

Intangibles, Inc.

BrianAldiss

“Always seems to be eating time in this house,” Mabel said.

She dumped the china salt- and pepper-shakers down at Arthur's end of the table and hurried through to the kitchen to get the supper. His eyes followed her admiringly. She was a fine figure of a young girl; not too easy to handle, but a good-looker. Arthur, on the other hand, looked like a young bull; none too bright a bull either.

"Drink it while it's hot," she said, returning and placing a bowl of soup before him.

Arthur had just picked up his spoon when he noticed a truck had stopped outside in the road. Its hood was up, and the driver stood with his head under it, doing no more than gazing dreamily at the engine.

Arthur looked at his steaming soup, at Mabel, and back out of the window. He scratched his scalp.

“Feller's going to be stranded in the dark in another half-hour,” he said, half to himself.

"Yep, it's nearlytime we were putting the lights on," she said, half to herself.

"I could maybe earn a couple of dollars going to see what was wrong," he said, changing tack.

"This is food like money won't buy or time won't improve on,' my mother used to say," Mabel mur-mured, stirring her bowl without catching his eye.

They had been married only four months, but it had not taken Arthur that long to notice the obliquity of their intentions. Even when they were apparently conversing together, their two thought-streams seemed never quite to converge, let alone touch. But he was a determined young man, not to be put off by irrelevancies. He stood up.

"I'll just go see what the trouble seems to be out there," he said. And as a sop to her culinary pride, he called, as he went through the door, "Keep that soup warm—I'll be right back."

Their little bungalow, which stood in its own untidy plot of ground, was a few hundred yards beyond the outskirts of the village of Hapsville. Nothing grew much along the road except billboards, and the stationary truck added to the desolation. It looked threadbare, patched and mended, as if it had been traveling the roads long before trains or even stage-coaches.

Thecoveralled figure by the engine waited till Arthur was almost up to it before snapping the hood down and turning around. He was a small man with specta-cles and a long, long face which must have

measured all of eighteen inches from crown of skull to point of jaw. In among a mass of crinkles, a likable expression of melancholy played.

"Got trouble, stranger?" Arthur asked.

"Who hasn't?" His voice, too, sounded like a mass of crinkles.

"Anything I can do?" Arthur inquired. "I work at the garage just down the road in Hapsville."

"Well," the crinkled man said, "I come a long way. If you pressed me I could put a bowl of steaming soup between me and the night."

"Your timing sure is good!" Arthur said. "You better come on in and see what Mabel can do. Then I'll have a look-see at your engine."

He led the way back to the bungalow. The crinkled man scuffed his feet on the mat, rubbed his spectacles on his dirty overalls, and followed him in. He looked about curiously.

Mabel had worked fast. She'd had time, when she saw through the window that they were coming, to toss their two bowls of soup back into the pan, add water, put the pan back to heat on the stove, and place a clean apron over her dirty one.

"We got a guest here for supper, Mabel" Arthur said. "I'll light up the lamp."

"Howd'you do?" Mabel said, putting out her hand to the crinkled man. "Welcome to our hospitality."

She said it just right: made it really sound welcoming, yet, by slipping in that big word "hospitality," let him know she was putting herself out for him. Mabel was educated. So was Arthur, of course. They both read all the papers and magazines. But while Arthur, just poured over the scientific or engineering or mechanical bits (those three words all meant the same thing to Mabel), she studied psychological or educational or etiquette articles. If they could have drawn pictures of their idea of the world, Arthur's would have been of a lot of interlocking cogs, Mabel's of a lot of interlocking schoolmarms.

They sat down at the table, the three of them, as soon as the diluted soup warmed, and sipped out of their bowls.

"You often through this way?" Arthur asked his visitor.

"Every so often. I haven't got what you might call a regular route."

"Just what model is your truck?"

"You're a mechanic down at the garage, eh?"

Thus deflected, Arthur said, "Why, no, I didn't call myself that, did I? I'm just a hand down there, but I'm learning, I'm learning fast."

He was about to put the question about the truck again, but Mabel decided it was time she spoke.

"What product do you deal in, sir?" she asked.

The long face wrinkled like tissue paper.

"You can't rightly say I got a product," he said, leaning forward eagerly with his elbows on the bare table. "Perhaps you didn't see the sign on my vehicle: 'Intangibles, Inc.' It's a bit worn now, I guess."

"So you deal in tangibles, eh?" Arthur said. "They grow down New Orleans way, don't they? Must be interesting things to market."

