George Blotz, Druggist

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JOHN slapped the dust cloth haphazardly across the magazine rack with his right hand and mopped perspiration off his forehead with the other. Today was going to be a scorcher, he thought, and threw a longing glance at the pop dispenser.

He looked out front, through the big plate glass window that had "Drugs" printed in black and gold on it, at his boss’ back overflowing in a worn office chair on the walk. Sometimes, John thought, George Blotz just wasn’t smart. Now take those darn cats. There were Toby, Jill, and Big Tom. Why in heaven’s name anyone liked cats in the first place was more than he could fathom. But you had to hand it to George. He had ’em trained. They followed him around like dogs and came when he whistled.

Big Tom, an immense cat of dubious ancestry, could stand on his hind legs, roll over, play dead, and beg for food.

But this dealing with the Minnehaska Public Utility Corporation meant bad business for George Blotz, he thought.

"Hey, George, shall I fix up the window this morning?"

"Yep. Change it to cosmetics. There’s a layout for it on my desk."

As he went toward the rear, John considered all the events of the past week. First, there was the young fellow who took a
room at Mrs. Riggs' boarding house Monday and drove out of town every morning. Nobody seemed to know what he did or where he went. The boss had seemed mighty interested in him, and when he couldn't find out anything from Mrs. Riggs he had taken the pickup and gone out of town behind the young fellow. Then he had returned a couple of hours later and resumed his position in front of the store.

Then Monday night George had spent most of his evening back in the office telephoning. He had called Joe Belding, Tom Purnell, and some other farmers who lived out along the river. That's when John had his first idea what it was all about, because George had mentioned the Minnehaska Public Utility Corporation and something about a power dam on the Ha Ha Tonka.

Now John picked up the layout on the desk and then went back to the right front window. He emptied the window and gathered up the cosmetics outlined on the chart. Then he squatted down and began arranging the display.

FROM the window he could see the length of Main Street by craning his head over in one corner. To his left he could see George sprawled out, with the cats lying under his chair. The shadow of the word “Drugs” was thrown on the back of his hand, and whenever he reached through it to put a jar in place he thought of dipping his hand in and out of water. He noticed George reach over and pick up Toby and place her on his lap. The movement caused a recurrence in his mind of something that had happened before . . . having to do with George fondling one of the cats . . . and then he remembered. He had done the same thing the time the marshall had had the fight with a drunk in front of the Hotel. He looked up and down the street quickly, wondering if George and the cat-petting was indicative of more trouble. No, nothing appeared out of place.

He looked at George through the window and saw that his innocent-looking blue eyes were fixed down at the end of Main Street beyond John's range. Soon he saw the young fellow from Mrs. Riggs' and two older men coming toward the drug store. He could tell they were from the city because all of them wore coats and no one else in Limeyville had on coats on a day like this. He watched George stroke Toby with a short, stubby hand
and wondered what he was thinking. He had more than once asked himself why Limeyville had ever made George mayor.

He guessed he’d never forget his first impression of George, sitting just where he was now with his arms full of cats and a half-asleep, half-awake look on his face. He’d wanted to learn a trade—and everybody had told him to “See George Blotz.” George hadn’t even shifted in his chair . . . just nodded his head and motioned toward the soda fountain.

NOW the young city fellow broke the silence with “Good morning, Mr. Blotz.”

“Mornin’,” said George noncommittally.

“Could we talk to you for a few minutes? This is Mr. Ward and Mr. Lewis of Minnehaska Public Utilities.”

“Sure. Come on inside.” George lifted himself from the chair and waddled towards his office, the three men following. The office door closed, and once again John was alone in the store. He hurriedly finished dressing the window and then went back to the prescription counter next to the office.

“Mr. Blotz,”—It was the young fellow’s voice—“as you know we’ve been interested for some time in damming the Ha Ha Tonka and erecting a power plant for Limeyville and the surrounding communities. For the past week I’ve been talking to farmers along the site we’ve selected. Strangely, though, each farmer I talked to, with one or two exceptions, had leased his land—to you. So-o-o, we’ve come to make some kind of arrangement, if we can.”

There was the squeak of chair hinges and John visualized George swinging slowly from side to side.

“Well, now, I don’t know. What will your company do that Consolidated isn’t doing now?”

“Well, uh,” one of the strange men was talking, “having the plant located here will mean more work for the townspeople, more families to make their homes here, and better service. You can see, Mr. Blotz, that would make quite a difference as far as the citizens are concerned.”

“What about the rates? Will they be any higher than they are now?” The chair squeaked again.

“There’ll be a short time before lower rates can go into effect. That is, while we’re getting adjusted and all. You know how
that is, Mr. Blotz,” he answered, with an ingratiating note playing an overtone on the words. “And then I believe we could arrange to have the employees of our company buy their supplies here.”

John stopped brushing the feather duster over the shelf in front of him and moved nearer the door.

