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# **“The Cold, Cold Box”**

Howard Fast

As always, the annual meeting of the Board of Directors convened at nine o'clock in the morning, on the 10th of December. Nine o'clock in the morning was a sensible and reasonable hour to begin a day's work, and long ago, the 10th of December had been chosen as a guarantee against the seduction of words. Every one of the directors would have to be home for the Christmas holiday—or its equivalent—and therefore the agenda was timed for precisely two weeks and not an hour more.

In the beginning, this had caused many late sessions, sometimes two or three days when the directors met the clock round, with no break for sleep or rest. But in time, as things fell into the proper place and orderly management replaced improvisation, each day's meeting was able to adjourn by four o'clock in the afternoon—and there were even years when the general meeting finished its work a day or two early.

By now, the meeting of the Board of Directors was very matter-of-fact and routine. The big clock on the wall of the charming and spacious meeting room was just sounding nine, its voice low and musical, as the last of the directors found their seats. They nodded pleasantly to each other, and if they were seated close to old friends, they exchanged greetings. They were completely relaxed, neither tense nor uneasy at the thought of the long meeting that lay ahead of them.

There were exactly three hundred of these directors, and they sat in a comfortable circle of many tiers of seats—in a room not unlike a small amphitheatre. Two aisles cut through to a center circle or stage about twenty feet in diameter, and there a podium was placed which allowed the speaker to turn in any direction as he spoke. Since the number of three hundred was an arbitrary one, agreed upon after a good deal of trial and error, and maintained as an excellent working size, half the seats in the meeting room were always empty. There was some talk now and then of redesigning the meeting room, but nobody ever got down to doing it and by now the empty seats were a normal part of the decor.

The membership of the Board was about equally divided between men and women. No one could serve under the age of thirty, but retirement was a matter of personal decision, and a reasonable number of members were over seventy. Two thirds of them were in their fifties. Since the Board was responsible for an international management, it was only natural that all nations and races should be represented—black men and white men and brown men and yellow men, and all the shadings and gradations in between. Like the United Nations—they were too modest to make such a comparison themselves—they had a number of official languages (and a system of simultaneous translation), though English was most frequently used.

As a matter of fact, the Chairman of the Board, who had been born in Indo-China, opened this meeting in English, which he spoke very well and with ease, and after he had welcomed them and announced the total attendance—all members present—he said,

“At the beginning of our annual meeting—and this is an established procedure, I may say—we deal with a moral and legal point, the question of Mr. Steve Kovac. We undertake this before the reading of the agenda, for we have felt that the question of Mr. Kovac is not a matter of agenda or business, but of conscience. Of our conscience, I must add, and not without humility; for Mr. Kovac is the only secret of this meeting. All else that the Board discusses, votes upon and decides or rejects, will be made public, as you know. But of Mr. Steve Kovac the world knows nothing; and each year in the past, our decision has been that the world should continue to know nothing about Mr. Kovac. Each year in the past, Mr. Kovac has been the object of a cruel and criminal action by the members of this Board. Each year in the past, it has been our decision to repeat this crime.”

To these words, most of the members of the Board did not react at all—but here and there young men and women showed their surprise, bewilderment and unease, either by the expressions on their faces or by low protestations of disbelief. The members of the Board were not insensitive people.

“This year, as in the past, we make this question of Mr. Kovac our first piece of business—because we cannot go onto our other business until it is decided. As in the past, we will decide whether to engage in a criminal conspiracy or not.”

A young woman, a new member of the board, her face flushed and angry, rose and asked the chairman if he would yield for a question. He replied that he would. “

Am I to understand that you are serious, Mr. Chairman, or is this some sophomoric prank for the edification of new members?”

“This board is not used to such descriptive terms as sophomoric, as you should know, Mrs. Ramu,” he answered mildly. “I am quite serious.”

The young woman sat down. She bit her lower lip and stared at her lap. A young man arose.

“Yes, Mr. Steffanson?” the chairman said pleasantly.

The young man sat down again. The older members were gravely attentive, thoughtful without impatience.

“I do not intend to choke off any discussion, and I will gladly yield to any questions,” said the Chairman, “but perhaps a little more about this troublesome matter first. There are two reasons why we consider this problem each year. Firstly, because the kind of crime we have committed in the past is hardly anything to grow indifferent to; we need to be reminded; premeditated crime is a deadly threat to basic decency, and God help us if we should ever become complacent! Secondly, each year, there are new members on this board, and it is necessary that they should hear all of the facts in the case of Mr. Kovac. This year, we have seven new members. I address myself to them, but not only to them. I include all of my fellow members of this Board.”