"Dearieme!" exclaimed Mabel crossly, almost blushing. "Didn't you hear the gentleman properly, Arthur? He said he peddles intangibles. They're not things at all: surely you knew that? They're more like—well, like something that isn't there at all."

She came uncertainly to a halt, looking confused. The little man was there instantly to rescue both of them.

"The sort of intangibles I deal in are there all right," he said. "In fact, you might almost say they're the things that govern people's lives. But because you can't see them, people are apt to discount them. They think they can get through life without them, but they can't."

"Try a sample of this cheese," Mabel said, piling up their empty bowls. "You were saying, sir...."

The crinkled man accepted a square of cheese and a slab of home-baked bread and said, "Well, now I'm here, perhaps I could offer you good folks an intangi-ble?"

"We're mighty poor," Arthur said quickly. "We only just got married, and we think there may be a baby on its way for next spring. We can't afford luxuries, that's the truth."

"I'm happy to hear about the babe," the crinkled man said. "But you understand I don't want money for my goods. I reckon you already gave me an intangi-ble: hospitality; now I ought to give you one."

"Well, if it's like that," Arthur said. But he was thinking that this old fellow was getting a bit whimsical and had better be booted out as soon as possible. People were like that. They were either friendly or unfriendly, and unfortunately there were as many ways of being objectionable while being friendly as there were while being unfriendly.

Chewing hard on a piece of crust, the crinkled man ramed to Mabel and said, "Now let us take your own: ase and find out which intangibles you require. What is your object in life?"

"She ain't got an object in life," Arthur said flatly. "She's married to me now."

At once Mabel was ready with a sharp retort, but somehow her guest was there first with a much milder one. Shaking his head solemnly at Arthur, he said, "No, no, I don't quite think you've got the hang of what I mean. Even married people have all sorts of intangibles, ambition and whatnot—and most of them are kept a dead secret." He turned to look again at Mabel, and his glance was suddenly very penetrating as he continued. "Some wives, for instance, take in into their pretty heads very early in marriage always to run counter to their husbands' wishes. It gets to be their main intangible, and you can't shake 'em out of it."

Mabel said nothing to this, but Arthur stood up angrily. The words had made him more uneasy than he would confess even to himself.

"Don't you go saying things like that about Mabel!" he said in a bull-like voice. "It's none of your business, and it ain't true! Maybe you'd better finish up that bread and go and see anybody don't pinch your truck!"

Mabel was also up.

"Arthur Jones!" she said. "That's not polite to a guest. He wasn't meaning me personally, so just you sit down and listen to a bit of conversation. It isn't as if we get so much of that!"

Squelched, Arthur sat down. The crinkled man's long crinkled face regarded him closely, immense compassion in the eyes.

"Didn't mean to be rude," Arthur muttered. He fiddled awkwardly with the salt shaker.

"That's all right. Intangibles can be difficult things to deal with—politeness, for one. Why, some people never use politeness on account of it's too difficult. The only way is to use willpower with intangibles." He sighed. "Willpower certainly is needed. Have you got willpower, young man?"

"Plenty," Arthur said. The crinkled man seemed unable to understand how irritated he was, which of course made the irritation all the greater. He spun the salt shaker at a furious speed.

"And what's your object in life?" persisted the crinkled man.

"Oh, why should you worry?"

"Everyone's happier with an object in life," the crinkled man said. "It don't do to have time passing without some object in life, otherwise I'd be out of business."

This sounded to Mabel very like the maxims she read in her magazines, the founts of all wisdom. Pleasure shared is pleasure doubled; a life shared is life immortal. Caring for others is the best way of caring for yourself. Cast your bread upon the waters: even sharks got to live. Mabel was not too happy about this little man in overalls, but obviously he could teach her husband a thing or two.

"Of course you got an object in life, honey," she said.

Honey raised his bovine eyes and looked at her, then lowered them again. A crumpled hand slid across the table and removed that fidgeting salt shaker from his grasp. Arthur had a distinct feeling he was being assailed from all sides.

"Sure, I got objects ... make a bit of money ... raise some children ..." he muttered, adding, "and knock a bit of shape into the yard."

"Very commendable, very honorable," the crinkled man said in a warm tone. "Those are certainly fine objectives for a young man, fine objectives. To cultivate the garden is especially proper. But those, after all, are the sort of objectives everyone has. A man -needs some special, private ambition, just to distinguish himself from the herd."

