

White-Collar Slavery

by AN EX-SLAVE

AS ONE OF THEM, I am familiar with the characteristics of the white-collar worker. Indeed, his type is familiar to us all: he is down-trodden, docile, apathetic, a mere cipher in the Big Business he serves. But how he gets that way is not generally so well known. My own experience may serve to illustrate it.

I lived through two years of clerical serfdom with a large concern which sells miscellaneous merchandise at retail in many cities throughout the country. What I say here, while referring specifically to this one company, is also true to a greater or lesser degree of other large corporations; so true that I feel justified in citing my own case as typical. Were my illustrations without parallel in other concerns, I might well be accused of airing a personal grudge; but, though some of the details may seem extreme, my experience has been and is being duplicated in many offices.

To the many who have no jobs in these jobless days it may seem petty and ungrateful to call attention to the unhappier aspects of any paid position, the idea being that anybody who is lucky enough to be drawing a salary ought to overlook whatever drawbacks his job entails. Still, depression or no depression, there is such a thing as self-respect, and I hold that it is important to any man. My experience with this particular firm, this One Big Family — for so its executives loved to term it — indicates that the worker is often expected as a matter of course to sacrifice this self-respect to his weekly wage.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

WHEN I approached the personnel man of the establishment in which I was to serve, he greeted me with the same degree of cordiality that J. P. Morgan might accord to Comrade Stalin. Precise, impersonally polite, and radiating a numbing chill, this functionary put his questions in courteous and well-modu-

lated tones, so casual as to disguise the fact that his inquisition was a formula learned by rote. They were simple, harmless, ordinary questions. My name and address, of course. My age. Was I employed at present? What positions had I held? What sort of position was I seeking? What were my salary expectations? Married? Any children? Ever been discharged from a job?

Reasonable, and not too intrusive, surely. Then, as I began to feel a bit at my ease, the personnel expert's manner changed. His tones became less casual, his questions more personal, more incisive, more difficult to answer. I realized that as an applicant for work I was suspect, that I was under the unpitiful scrutiny of a psychoanalyst. My replies became less assured, more halting, lest unwittingly I reveal the jealously guarded secrets of my past. I felt that my very reticences cried out against me, that I was sunk, and that in the mind of my questioner I was a psychopathic subject, no less. While in this funk I was turned over to another exponent of the personnel profession. Before the second questioner finished with me, my existence from the cradle to that present agonizing moment had been plumbed to its depths.

All the while the second ordeal lasted not a word was uttered about any job being open in the organization, or the salaries paid, or any kind of hint as to the sort of establishment into which, by the grace of God and my own merits, granting I had any, I might happily be privileged to enter. Only questions, questions, until, limp and sweating, I was waved aside to bide the outcome of a conference between my two examiners. Apparently they agreed in their diagnosis of my case, for after perhaps an hour's fearsome wait I was ushered into the office of a third examiner. By this time my self-esteem was pretty thoroughly riddled and I was buoyed up only by the not too certain

prospect of obtaining the job. However, my third ordeal was not too terrifying; or perhaps I had become inured to it. The same questions were asked of me, my third inquisitor adding a few of his own. His manner was as impersonal and altogether owlsh as that of the understrappers. The third interview at an end, I was directed to a seat in the reception room.

There, after a long wait, the first examiner came to me. More in sorrow than in anger he catalogued the flaws in my character and behavior. I was told that the index finger of my right hand bore an obvious nicotine stain; that I tapped my feet nervously during the interview; that I squirmed in my chair at certain crucial moments; that I surveyed the lining of my hat on several occasions, when my gaze should have been directed, manly fashion, straight into the eyes of my tormentor. Trifles, these, but they pointed out inerrantly to the interrogator an emotional instability and indicated that, not to put too fine a point on it, at times I might be inclined to stray from the strict truth.