Steve Kovac (the President of the Board began) was born in Pittsburgh in the year 1913. He was one of eleven children, four of whom survived to adulthood. This was not too unusual in those days of poverty, ignorance and primitive medicine.

John Kovac, Steve Kovac’s father, was a steelworker. When Steve Kovac was six years old, there was a long strike—an attempt on the part of the steelworkers to increase their wages. I am sure you are all familiar with the method of the strike, and therefore I will not elaborate.

During this strike, Steve Kovac’s mother died; a year later, John Kovac fell into a vat of molten steel. The mother died of tuberculosis, a disease then incurable. The father’s body was dissolved in the molten steel. I mention these things in terms of their very deep and lasting effect on the mind and character of Steve Kovac. Orphaned at the age of seven, he grew up like an animal in the jungle. Placed in a county home for orphan children, he was marked as a bad and intractable boy, beaten daily, deprived of food, punished in every way the ignorance and insensitivity of the authorities could devise. After two years of this, he ran away.

This is a very brief background to the childhood of a most remarkable man, a man of brilliance and strong character, a man of high inventive genius and grim determination. Unfortunately, the mind and personality of this man had been scarred and traumatized beyond redemption. A psychiatric analysis of this process has been prepared, and each of you will find a copy in your portfolio. It also itemizes the trials and suffering of Steve Kovac between the ages of nine and twenty—the years during which he fought to survive and to grow to adulthood.

It also gives a great many details of this time of his life—details I cannot go into. You must understand that while the question before us is related to this background, there are many other features I will deal with.

At this point, the Chairman of the Board paused to take a drink of water and to glance through his notes. The younger members of the Board glanced hurriedly at the psychiatric report; the older members remained contemplative, absorbed in their own thoughts. As many times as they had been through this, somehow it was never dull.

At the age of twenty (the Chairman resumed) Steve Kovac was working in a steel mill outside of Pittsburgh. He was friendly then with a man named Emery. This man, Emery, was alone, without family or means of support. A former coal miner, he suffered from a disease of the lungs, common to his trade. All he had in the world was a five thousand dollar insurance policy. Steve Kovac agreed to support him, and in return he made Kovac the beneficiary of the insurance policy. In those days, insurance policies were frequently the only means with which a family could survive the death of the breadwinner.

Four months later, Emery died. Years afterward, it was rumored that Kovac had hastened his death, but there is no evidence for the rumor. The five thousand dollars became the basis for Steve Kovac's subsequent fortune. Twenty-five years later, the net worth of Steve Kovac was almost three billion dollars. As an individual, he was possibly the wealthiest man in the United States of America. He was a tycoon in the steel and aluminum industries, and he controlled chemical plants, copper mines, railroads, oil refineries and dozens of associated industries. He was then forty-six years old. The year was 1959.

The story of his climb to power and wealth is unique for the generations he lived through. He was a strong, powerful, handsome man—tortured within himself, driven by an insatiable lust to revenge himself, and his father and mother too, for the poverty and suffering of his childhood. Given the traumatic factors of his childhood, his cravings for power turned psychopathic and paranoid, and he built this structure of power securely. He owned newspapers as well as airlines, television stations and publishing houses, and much more than he owned, he controlled. Thereby, he was able to keep himself out of the public eye. In any year of the fifties, you can find no more than an occasional passing reference to him in the press.

How an individual achieved this in a time of the public corporation and the "corporation man" is a singular tale of drive and ambition. Steve Kovac was ambitious, ruthless, merciless and utterly without compassion or pity. His policy was to destroy what stood in his way, if he could; if he could not, he bent it to his will in one way or another. He wrecked lives and fortunes. He framed and entrapped his competitors; he used violence when he had to—when he could not buy or bribe what he wanted. He corrupted individuals and bribed parliaments and bought governments. He erected a structure of power and wealth and control that reached out to every corner of the globe.

And then, in his forty-sixth year, at the height of his wealth and power, he discovered that he had cancer.

The Chairman of the Board paused to allow the impact of the words to settle and tell. He took another drink of water. He rearranged the papers in front of him.