"I'm never likely to mistake myself for anyone else, mister," Arthur said unhappily. He could tell by Mabel's silence that she approved of this interrogation. Seizing the pepper shaker, he began to twirl that. "That yard—always full of duckweed...."

"Haven't you got any special, private ambitions of your own?"

Not knowing what to say without sounding stupid, Arthur sat there looking stupid. The crinkled man politely removed the twirling pepper shaker from his hand, and Mabel said with subdued ferocity, "Well, go on then, don't be ashamed to admit it if you've got no aim in life."

Arthur scraped back his chair and lumbered up from the table.

"I can't say any more than what I have. I don't reckon there's anything in your cargo for me, mister!"

"On the contrary," said the crinkled man, his voice losing none of its kindness. "I have just what you need. For every size of mentality I have a suitable size of intangible."

"Well, I don't want it," Arthur said stubbornly. "I'm happy enough as I am. Don't you go bringing those things inhere! "

"Arthur, I don't believe you've taken in a word this...."

"You keep out of this!" Arthur told her, wagging a finger at her. "All I know is, this traveling gentleman's trying to put something over on me, and you're help-ing him."

They confronted each other, the crinkled man sit-ting nursing the two shakers and looking at the hus-band and wife judiciously. Mabel's expression changed from one of rebellion to anguish; she put a hand to her stomach.

"The baby's hurting me," she said.

In an instant, Arthur was around the table, his arms about her, consoling her, penitent. But when she peeped once at the crinkled man, he was watching her hard, and his eyes held that penetrating quality again. Arthur also caught the glance and, misinterpret-ing it, asked guiltily, "Do you reckon I ought to get a doctor?"

"It would be a waste of money," the crinkled man said.

This obviously relieved Arthur, but he felt bound to say, "They do say DocSmallpiece is a good doctor."

"Maybe," said the crinkled man. "But doctors are no use against intangibles, which is what you're dealing with here.... Ah, a human soul is a wonder-ful intricate place! Funny thing is, it could do so much, but it's in such a conflict it can do so little."

But Arthur was feeling strong again now that he was touching Mabel.

"Go on, you pessimistic character," he scoffed. "Ma-bel andme're going to do a lot of things in our life."

The crinkled man shook his head and looked ineffa-bly sad. For a moment they thought he would cry.

"That's the whole trouble," he said. "You're not. You're going to do nothing thousands of people aren't doing exactly the same at exactly the same time. Too many intangibles are against you. You can't pull in one direction alone for five minutes, never mind pull-ing together."

Arthur banged his fist on the table.

"That ain't true, and you can get to hell out of here! I can do anything I want. I got willpower!"

"Very well."

Now the crinkled man also stood up, pushing his chair aside. He picked up the pepper- and salt-shakers and plonked them side by side, not quite touching, on the edge of the table.

"Here's a little test for you," he said. His voice, though still low, was curiously impressive. "I put these two shakers here. How long could you keep them here, without moving them, without touching them at all, in exactly that same place?"

For just a moment Arthur hesitated as if grappling with the perspective of time.

"As long as I liked," he said stubbornly.

"No, you couldn't," the visitor contradicted.

"Course I could! This is my place, I do what I like in it. It's a fool thing to want to do, but I could keep them shakers there a whole year if need be!"

"Ah, I see! You'd use your *willpower* to keep them there, eh?"

"Why not?" Arthur asked. "I got plenty of willpower, and what's more I'm going to fix the yard and grow beans and things."

The long face swung to and fro, the shoulders drugged.

"You can't test willpower like that. Willpower is something that should last a lifetime. You're not enough of an individualist to have that kind of will-power, are you now?"

"Want to bet on that?" Arthur asked.

"Certainly."

"Right. Then I'll bet you I can keep those shakers retouched on that table for a lifetime—my lifetime."

The crinkled man laughed. He took a pipe out of his pocket and commenced to light it. They heard spittle pop in its stem.

"I won't take on any such wager, son," he said, "because I know you'd never do it and then you'd be disappointed with yourself. You see, a little thing like you propose is not so simple; you'd run up against all those intangibles in the soul as I was talking about."

"To hell with them!" Arthur exploded. His blood was now thoroughly up. "I'm telling you I could do it."

"And I'm telling you, you couldn't. Because why? because in maybe two, maybe five, say maybe ten years, you'd suddenly say to yourself, 'It's not worth the bother—I give up.' Or you'd say, 'Why should I be bound by what I said when I was young and foolish?' Or a friend would come in and accidentally

knock the shakers off the table; or your lads would grow up and take the shakers; or your house would burn down; or something else. I tell you it's impos-sible to do even a simple thing with all the intangi-bles stacked against you. They and the shakers would beat you."