However, the examiner was willing to go further into my case, and he handed me an application blank. It contained a dismaying list of questions to which answers in writing were required. My need of a job was such that it outweighed all the outraged protests of my manhood, and so I spent the rest of the afternoon filling in answers to many questions, some pertinent, others unbelievably impertinent. So much information about my private life and that of my kin was sought by this form that I concluded that whatever positions were open must be of great responsibility, with salaries commensurate.

Nevertheless, I hesitated before filling out and returning that form. I felt it was degrading, stultifying, humiliating. Yet I needed the job badly. My parents had done the best they could in providing me with a good home and as good an education as their slender means allowed. They needed my help now. I decided that I ought to stifle my feelings and do my best to land the job. In the list of questions that I answered, only those that seemed egregiously prying and inexcusable on any count have been included in the following:

Is your married life harmonious? If not explain circumstances. Divorced? Who instigated divorce proceedings and why?

Are both your parents living? If so, living together?

Do you own an automobile? Make, year, cost? Did you purchase it for cash or on the installment basis? Is it fully paid for? If not, how much is still owing?

If you own an automobile, where do you keep it garaged? How much garage rent do you pay?

What recreations do you indulge in and to what extent? Do you play golf? Name of club, location, initiation fee, yearly fees? Where have you spent your summer vacation for the last five years? State respective years at each place.

Name the social organizations, clubs, lodges, and other associations you belong to and state annual dues of each respectively.

What is your religious faith? What church do you attend?

Who is your family doctor? Who is your dentist?

Do you own your own home? Describe type of house and state original cost.

Who holds first, second, and third mortgages? How are these mortgages amortized?

Do you rent any part of your home? To whom? Rent received?

Do you live with your parents? What board do you pay?

Does your husband or wife work? Occupation, salary, name and address of employer?

What insurance policies do you carry? Company, type, beneficiary, amount, annual premium?

Have you any savings bank accounts? In what banks? Do you have a checking account? In what bank? In what name or names do they stand?

Do you borrow from your bank? What amount do you owe at present?

Have you a safe deposit box or any interest in one? In what company?

Do you have any building and loan accounts? In what companies?

Are you indebted to any loan company? How much? When due?

Do you own any stocks or bonds? Amount, security, dates purchased, price purchased?

Give history of any partial payment contract you are a party to.

Do you owe any money to any relative, friend, or acquaintance?

When the preliminaries of filing my application had been completed, I had a short breathing spell while the company investigator made a searching check-up of my answers on the application blank. A few days later I was notified to appear at the company's office. Not unreasonably I concluded that I had cleared the last hurdle and that a position was mine for the taking. I reported at the office with somewhat less trepidation than on my first call. I was even disposed to feel cordial and a bit grateful toward the personnel man who now greeted me. Any impulse to be expansive with him, however, was checked at the outset, for his manner was as aloof as ever. I had another hurdle to clear. I was told I would be

"tried out on the job," provided the company doctor pronounced me physically fit.

I passed this final test and was formally received into the family. A solemn handclasp, a few grave words of admonition, and something feelingly and reverentially murmured about the ideal nature of the One Big Family relationship I had been privileged to assume, and the ceremony of my induction was over. My salary was to be \$40 a week, a really liberal emolument for a beginner, I was assured. Whatever my own doubts about this, I was glad to get the position and eager to be at my tasks, where, I was told and believed, my industry, loyalty, resourcefulness, and ambition would carry me far.

THE TREADMILL

SO I BEGAN my service, aglow with the high purpose to prove myself worthy of the shining ideal of the business family concept. These cheering reflections were slightly dashed at the very outset, when my boss assigned a number to me. To my employers henceforth I would be merely a combination of digits. My desk, pencils and pens, locker, time-clock card, even my mail, would bear the cabalistic device which served me as alternative to a name.

Formally labeled for identification purposes, I was prepared to hear the few simple rules and regulations that were to govern my conduct within the charmed circle of the family. I must be seated at my desk and working every morning at 8:30 o'clock. Thereafter I was to continue at my tasks without let or stop throughout the day, save for the luncheon period; and except also that I might leave my desk only for imperative personal reasons. Unnecessary talking during working hours was forbidden and regarded as a major sin against efficiency. Bringing newspapers into the office also was on the *verboden* list. Besides being a distraction in the temptation they offered to reading, there was also the chance that the workers' glances might stray to the Help Wanted columns.