"At this time," he said, "I propose to read to you a short extract from the diary of Dr. Jacob Frederick. I think that most of you are familiar with the work of Dr. Frederick. In any case, you know that he was elected a member of our Board. Naturally, that was a long time ago. I need only mention that Dr. Frederick was one of the many wise and patient pioneers in the work of cancer research—not only a great physician, but a great scientist. The first entry I propose to read is dated January 12, 1959."

I had an unusual visitor today (the Chairman of the Board read), Steve Kovac, the industrial tycoon. I had heard rumors to the effect of the wealth and power of this man. In himself, he is a striking individual, tall, muscular, handsome with a broad strong face and a great mane of prematurely-white hair. He has blue eyes, a

ruddy complexion, and appears to be in the prime of life and health. Of course, he is not. I examined him thoroughly. There is no hope for the man.

“Doctor,” he said to me, “I want the truth. I know it already. You are not the first physician I have seen. But I also want it from you, plainly and bluntly.”

I would have told him in any case. He is not the kind of a man you can lie to easily. “Very well,” I said to him, “you have cancer. There is no cure for your cancer. You are going to die.”

“How long?”

“We can’t say. Perhaps a year.”

“And if I undergo operative procedure?”

“That could prolong your life—perhaps a year or two longer if the operation is successful. But it will mean pain and incapacity.”

“And there is no cure?” His surface was calm, his voice controlled; he must have labored for years to achieve that kind of surface calm and control; but underneath, I could see a very frightened and desperate man.

“None as yet.”

“And the quacks and diet men and the rest—they promise cures?”

“It’s easy to promise,” I said. “But there isn’t any cure.”

“Doc,” he said to me, “I don’t want to die and I don’t intend to die. I have worked twenty-five years to be where I am now. The tree is planted. I’m going to eat the fruit. I am young and strong—and the best years of my life are ahead of me.”

When Kovac talked like that, he was convincing, even to me. It is his quality not simply to demand of life, but to take. He denies the inevitable. But the fact remained.

“I can’t help you, Mr. Kovac,” I told him.

“But you’re going to help me,” he said calmly. “I came to you because you know more about cancer than any man in the world. Or so I am told.”

“You have been misinformed,” I said shortly. “No man knows more than anyone else. Such knowledge and work is a collective thing.”

“I believe in men, not mobs. I believe in you. Therefore, I am ready to pay you a fee of one million dollars if you can make it possible for me to beat this thing and live a full life span.” He then reached into his coat for his wallet and took out a certified check for one million dollars. “It is yours—if I live.”

I told him to return the following day—that is tomorrow. And now I have been sitting here for hours, thinking of what one million dollars would mean to my work, my hopes—indeed, through them, to all people. I have been thinking with desperation and with small result. Only one thought occurs to me. It is fantastic, but then Steve Kovac is a fantastic man.

Again, the Chairman of the Board paused and looked inquiringly at some of the younger members. They had been listening with what appeared to be hypnotic concentration. There were no questions and no comments. “Then I will continue with the diary of Dr. Frederick,” the Chairman said.

January 13, (the Chairman said). Steve Kovac returned at 2:00, as we had arranged. He greeted me with a confident smile.

“Doc, if you are ready to sell, I am ready to buy.”

“And you really believe that you can buy life?”

“I can buy anything. It’s a question of price.”

“Can you buy the future?” I asked him. “Because that is where the cure for cancer lies. Do you want to buy it?”

“I’ll buy it because you have decided to sell,” he said flatly. “I know who I am dealing with. Make your offer, Dr. Frederick.”

I made it, as fantastic as it was. I told him about my experiments with the effects of intense cold upon cancer cells. I explained that though, as yet, the experiments had not produced any cure, I had made enormous strides in the intense and speedy application of extreme cold—or, to put it more scientifically, my success in removing heat from living objects. I detailed my experiments—how I had begun with frogs and snakes, freezing

them, and then removing the cold and resuming the life process at a later date; how I had experimented with mice, cats, dogs—and most recently, monkeys.

He followed me and anticipated me. “How do you restore life?” he wanted to know.

“I don’t restore it. The life never dies. In the absence of heat, what might be called the ripening or aging process of life is suspended, but the life remains. Time and motion are closely related; and under intense cold, motion slows and theoretically could cease—all motion, even within the atomic structure. When the motion ceases, time ceases.”

“Is it painful?”

“As far as I know, it isn’t. The transition is too quick.”

“I’d like to see an experiment.”

I told him that I had in my laboratory a spider monkey that had been frozen seven weeks ago. My assistants could attest to that. He went into the laboratory with me and watched as we successfully restored the monkey. Seemingly, it was none the worse.