"He's quite right," Mabel agreed. "It's a silly thing to do, and you couldn't do it."

And that was what settled it.

Arthur rammed his fists deep down into his pockets and stood over the two shakers.

"I bet you these shakers will stay here, untouched, all my Me," he said. "Take it or leave it."

"You can't," Mabel began, but the crinkled man silenced her with a gesture and turned to Arthur.

"Good," he said. "I shall pop in occasionally—if I may—to see how things are going. And in exchange I give—I have already given—you one of my best in-tangibles: an objective in life."

He paused for Arthur to speak, but the young man only continued to stare down at the shakers as if hypnotized.

It was Mabel who asked, "And what is his objective in life?"

As he turned toward the door, the crinkled man gave a light laugh, not exactly pleasant, not exactly cruel.

"Why, guarding those shakers," he said. "See you, children!"

Several days elapsed before they realized that he went out and drove straight away without any further trouble from the engine of his ancient truck.

At first Mabel and Arthur argued violently over the shakers. The arguments were one-sided, since Mabel had only to put her hand on her stomach to win them. She tried to show him how stupid the bet was; sometimes he would admit this, sometimes not. She tried to show him how unimportant it all was; but that he would never admit. The crinkled man had bored right through Arthur's obtuseness and anger and touched a vital spot.

Before she realized this, Mabel did her best to get Arthur to remove the shakers from the table. After-ward, she fell silent. She tried to wait in patience, to continue life as if nothing had happened.

Then it was Arthur's turn to argue against the shakers. They changed sides as easily as if they had been engaged in a strange dance. Which they were.

"Why should we put up with the nuisance of them?" he asked her. "He was only a garrulous old man making a fool of us."

"You know you wouldn't feel right if you did move the shakers—not yet anyhow. It's a matter of psychol-ogy*

"I told you it was a trick," growled Arthur, who had a poor opinion of the things his wife read about.

"Besides, the shakers don't get in your way," Mabel said, changing her line of defense. "I'm about the

place more than you, and they don't really worry me, standing there."

"I think about them all the while when I'm down at the pumps," he said.

"You'd think more about them if you moved them. Leave them just a few more days."

He stood glowering at the two little china shakers. Slowly he raised a hand to skitter them off the table and across the room. Then he turned away instead and mooched into the yard. Tomorrow, he'd get up real early and start on all that blamed duckweed.

The next stage was that neither of them spoke about the shakers. By mutual consent they avoided the subject, and Mabel dusted around the shakers. Yet the subject was not dropped. It was like an icy draft between them. An intangible.

Two years passed before the antediluvian vehicle drove through Hapsville again. The day was Arthur's twenty-fourth birthday, and once more it was evening as the covered figure with the long skull walked up to the door.

"If he gets funny about those shakers, I swear I'll throw them right in his face," Arthur said. It was the first time either of them had mentioned the shakers for months.

"You'd better come in," Mabel said to the crinkled man, looking him up and down.

He smiled disarmingly, charmingly, and thanked her, but hovered where he was, on the step. As he caught sight of Arthur, his spectacles shone, every wrinkle animated itself over the surface of his face. He read so easily in Arthur's expression just what he wanted to know that he did not even have to look over their shoulders at the table for confirmation.

"I won't stop," he said. "Just passing through and thought I'd drop this in."

He fished a small wooden doll out of a pocket and dangled it before them. The doll had pretty, round, painted light blue eyes.

"A present for your little daughter," he said, thrusting it toward Mabel.

Mabel had the toy in her hand before she asked in sudden astonishment, "How did you guess it was a girl we got?"

"I saw a frock drying on the line as I came up the path," he said. "Good night! See you!"

They stood there watching the little truck drive off and vanish up the road. Both fought to conceal their disappointment over the brevity of the meeting.

"At least he didn't come in and rile you with his clever talk," Mabel said.

"I wanted him to come in," Arthur said petulantly.

"I wanted him to see we'd got the shakers just where he left them, plumb on the table edge."

"You were rude to him last time."

"Why didn't you make him come in?"

"Last time you didn't want him in, this time you do! Really, Arthur, you're a hard man to please. I reckon you're most happy when you're unhappy. You're your own worst enemy."