When the sanctity of these rules of conduct had been duly impressed upon me, I was led to my desk and there introduced to my chief taskmaster. Here was efficiency hitting on all six. This silent arbiter of my toil, as impersonal as I myself had become under the anonymity of my recently acquired tag, was a printed

chart on which were outlined the duties of each employee of the division. On this chart, under my number, were described the details of the operations required of me, with the maximum amount of time allowed for each operation.

In some offices where super-efficiency is practiced, solicitous paternalism has devised a way to make the performance of tasks within the allotted time as nearly automatic as is humanly possible. At ten- or fifteen-minute intervals throughout the working day, a bell rings to announce the completion of the time allowed for one operation and the beginning of another. A hard-driven clerk, listening to the successive clangings of this bell, can appreciate the mental state of the prone boxer who hears the gong counting him out. He knows that if too many strokes of the bell find him behind time, the organization will yank him out like a decayed tooth. On the other hand, he will be penalized for efficiency, for should he reduce the time allowed to do his stint, a proportionate increase in his tasks is made. As the reduction in time is gradual, the addition of new work at first is not noticed. Which is entirely unimportant, for in any event there is nothing he can do about it. Although our office had no bell, we knew very well that the same penalties awaited us.

All this was rather more impersonal and machinelike than I had supposed customary in a business office. I was not disheartened, however, for I knew system was indispensable to my firm in its huge operations. Had I been less ardent, more cynical and hard-bitten, the dull, cowed, driven expression of my fellow clerks might have given pause to my exuberance.

I very soon was made to realize that efficiency and net profits were foremost considerations with my employers, that the units of the family were but cogs in an office machinery that, for all its smooth rhythm and placid hum, was deliberately geared to grind their human entities into malleable pulp. Loyalty, industry, and ambition continued to be smugly preached by my superiors, but very soon I knew that the purpose was to spur me on to work and more work, and that hope of substantial reward for my efforts was a will-o'-the-wisp.

These shibboleths, however, are not the sole reliance of employers to squeeze the ultimate ounce of production out of their families.

Subtly and adroitly an appeal to fear is introduced. A spirit of friendly rivalry is induced between the different departments, between the divisions within the departments, and finally between the employees within the divisions. What begins as a manifestation of commendable *esprit de corps* degenerates into bitter competition, a dog-eat-dog struggle, as department heads furtively watch each other's every action to be sure their authority is not undermined or their functions usurped. Each department is led to worry and fret lest the other find a weak part in its machinery.

The fear spreads to the divisions and on through the ranks of the employees. The numbered office workers are urged by their chief clerks to speed up their tasks for the honor of their divisions. And, if they seem to hold this honor too lightly as reflected in the toll of their daily stint, they are reminded that "times are bad and jobs hard to get nowadays." My experience with this sort of thing took place in the pre-depression era, but there has never yet been a boom so great that an office slave with a family to support could not be intimidated with the observation that "jobs are hard to get." His fear may be evidence of a craven disposition, but fear it is — and, I think, an understandable one. Sometimes the unctuous chief prefers to vary the recital of this truism by basing his appeal on purely ethical grounds. Then he prates piously about "service" and the call it has upon the worker's better nature, if any. I was constantly being "pepped up" by my chief's feeling reference to me as a soldier battling against a host of ruthless, price-cutting, unscrupulous, and altogether nefarious competitors.

Discipline in the business family is honored as the handmaid of efficiency. In our office we were under its rule every minute of our working days. No casual stroll to an inviting window for a quick inhalation of fresh air, or for a moment's change of scene from the deadeningly stale view within the office walls, was permitted. Should the worker be called to the reception room to meet a business caller, the interview must be confined to the time limit our employers regarded as reasonable. Should he go beyond the limit, one of his taskmasters would follow him and suavely wave him back to his desk on the pretext of more pressing business there.

