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The Thief

A Short Story by
DESMOND STONE

THE Big Four met every afternoon at 3.30. Sometimes they discussed the future of Germany, solving the boundary problems in double-quick time. Other days they ranged far over the East. Now and again they descended to humbler things—to carrots that persisted in splitting and to weather that gave the town four seasons in a day.

But mostly they talked of the business itself, of new stock on the water and the takings of the day before. There was the manager, the sub-manager, the chief clerk and the accountant. Tea at 3.30 was an informal affair. And to all but the accountant, the food they ate was incidental—a mere plate to be gathered around. Only Mr. White regarded the cakes with a kindling eye, making a swift mental selection long before the tea was poured.

It was, on the whole, a discreet and restrained kind of greed. Mr. White, when the occasion demanded it, was prepared to feast with his eyes and fast with his mouth. If, after the first two rounds, one cake lay small and lonely on the plate, he heroically refrained from taking it—only to see the others do the same. When a tragedy like this occurred, and the left-over was thrown away, Mr. White hungered in silence.

It was a measure of his concern for food that he rated the manager's secretaries good or bad according to the afternoon tea they dispensed. A girl who dumped down oatmeal wafers day after day was scarcely worth keeping on. If she showed an imaginative touch, ushering in buttered scones on one day and pink meringues on another, she was a girl out of the box. She might be an indifferent speller, she might not even be able to read her own shorthand. But these things were as nothing if she knew how to adventure with cakes.

"What do you say, Mr. White?" said the manager one afternoon, his hand hovering uncertainly above a plate of

custard squares of violent hue. "Shall I take the risk?"

"I don't recommend them," said the accountant without thinking. "They lie a little heavy on the tummy."

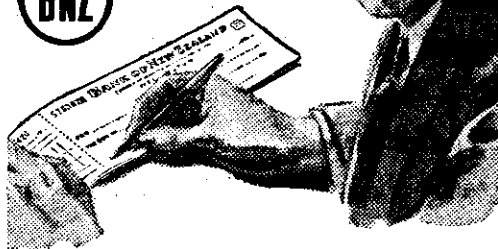
"Ah hah," said the manager jocularly. "Sounds as if you've been doing some sampling on the sly."

Everybody laughed except Mr. White, who bent his head over his cup. The manager had rattled a skeleton in his cupboard. Though he would have nobody know it, the accountant had had a secret surprise. It was his habit and his pleasure to raid the afternoon tea cakes.

It was all the fault of the medicine men. Mr. White had smoked his cigarettes happily for 20 years, enjoying every one. When at first the specialists had advanced their theories, he had been openly sceptical. If Sir Winston Churchill could smoke those tremendous cigars without harm, he was perfectly safe with cigarettes. But when, with the irritating insistency of a dripping tap, the doctors rammied their warnings home, some of the savour of smoking began to depart. He felt the first prickings of alarm. And with every warning multiplied a thousand times by his wife and his mother, life was suddenly joyless.

In the end Mr. White stopped smoking. The void was enormous. For the first few days he loaded his mouth with chewing gum. He chewed it until his jaw began to ache, until his stomach started to revolt. After that he began to have snacks between meals—a sandwich here and an apple or two there. It was easy at home, where he thought of the afternoon tea cakes. It was not like a case of common theft. With the others, the accountant paid 2/6 a week for his tea and cakes, so that how and when and where he ate his share was entirely his own affair. For all that, he admitted the need for stealth. There was his reputation to be considered. Mr. White valued nothing so much as his dignity and he took care to keep it intact. No one ever saw him sliding down

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