He swore at her. They began to argue more violently until Mabel clapped a hand to her stomach and assumed a pained look.

This time it was a boy. They called him Mike, and he grew into a little fiend. Nothing was safe from him. Arthur had to nail four walls of wood around the salt- and pepper-shakers to keep them unmolested; as he told Mabel, it wasn't as if it was a valuable table.

"For crying out loud, a grown man like you!" she exclaimed impatiently. "Throw away those shakers at once! They're getting to be a regular superstition with you. And when are you going to do something about the yard?"

He stared darkly and belligerently at her until she timed away.

Mike was almost ten years old, and away trapping birds in the woods, before the crinkled man called again. He arrived just as Arthur was setting out for the garage one morning, and smiled engagingly as Mabel ushered him into the front room. Even his worn old overalls looked unchanged.

"There are your two shakers, mister," Arthur said proudly, with a gesture at the table. "Never been touched since you set 'em down there, all them years ago!"

Sure enough, there the shakers stood, upright as sentries.

"Very good, very good!" the crinkled man said, looking really delighted. He pulled out a notebook and made an entry. "Just like to keep a note on all my customers," he told them apologetically.

"You mean to say you've folks everywhere guarding salt shakers?" Mabel asked, fidgeting because she could hear the two-year-old crying out in the yard.

"Oh, they don't only guard salt shakers," the crinkled man said. "Some of them spend their lives collecting matchbooks, or sticking little stamps in albums, or writing words in books, or hoarding coins, or running other people's lives. Sometimes I help them; sometimes they manage on their own. I can see you two are doing fine."

"It's been a great nuisance keeping the shakers just so," Mabel said. "A man can't tell how much nuisance."

The crinkled man turned on her that penetrating look she remembered so well but said nothing. Instead, he switched to Arthur and inquired how work at the garage was going.

"I'm head mechanic now," Arthur said, not without pride. "And Hapsville's growing into a big place now— yes, sir! New canning factory and everything going up. We've got all the work we can handle at the garage."

"You're doing fine," the crinkled man assured him again. "But I'll be back to see you soon."

Soon was fourteen years.

The battered old vehicle with its scarcely distinguishable sign drew up in front of the bungalow, and the crinkled man climbed out. He looked about with interest. Since his last visit, Hapsville had crawled out to Arthur's place and embraced it with neat little wooden doll's houses on either side of the highway. Arthur's place itself had changed. A big new room was tacked onto one side; the whole outside had been recently repainted; a lawn with rosebushes fringing it lapped up to the front fence. No sign of chickweed.

"They're doing OK" the crinkled man said, and went and knocked on the door.

A young lady of sixteen greeted him and guessed at once who he was.

"My name's Jennifer, and I'm sixteen, and I've been looking forward to seeing you for simply ages! And you'd better come on in because mom's out in the yard doing washing, and you can come and see the shakers because they're just in the same place and never once been moved. Father says it's a million years' bad luck if we touch them, 'cause they're intangible"

Chattering away, she led the crinkled man into the old room. It too had changed; a bed stood in it now, several faded photographs hung on the wall. An old man with a face as pink as a sunset sat in a rocking chair and nodded contentedly when Jennifer and the crinkled man entered. "That's father's pop," the girl explained, by way of introduction.

One thing was familiar and unchanged. A bare table stood in its usual place, and on it, near the edge and not quite touching each other, were two little china shakers. Jennifer left the crinkled man admiring them while she ran to fetch her mother from the yard.

"Where are the other children?" the crinkled man asked father's pop by way of conversation.

"Jennifer's all that's left," father's pop said. Prue the eldest, she got married like they all do. That would be before I first came to live here. Six years, most like, maybe seven. She married a miller called Muller. Funny thing that, huh?—A miller called Muller. And they got a little girl called Millie. Now Mike, Arthur's boy, he was a young dog. He was good for nothing but reproducing. And when there was too many young ladies that should have known better around here expecting babies—why, then young Mike pinches hold of an automobile from his father's garage and drives off to San Diego and joins the navy, and they never seen him since."

The crinkled man made a smacking noise with his lips, which suggested that although he disapproved of such carryings-on he had heard similar tales before.

"And how's Arthur doing?" he asked.

"Business is thriving. Maybe you didn't know he bought the garage downtown last fall? He's the boss now!"

"I haven't been around these parts for nearly fifteen years."

"Hapsville's going up in the world," father's pop murmured. "Of course, that means it ain't such a comfortable place to live in any more.... Yes, Arthur bought up the old garage when his boss retired.