When the lunch period arrived each clerk was expected to leave the office, or continue working. That is, he might not, no matter what the state of the weather, his health, or inclinations, remain in the office merely to relax. That would savor too much of loafing, a mortal affront to efficiency. Furthermore, should he be a gregarious creature who enjoyed lunching in company with a fellow worker, after a few such indulgences of his social nature he was firmly told by his office chief that such familiarity was discountenanced by his employers. It was particularly objectionable to them should his luncheon companion chance to be a subordinate.

Smoking in the neighborhood of the office was regarded as a pernicious habit, enervating in its effects upon the physical and mental fiber of a clerk. Of course, it was not tolerated within office precincts. This embargo on tobacco did not apply, as a rule, to the bosses, who were supposed by long apprenticeship in self-control to have become immune to possible toxic effects on their schooled moral and cerebral natures. Nor had I better dare to sneak a hasty drag or two on a cigarette on such occasions as I might have to go from one building to another for the transaction of some business. My time in transit was checked up, and should it vary too widely, it was for me to explain the delay. In yet more intimate particulars discipline dogged us. Too long an absence in the washroom, or too frequent visits thereto, were considered matters of sufficient gravity to justify a conference of chief clerks.

Humiliating as this espionage was to us, we were more fortunate in this intimate particular than the employees of another large concern engaged in a business similar to our own. There it was the practice to reward some office worker who showed promise as a sneak by affording him opportunity for preliminary training in snooping. Sometimes he obtained this training in an assignment to station himself outside the women's washroom, there to reprimand girls as they emerged for their violation of the office regulation against two employees from the same division simultaneously attending to the calls of nature.

Otherwise, hardly any detail of our personal habits was considered to be outside the legitimate supervision of those who paid us our weekly hire. If any of us missed his daily shave,

he was paternally reminded of the omission. If our attire, in the opinion of our mentors, was too modish in cut or too resplendent in hue for the chaste atmosphere of the office, we were sure to be advised in what constituted sartorial propriety for a clerk. Should one of us sport a flivver, and the fact become known to our employer, he was counseled that his modest income did not warrant the extravagance. Contrariwise, should he be of a thrifty and domestic nature and venturesome enough to buy a home on mortgage in the suburbs, his chief would kindly warn him against the fallacy of burdening himself with time payments on his meager salary, at the same time describing to him the advantages of living near his work.

My deliverance from this hateful thrall happily had come before the depression. How the superb efficiency of this company met the situation I am not in a position exactly to say, but from first-hand knowledge I can be pretty sure that it operated along lines similar to those of another company of the same stripe. In that concern, when the first cloud appeared, a committee was created composed of chief clerks from each department. Theirs was the task of reducing expenses in an organization where, to the uninitiated, it might seem that the irreducible minimum already had been attained. The committee, however, without half trying, soon discovered numerous employees whose services could be dispensed with in a pinch. The spectacle of this sacrifice to retrenchment, it was shrewdly believed, would be enough to put the fear of the Lord into those fortunate enough to be spared in their jobs. Also, any later necessary cuts in salaries would be accepted more submissively by the victims.

The first combings of the committee did not end there. Their work was reviewed by a corps of super-efficiency experts, who separated still other workers from their jobs, including some members of the original decapitation committee. Poetic justice went even further. As a master stroke, the company's first vice-president's head fell into the basket. The unholy glee afforded by this comic dénouement to those first bereft of their jobs may be imagined.

THE SPY SYSTEM

OUR COMPANY's system of office espionage was a tower of strength regulating the work, habits, and personal lives of thousands

in the accumulation of net profits. The underlying principles of spying are the same wherever not too squeamish men countenance it, but the methods of their execution vary. Ours was a model of excellence that illustrated the operation of the system at its highest efficiency point. The first line of offense was a body of trained executives, supplemented by a larger but less expert troop of employed recruits. The latter were not selected haphazardly; they must have exhibited to their employers tendencies that indicated their aptitude for the work. With us the personnel department was merely a euphemism for the major espionage corps.