“And the mind?” he asked me.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I have never attempted it with a human being.”

“But you think it would work?”

“I am almost certain that it would work. I would need better and larger equipment. With some money to spend, I can improve the process—well, considerably.”

He nodded and took the certified check out of his wallet. “Here is your retainer—apart from what you have to spend. Buy whatever you need, and charge it to me. Spend whatever you have to spend and buy the best. No ceiling, no limit. And when I wake up, after a cure has been discovered, there will be a second million to add to your fee. I am not a generous man, but neither am I niggardly when I buy what I want. When will you be ready?”

“Considering the prognosis of your disease,” I said, “we should not delay more than five weeks. I will be ready then. Will you?”

Steve Kovac nodded. “I will be ready. There are a good many technical and legal details to work out. I have many and large interests, as you may know, and this is a journey of uncertain duration. I will also take care of your own legal responsibilities.”

Then he left, and it was done—possibly the strangest agreement ever entered into by a doctor and his patient. I try to think of only one thing—that I now have a million dollars to put into my work and research.

The Chairman of the Board wore pince-nez, and now he paused to wipe them. He cleared his throat, rearranged the papers on the podium once again, and explained.

You see, the plan was a simple one and a sensible one too. Since Mr. Kovac’s condition could not be cured, here was a means of preserving his life and arresting the disease until science had found a cure. Timidity was never one of Mr. Kovac’s qualities. He analyzed the situation, faced it, and accepted the only possible escape offered to him. So he went about placing his affairs in such order as to guarantee the success and prosperity of his enterprises while he slept—and also their return to his bidding and ownership when he awoke.

In other words, he formed a single holding company for all of his many interests. He gathered together a Board of Directors to manage that holding company in his absence, making himself president in absentia, with a substitute president to preside while he was gone. He made a set of qualifying bylaws, that no president could hold office for more than two years, that the Board was to be enlarged each year and a number of other details, each of them aimed at the single goal of retaining all power to himself. And because he was not dead, but merely absent, he created a unique situation, one unprecedented in the history of finance.

This holding company was exempted from all the traditional brakes and tolls placed upon previous companies through the mechanism of death. Until Mr. Kovac returned, the holding company was immortal. Naturally, Dr. Frederick was placed upon the Board of Directors.

In other words (the Chairman of the Board concluded) that is how this Board of Directors came into being.

He allowed himself his first smile then. "Are there any questions at this point?" he asked mildly.

A new member from Japan rose and wanted to know why, if this was the case, the whole world should be told otherwise?

We thought it best (said the President). Just as we, on this Board, have great powers for progress and construction, so do we have no inconsiderable powers of concealment and alteration. The people of the United States and the United Kingdom might have accepted the knowledge that Steve Kovac brought this Board of Directors into being, but certainly in the Soviet Union and China, such knowledge might have been most disconcerting and destructive. Remember that once we had established an open trade area in the Soviet Union and had brought three of her leading government people onto our Board of Directors, our situation changed radically. We were enabled then, through a seizure of all fuel supplies on earth, to prevent the imminent outbreak of World War III.

At that point, neither the extent of our holdings nor the amount of our profits could be further concealed. I say we (the Chairman deferred modestly) but of course it was our predecessors who faced these problems. Our cash balance was larger than that of the United States Treasury, our industrial potential greater than that of any major power. Believe me, without planned intent or purpose, this Board of Directors suddenly found itself the dominant force on earth. At that point, it became desperately necessary for us to explain what we represented.

A new member from Australia rose and asked, "How long was that, Mr. Chairman, if I may inquire, after the visit of Mr. Kovac to Dr. Frederick?"

The Chairman nodded. "It was the year Dr. Frederick died—twenty-two years after the treatment began. By then, five types of cancer had already surrendered their secret to science. But there was not yet any cure for Mr. Kovac's disease."

"And all the time, the treatment had remained secret?"

"All the time," the Chairman nodded.

You see (he went on), at that time, the Board felt that the people of Earth had reached a moment of crisis and decision. A moment, I say, for the power was only momentarily in the hands of this Board. We had no armies, navies or air-fleets—all we had were a major portion of the tools of production. We knew we had not prevented war but simply staved it off. This was a Board of Directors for management, not for power, and any day the installations and plants we owned and controlled could have been torn from our grasp. That was when our very thoughtful and wise predecessors decided to embark on a vast, global propaganda campaign to convince the world that we represented a secret Parliament of the wisest and best forces of mankind—that we were in effect a Board of Directors for the complex of mankind.