Clev-er boy, Arthur—a bit stupid, but clever."

When Mabel appeared, she was drying her hands on a towel. Like nearly everything else, she had changed. Her last birthday had been her forty-eighth, and the years had thickened her. The spectacles perched on her nose were a tribute to the persistence with which she had tracked down home psychology among the columns of her perennial magazines. Experience, like a grindstone, had sharpened her expression.

Nevertheless, she allowed the crinkled man a smile and greeted him cordially enough.

"Arthur's at work," she said. "I'll draw you a mug of cider."

"Thank you kindly," he said, "but I must be getting along. Only just called in to see how you were all doing."

"Oh, the shakers are still there," Mabel said, with a sudden approach to asperity, sweeping her hand toward the pepper and salt. Catching sight as she did so of Jennifer lolling in the doorway, she called, "Jen-ny, you get on stacking them apples like I showed you. I want to talk with this gentleman."

She took a deep breath and turned back to the crinkled man. "Now," she said. "You keep longer and longer intervals between your calls here, mister. I thought you were never going to show up again. We've had a very good offer for this plot of ground, enough money to set us up for life in a better house in a nicer part of town."

"I'm so glad to hear of it." The long face crinkled engagingly.

"Oh, you're glad are you?" Mabel said. "Then let me tell you this: Arthur keeps turning that very good offer down just because of these two shakers sitting here. He says if he sells up, the shakers will be moved, and he don't like the idea of them being moved. Now what do you say to that, Mr. Intangible?"

The crinkled man spread wide his hands and shook his head from side to side. His wrinkles interwove busily.

"Only one thing to say to that," he told her. "Now this little bet we made has suddenly become a major inconvenience, it must be squashed. How'll it be if I remove the shakers right now before Arthur comes home? Then you can explain to him for me—eh?"

He moved over to the table, extending a hand to the shakers.

"Wait!" Mabel cried. "Just let me think a moment before you touch them."

"Arthur'd never forgive you if you moved them shakers," father's pop said from the background.

"It's too much responsibility for me to decide," Mabel said, furious with herself for her indecision. "When you think how we guarded them while the kids were small. Why, they've stood there a quarter of a century...."

Something caught in her voice.

"Don't you fret," the crinkled man consoled her. "You wait till Arthur's back and then tell him I said to forget all about our little bet. Like I explained to you right back in the first place, it's impossible to do even a simple thing with all the intangibles against you."

Absentmindedly, Mabel began to dry her hands on the towel all over again.

"Can't you wait and explain it to him yourself?" she asked. "He'll be back in half an hour for a bite of food."

"Sorry. My business is booming too—got to go and see a couple of young fellows breeding a line of dogs that can't bark. I'll be back along presently."

And the crinkled man came back to Hapsville as he promised, nineteen years later. There was snow in the air and mush on the ground, and Arthur's place was hard to find. A big movie theater showing a film called *Lovelight* bounded it on one side, while a new six-lane bypass shuttled automobiles along the other.

"Looks like he never sold out," the crinkled man commented to himself as he trudged up the path.

He got to the front door, hesitating there and look-ing around again. The garden, so trim last time, was a wilderness now; the roses had given way to cabbage stumps; old tickets and ice-cream cartons fringed the cinema wall. Chickweed was springing up on the path. The house itself looked a little rickety.

"They'd never hear me knock for all this traffic," the crinkled man said. "I better take a peek inside."

In the room where the china shakers still stood, a fire burned, warming an old man in a rocking chair. He and the intruder peered at each other through the dim air.

"Father's pop!" the crinkled man exclaimed. For a moment he had thought...

"What you say?" the old fellow asked. "Can't hear a thing these days. Come here.... Oh, it's you! Mr. Intangibles calling in again. Beenadum long while since you were around!"

"All of nineteen years, I guess. Got more folk to visit all the time."

"What you say? Didn't think to see me still here eh?" father's pop asked. "Ninety-seven I was last November, ninety-seven. Fit as a fiddle, too, barring this deafness."

Someone else had entered the room by the rear door. It was a woman of about forty-five, plain, dressed in unbecoming mustard green. Something bovine in her face identified her as a member of the family.

"Didn't know we had company," she said. Then she recognized the crinkled man. "Oh, it's you, is it? What do you want?"

"Let's see," he said. "You'd be—why, you must be Prue the eldest, the one who married the miller!"

"I'll thank you not to mention him," Prue said sharply. "We saw the last of him two years ago, and good riddance to him."