“How much would you be willing to pay for leases?” George asked, and John thought he detected a softness, a lowering of the voice.

There was a pause, and one of the strangers said, “We'll give you $5 an acre for all you have, in a block.”

The swivel chair squeaked. “Gentlemen, seems there’s a gap somewhere. According to what I hear, you’ve offered the farmers $7.50 an acre. Now is that fair?” George’s voice was low and vibrant. John inched nearer the door.

One of the strangers laughed, forced and embarrassed. “Well, Mr. Blotz, you understand we’re not in business for our health. Tell you what we’ll do, we’ll give you $8 an acre for the block.”

“Well, I don’t know now. Think maybe I’d better wait and talk to them fellows at Consolidated.”

“Mr. Blotz, you’re making a mistake.” It was the young fellow again, only this time his voice held a menacing note.

“No, gents, I don’t think so.”

“Mr. Blotz, we have ways of convincing people that we’re . . .”

John stifled a gasp as he caught a bottle rocking back and forth on the shelf. Darn it, he thought, I’d better watch what I’m doing with this feather duster.

“Get out!” George commanded, low and tense-like. “Get out—and I wouldn’t come back, if I were you.”

The three men came out of the office, their faces flushed and set. George followed them to the front, and as the young fellow went out he said, “You’ll change your mind.”

The men trooped down the street, shaking their heads and talking.

George walked back to the soda container and drew out two glistening, sweat-cold bottles. “Here, John, have one.” His eyes lit up in a twinkle as he noticed John’s face. “You wanta watch that feather duster, John. Some of these days you’re liable to have an accident.” Then he walked back to his chair, and the chair squeaked thoughtfully as John moved toward the front of

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the store. How did he know that I'd almost knocked that bottle off, John thought, and then as he looked at the bottle he understood... the label was facing the wrong way.

Later that afternoon John had just finished rolling up the awning and was filling a prescription for Mrs. Saunders when a black sedan with out-of-state license plates pulled up to the curb. John glanced at the two men who came toward the store and then went on with his work. He noticed that the driver of the car had given his belt a hitch as he came around the car, just like a fellow pulling up a pair of bathing trunks... or boxing trunks. Even then John was only mildly curious until he heard George whistle. His head snapped up and he noticed then that the men were sauntering casually—too casually—toward George.

John suddenly grasped what was happening and grabbed an ice cream dipper, the only thing handy. Before he could get around the counter the men had reached George, and about that time the cats came hopping around the corner. "Toby! Jill! Big Tom! Get 'em!" George said.

John was around the counter, running hell-for-leather toward the door. "I'm coming, George," he yelled, and then sprawled head first, sliding into the screen in approved Pepper Martin style.

He heard the mad scramble as the cats, the strangers, and George mingled into a racket of blows, meows, and "pff-f-f-ts." Before John got out on the street it was all over, the black sedan was roaring down the road, and Big Tom was licking a sore paw where one of the men had stepped on it. John stood there, feeling very foolish, with the dipper in his hand. People were running toward the druggist's to see what the commotion was about.

"You're a little late," George chuckled, between puffs, as he saw John. "But since you've got the dipper handy, why don't you dish out ice cream for the boys?" He indicated the cats.

"Y' see," George said, after the crowd had dispersed and John had finally asked him what it was all about, "I can't help sticking my nose in other people's business. When I saw that young fellow take out of town I was just curious enough to want to know why." He drank deeply of the cold pop in his glass. "Lem Turner told me what he was doing, and I added two and two.
From the courthouse records I found that the Consolidated franchise expired in a couple of months. That would leave this town open for another company.”

“Yes, but how did you figure out the lease business so quick?”

George reached over and scratched the ears of Big Tom. The animal sat up on its hind legs, and George threw it a mint.

“Well, the way I looked at it the easiest way to stall until I could find out more about it was to lease the land—on the condition that I turn it back if and when I wanted to. Look at that!” Big Tom was still on his hind legs, eating the mint like a squirrel.

“A Consolidated man was over last night and offered the town a reasonable reduction in rates if we’d renew the franchise—not much, but enough to profit the city in the long run,” he continued.

“Well, I’ll be darned,” was all John could think to say.

Big Tom rubbed up against John’s leg, his purring creating a rumbling sensation to the skin. John’s hand unconsciously went down and along his back, and he felt the friction of electricity against the hair.

HE sat like that in silence. John thought maybe he had underestimated George. He noticed the sparks along the cat’s back and wondered how many volts were being ejected.

George smiled. “Cats is nice... after you get used to them.”

John nodded his head.

“Well, come one, let get back. You’d better get a couple more gallons of sirup out of the storeroom. Tonight that bank night crowd will be in again,” George said. “I’ve some accounts to straighten, too, and it’s just two days till the first.”

John followed his retreating back with his eyes. It just made a fellow wonder about George...

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Birth

Arnold Skromme

Ag. E. Sr.

Tearing tissues and bloody thighs;
Quivering muscles—a baby cries.

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