And in this, we succeeded, for the television stations, the newspapers, the radio, the film and the theatre—all these were ours. And in that brief, fortunate moment, we launched our attack. We used the weapons of Steve Kovac—let us be honest and admit that. We acted as he would have acted, but out of different motives entirely.

We bought and bribed and framed. We infiltrated the parliaments of all mankind. We bought the military commanders. We dissolved the armies and navies in the name of super-weapons, and then we destroyed the super-weapons in the name of mankind. Where leaders could not be bought or bribed, we brought them into our Board. And above all, we bought control—control of every manufacturing, fanning or mining unit of any consequence upon the face of the earth.

It took the Board of Directors twenty-nine years more to accomplish this; and at the end of that twenty-nine years, our earth was a single complex of production for use and happiness—and if I may say so, for mankind. A semblance of national structure remained, but it was even then as ritualistic and limited as any commonwealth among the old states of the United States. Wars, armies, navies, atom bombs—all of these were only ugly memories. The era of reason and sanity began, the era of production for use and life under the single legal code of man. Thus, we have become creatures of law, equal under the law, and abiding by the law. This Board of Directors was never a government, nor is it now. It is what it proposes to be, a group management for the holding company.

Only today, the holding company and the means of mankind are inseparable. Thereby, our very great responsibility.

The Chairman of the Board wiped his face and took a few more sips of water. A new member from the United States rose and said,

“But, Mr. Chairman, the cure for all types of cancer was discovered sixty-two years ago.”

“So it was,” the Chairman agreed.

“Then, Steve Kovac—” The new member paused. She was a beautiful, sensitive woman in her middle thirties, a physicist of note and talent, and also an accomplished musician.

“You see, my dear,” the Chairman said, lapsing into a most informal mode of address, pardonable only because of his years and dignity, “it faced us. When we make a law for mankind and submit to it, we must honor it. Sixty-two years ago, Steve Kovac owned the world and all its wealth and industry, a dictator beyond the dream of any dictator, a tyrant above all tyrants, a king and an emperor to dwarf all other kings and emperors—”

As he spoke, two of the older members left the meeting room. Minutes later, they returned, wheeling into the room and up to the podium a rectangular object, five feet high, seven feet long and three feet wide, the whole of it covered with a white cloth. They left it there and returned to their seats.

“—yes, he owned the world. Think of it—for the first time in history, a just peace governed the nations of mankind. Cities were being rebuilt, deserts turned into gardens, jungles cleared, poverty and crime a thing of the past. Man was standing erect, flexing his muscles, reaching out to the planets and the stars—and all of this belonged to a single savage, merciless, despotic paranoid, Steve Kovac. Then, as now, my dear associates, this Board of Directors was faced with the problem of the man to whom we owed our existence, the man who all unwittingly unified mankind and ushered in the new age of man—yes, the man who gave us the right and authority to hold and manage, the man whose property we manage. Then as now, we were faced with Steve Kovac!”

Almost theatrical in his conclusion and gestures, the Chairman of the Board stepped down from the podium and with one motion swept the cloth aside. The entire Board fixed their eyes on the cabinet where, under a glass cover, in a cold beyond all concept of cold, a man lay sleeping in what was neither life nor death, but a subjective pause in the passage of time. He was a handsome man, big and broad, ruddy of face and with a fine mane of white hair. He seemed to sleep lightly, expectantly, confidently—as if he were dreaming hungrily but pleasantly of what he would awaken to.

“Steve Kovac,” the President said. “So he sleeps, from year to year, no difference, no changes. So he appeared to our predecessors sixty-two years ago, when they first had the means to cure him and the obligation to awaken him. They committed the first of sixty-two crimes; they took no action in the face of a promise, a duty, a legality and an almost sacred obligation. Can we understand them? Can we forgive them? Can we forgive the

board that voted this same decision again and again? Above all, can we forgive ourselves if we stain our honor, break the law, and ignore our own inheritance of an obligation?

“I am not here to argue the question. It is never argued. The facts are presented, and then we vote. Therefore, will all those in favor of awakening Mr. Kovac raise their right hands?”

The President of the Board waited. Long moments became minutes, but no hands were raised. The two older members covered the cold, cold box and wheeled it out. The Chairman of the Board took a sip of water, and announced,

“We will now have the reading of the agenda.”