"Is that so? Divorce, eh? Well, it's fashionable, my dear—and your little girl?"

"Millie's married, and so's my son Rex, and both living in better cities than Hapsville," she told him.

That so? I hadn't heard of Rex."

"If you want to see my father, he's through here," Prue said abruptly, evidently anxious to end the conversation.

She led the way into a bedroom. Here curtains were drawn against the bleakness outside, and a bright bedside lamp gave an illusion of coziness. Arthur, a *Popular Mechanics* on his knees, sat huddled up in bed.

It was thirty-three years since they had seen each other. Arthur was hardly recognizable, until you discovered the old contours of the bull under his heavy jowls. During middle age he had piled up bulk which he was now losing. His eyebrows were ragged; they all but concealed his eyes, which lit in recognition. His hair was gray and uncombed.

Despite the gulf of years which separated their meeting, Arthur began to talk as if it were only yesterday that they had spoken.

"They're still in there on the table, just as they always were. Have you seen them?" he asked eagerly.

"I saw them. You've certainly got willpower!"

"They never been touched all these years! How ... how long's that been, mister?"

"Forty-five years, all but."

"Forty-five years!" Arthur echoed. "It don't seem that long—shows what an object in Ufeil do, I suppose. Forty-five years—that's a terrible lot of years, ain't it? You ain't changed much, mister."

"Keeps a feller young, my job," the crinkled man said, crinkling.

"We got Prue back here now to help out," Arthur said, following his own line of thought. "She's a good girl. She'd get you a bite to eat, if you asked her. Mabel's out."

The crinkled man polished up his spectacles on his overalls.

"You haven't told me what you're doing lying in bed," he said gently.

"Oh, I sprained my back down at the garage. Try-ing to lift a chassis instead of bothering to get a jack. We had a lot of work on hand. I was aiming to save time. Should have known better at my age."

"How many garages you got now?"

"Just the one. We—I got a lot of competition from big companies, had to sell up the downtown garage. It's a hard trade. Cutthroat. Maybe I should have gone in for something else, but it's too late to think of changing now. Doctor says I can get about again in the spring."

"How long have you been in bed?" the crinkled man asked.

"Weeks, on and off. First it's better, then it's worse. You know how these things are. I should have known better. These big gasoline companies squeeze the life out of you. Mabel goes down every day to look after the cash for me. Look, about them shakers...."

"Last time I came, I told your lady wife to call the whole thing off."

Arthur plucked peevishly at the bedclothes, his hands shining redly against the gray coverlet. In a moment of pugnacity he looked more his old self.

"You know our bet can't be called off," he said pettishly. "Why'd you talk so silly? It's just something I'm stuck with. It's more than my life's worth to think of moving those two shakers now. Mabel says it's a jinx, and that's just about what it is. Move them and anything might happen to us! Life ain't easy, and don't I know it."

The long head wagged sadly from side to side.

"You got it wrong," the crinkled man said. "It was just a bet we made one night when we were kind of young and foolish. People get up to the oddest things when they're young. Why, I called on some young fellows just last week—they're trying to launch mice into outer space, if you please!"

"Now you're trying to make me lose the bet!" Arthur said excitedly. "I never did trust you and your Intangibles too much. Don't think I've forgotten what you said that first time you come here. You said something would make me change my mind, you thought I'd go in there and knock 'em off the table one day. Well—I never have! We've even stuck on in this place because of those two shakers, and that's been to our disadvantage."

"Guess there's nothing I can say, then."

"Wait! Don't go!" Arthur stretched out a hand, for the crinkled man had moved toward the door. "There's something I want to ask you."

"Go ahead."

"Those two shakers -- although we never touch 'em -- if you look at them you'll see something. You'll see they got no dust on them! Shall I tell you why? It's the traffic vibration from the new bypass. It jars all the dust off the shakers."

"Useful," the crinkled man said cautiously.

"But that's not what worries me," Arthur continued. "That traffic keeps on getting worse all the time. I'm scared that it will get so bad it'll shake the shakers right off of the table. They're near the edge, aren't they? They could easily be shaken off, just by all that traffic roaring by. Supposing they are shaken off—does that count?"

He peered up at the crinkled man's face, but lamp-light reflecting from his spectacles hid the eyes. There was a long silence which the crinkled man seemed to break only with reluctance.

"You know the answer to that one all the time, Arthur," he said. It was the only time he ever used the other's name.