Some of the snooping the trained exponents of the art were called upon to perform in their tour of duty was repellent to anyone of decent instincts, but with the true humility of Little Brothers of Efficiency, our undercover men stooped to it. When an employee reported himself ill for more than two or three days in succession, the matter called for their attention. In the guise of a medical investigator, the company spy would call at the home of the absent one and solicitously inquire of his condition. If the employee did not seem to the investigator ill enough to warrant his absence from the office, it was so reported to his superior and the supposed malingerer fired.

The case of the amateur, or second line, office sleuths was somewhat different. Their routine duties included spying upon their fellow clerks, and their superiors as well, for evidence of indiscretions, misdemeanors, indecorum of any kind; in fact, any and all sorts of breaches of conduct, official or private, and offenses against the sacred name of efficiency. These offenses did not exclude such venial sins as smoking in the washroom, or showing obvious politeness to a subordinate. The most apt of these spies — that is, those who turned up the greater number of instances of the sinful natures of their fellows — received slight increases in salaries and promotions. The less proficient were accorded the need of praise and the encouragement of promised rewards should they prove unflagging and resultful in their work of snooping on their fellows.

The spy system of our firm was efficient, yet it seemed to me that it fell short of the perfection of meanness attained by that of another concern, a rival of our own company. Their

surveillance of employees was constant, searching, and merciless. Every six months their personnel men drew up a "rating report," in which the employee's work and conduct were frankly reviewed. This secret dossier contained notes on the ability with which the employee performed his tasks; the degree in which he was, or was not, amenable to discipline; his aptitude for various tasks; his loyalty to the Founder (one of the shining virtues); his weaknesses and indicated vices; his infractions, if any, of the firm's commandments; and any choice tidbits of his private life that could be garnered in ways short of actually peeking through keyholes. The report then proceeded to rate its subject according to character, personality, honesty, piety, ambition, health, and loyalty. Perhaps, also, his regularity as a staunch supporter of the Anti-Saloon League and the Republican Party.

REBELLION

IT is not entirely just to cavil at the white-collar worker's meek acceptance of the conditions of his servitude. There are millions of him. They are quite as inarticulate as Gandhi's dumb millions, with the important difference that they have no Mahatma to speak in their cause. Long before I severed my connection with this firm I had shed all the bright illusions with which I entered its service. Yet I held on, even after I had become aware of the cant, the cruelty, and the cold-blooded purpose of its executives to annihilate the spirit of those in their employ.

I needed the job, for one thing. I could not indulge in the only protest I could make against the hypocrisy I loathed. Against the evidence of my senses, I tried to persuade myself that no management in reality could be so heartless, so soulless, so greedy for profits, so altogether indifferent to the common rights of their employees and to the ordinary duties toward them inherent in employers, as seemed the case with my firm.

I had given the firm the best that was in me of cheerful service, of willing loyalty, of faithful compliance with its rules. I had received several promotions. Presumably others were in store for me. But they left me cold, for I knew the price I would be expected to give for them was greater than I would be willing to pay. I was right, and the day came when I had to

choose the alternative. In words that could not be misunderstood I was told that, while my work otherwise was satisfactory to my chief, I could not hope for advancement unless I should exhibit a greater interest in the maintenance of the *esprit* of the office. Which meant, it was explained when I asked to have it made clearer, that I should observe, and report on, my fellow workers' conduct, both within the office and without it, whenever it was such as to tend to impair this *esprit*. I refused to do it, I resigned on the spot, and my resignation was accepted, to take effect at the end of that week.

In effect, it was a summary dismissal for me, but I did not regret it. I felt for the first time in two years that I had reclaimed my lost self-respect; that at last I had redeemed myself for my two years' acceptance of intolerable conditions that in time would surely have led to the disintegration of my character. I have never since regretted it. For one thing, my subsequent experience as a white-collar worker has been far happier, and such as to restore somewhat my faith in American employers.

