maybe Mexico."

"You're ill," she scolded. "You've been working too hard lately. And worrying about that Happy Acres deal "

It was too much for Homer. He turned toward the door.

"Homer! Where are you going, Homer?"

"I'll show you the money," he gritted. "I'll show you I really have it."

"Wait for me," she cried, but he didn't wait. She ran down the walk behind him.

He opened the car trunk. "There it is. We'll carry it up to the house. You can take off your shoes and walk in it. Then maybe you'll believe me."

"No, Homer, no !"

"Here, help me with these sacks," he said.

Inside the house, he opened the sacks. Neatly bundled she of bills spilled out on the floor.

Elaine knelt and picked up a package.

"Why, it's real!" she cried happily.

"Of course it is," said Homer.

"And, Homer, these are twenty-thousand-dollar bills?"

She dropped the package that she held and picked up another and another and another.

"And so are these !" she screamed. "There are millions and millions here!"

Homer was pawing desperately through the heap of money.

Sweat was running down his face.

"Are they all twenty-thousand-dollar bills ?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes," said Homer in a beaten voice.

"But what is wrong?"

"That dirty, lowdown, bungling Steen," he said bitterly.

"But what is wrong?" she cried again.

"They aren't worth a dime," said Homer. "There are no such things as twenty-thousand-dollar bills. The Treasury never issued any!"