"Yep," Arthur said slowly. "Reckon I do. If them shakers were rattled off the table, it would mean the intangibles had got me."

Gloomily, he sank back onto the pillows. The *Popular Mechanics* slid unregarded on to the floor. After a moment's hesitation, the crinkled man turned and went to the door; there, he hesitated again.

"Hope you'll be up and about again in the spring," he said softly.

That made Arthur sit up abruptly, groaning as he did so.

"Come and see me again!" he said. "You promise, you'll be around again?"

"I'll be around," the crinkled man said.

Sure enough, his antique truck came creaking back into the multiple lanes of Hapsville traffic another twenty-one years later. He turned off the bypass and pulled up.

"Neighborhoods certainly do change fast," he said.

The movie theater looked as if it had been shut down for a long time. Now it was evidently used as a furniture warehouse, for a big pantech icon was load-ing up divans outside it. Behind Arthur's place, a block of ugly apartment buildings stood; children shrieked and yelled down its side alley. On the other side of the busy highway was a row of small stores selling candies and pop records and the like. Behind the stores was a busy helicopter port.

He made his way down a narrow side alley, and there, squeezed behind the rear of the drugstore, was Arthur's place. Nature, pushed firmly out elsewhere, had reappeared here. Ivy straggled up the posts of the porch, and weeds grew tall enough to look in all the windows. Chickweed crowded the front step.

"What do you want?"

The crinkled man would have jumped if he had been the jumping kind. His challenger was standing in the half-open doorway, smoking a pipe. It was a man in late middle age, a bull-like man with heavy, un-shaven jowls and gray streaking his hair.

"Arthur!" the crinkled man exclaimed. And then the other stepped out into a better light to get a closer look at him.

"No, it can't be Arthur," the crinkled man said, "You must be — Mike, huh?"

"My name's Mike. What of it?"

"You'd be-sixty-four?"

"What's that to you? Who are you—police? No— wait a bit! I know who you are. How come you arrive here today of all days?"

"Why, I just got around to calling."

"I see." Mike paused and spat into the weeds. He was the image of his father and evidently didn't think any faster.

"You're the old pepper-and-salt guy?" he inquired.

"You might call me that, yes."

"You better go in and see ma." He moved aside reluctantly to let the crinkled man squeeze by.

Inside, the house was cold and damp and musty. Mabel hobbled slowly around the bedroom, putting things into a large black bag. When the crinkled man entered the room, she came close to him and stared at him, nodding to herself. She herself smelled cold and damp and musty.

She was eighty-eight. Under her threadbare coat, she had shrunken to a little old lady. Her spectacles glinted on a nose still sharp but incredibly frail. But when she spoke her voice was as incisive as ever.

"I thought you'd be here," she said. "I said you'd be here. I told them you'd come. You would want to see how it ended, wouldn't you? Well—so you shall. We're selling up. Selling right up. We're going. Prue got married again—another miller, too. And Mike's taking me out to his place—got a little shack in the fruit country, San Diego way."

"And ... Arthur?" the crinkled man prompted.

She shot him another hard look.

"As if you didn't know!" she exclaimed, her voice too flinty for tears. "They buried him this morning. Proper funeral service. I didn't go. I'm too old for any funerals but my own."

"I wish I'd come before...." he said.

"You come when you think you'll come," Mabel said, shortly. "Arthur kept talking about you, right to the last.... He never got out his bed again since that time he bust up his back down at the garage. Twenty-one years he lay in that bed there."

She led the way into the front room where they had once drunk diluted soup together. It was very dark there now, a sort of green darkness, with the dirty panes and the weeds at the windows. The room was completely empty except for a table with two little china shakers standing on it.

The crinkled man made a note in his book and attempted to sound cheerful.

"Arthur won his bet all right! I sure do compliment him," he said. He walked across the room and stood looking down at the two shakers.

"To think they've stood there undisturbed for sixty-six years...." he said.

"That's just what Arthur thought!" Mabel said. "He never stopped worrying over them. I never told him, but I used to pick them up and dust them every day. A woman's got to keep the place clean. He'd have killed me if he found out, but I just couldn't bear to see him believing in anything so silly. As you once said, women have got their own intangibles, just like men."

Nodding understandingly, the crinkled man made one final entry in his notebook. Mabel showed him to the door.

"Guess I won't be seeing you again," he said.

She shook her head at him curtly, for a moment unable to speak. Then she turned into the house, hobbled back into her dark bedroom, and continued to pack her things.