Furthermore, I can reasonably expect a less melancholy ending to my clerical saga than would be the case had I remained a member of the One Big Family. I could look forward in the latter event, should my service therein extend to a quarter century, to the fitting observance of the event by my appreciative employers. This would take the form of an award to me of a handsome, shiny button attesting my membership in the company's Twenty-five Year Club. Should my cycle of serfdom spin out to the half century, the unhappy event would be even more signally marked. My employers would give me the accolade of an even shinier button, plus a modest banquet to celebrate my induction into the Fifty Year Club.

After that, not much more in the way of grateful recognition of faithful service could be possible. If soon thereafter I should falter, then fail, in my allotted tasks, the cause of sacred efficiency would demand that cognizance be taken of the breakdown of my mental and physical powers. Regretfully, but none the less firmly, the company would relieve me of my duties. But not on a pension. That would be a Socialistic, unscientific, and wholly unbusinesslike procedure. Besides, there would be the matter of dividends to be safeguarded.

Thank God, I have escaped this finis.

A Trip to Czardis

A Short Story

by EDWIN GRANBERRY

IT WAS still dark in the pine woods when the two brothers awoke. But it was plain that day had come, and in a little while there would be no more stars. Day itself would be in the sky and they would be going along the road. Jim waked first, coming quickly out of sleep and sitting up in the bed to take fresh hold of the things in his head, starting them up again out of the corners of his mind where sleep had tucked them. Then he waked Daniel and they sat up together in the bed. Jim put his arm around his young brother, for the night had been dewy and cool with the swamp wind. Daniel shivered a little and whimpered, it being dark in the room and his baby concerns still on him somewhat, making sleep heavy on his mind and slow to give understanding its way.

"Hit's the day, Dan'l. This day that's right here now, we are goen. You'll recollect it all in a minute."

"I recollect. We are goen in the wagon to see papa —"

"Then hush and don't whine."

"I were dreamen, Jim."

"What dreamen did you have?"

"I can't tell. But it were fearful what I dreamt."

"All the way we are goen this time. We won't stop at any places, but we will go all the way to Czardis to see papa. I never see such a place as Czardis."

"I recollect the water tower —"

"Not in your own right, Dan'l. Hit's by my tellen it you see it in your mind."

"And lemonade with ice in it I saw —"

"That too I seen and told to you."

"Then I never seen it at all?"

"Hit's me were there, Dan'l. I let you play like, but hit's me who went to Czardis. Yet I never till this day told half how much I see. There's sights I never told."

They stopped talking, listening for their

mother's stir in the kitchen. But the night stillness was unlifted. Daniel began to shiver again.

"Hit's dark," he said.

"Hit's your eyes stuck," Jim said. "Would you want me to drip a little water on your eyes?"

"Oh!" cried the young one, pressing his face into his brother's side, "don't douse me, Jim, no more. The cold aches me."

The other soothed him, holding him around the body.

"You won't have e're chill or malarie ache to-day, Dan'l. Hit's a fair day —"

"I won't be cold?"

"Hit's a bright day. I hear mournen doves starten a'ready. The sun will bake you warm. . . . Uncle Holly might buy us somethen new to eat in Czardis."

"What would it be?"

"Hit ain't decided yet. . . . He hasn't spoke. Hit might be somethen sweet. Maybe a candy ball fixed on to a rubber string."

"A candy ball!" Daniel showed a stir of happiness. "Oh, Jim!" But it was a deceit of the imagination, making his eyes shine wistfully; the grain of his flesh was against it. He settled into a stillness by himself.

"My stomach would retch it up, Jim. . . . I guess I couldn't eat it."

"You might could keep a little down."

"No . . . I would bring it home and keep it. . . ."

Their mother when they went to bed had laid a clean pair of pants and a waist for each on the chair. Jim crept out of bed and put on his clothes, then aided his brother on with his. They could not hear any noise in the kitchen, but hickory firewood burning in the kitchen stove worked a smell through the house, and in the forest guinea fowls were sailing down from the trees and poking their way along the half-dark ground toward the kitchen steps,