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# The Happy Accident

*Robert Manning*

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**M**y hometown, the small city of Binghamton, sits in upstate New York astride the junction of two rivers with musical Indian names. When I go back there, as I do now and then, I usually take a stroll alongside the Susquehanna or the Chenango just to reassure myself that this is the same place I grew up in. So much has changed. I wouldn't recognize the plastic new downtown if it weren't for the rivers and the solid gray stone courthouse with its walls as thick as a county sheriff's head that still stands in the city's center, charming reminder of the past, almost unreal now like some stage set that is waiting to be dismantled and carted off. There must be scores of such relics still standing in New York State, New England, and the Midwest, hardy old structures with lawns that feature black big-mouthed cannons and cones of cannonballs sitting underneath green-encrusted likenesses of Civil War soldiers. A scattering of elms casts thin shade, and in season more starlings and sparrows than can be counted hold noisy conclave.

Standing before that old Broome County courthouse or walking close to one of the rivers I can still get my bearings in a hometown that has grown strange to me. This street in front of the soldier statues is Court Street, which arbitrarily becomes Main Street at the western end of a bridge that is so lacking in character that it isn't even ugly. When I was growing up, if you went west on Main to where Binghamton stopped and Johnson City began, you would come to a stone arch bearing the boastful inscription GATEWAY TO THE VALLEY OF OPPORTUNITY. An innocent traveler was not told in which direction that Valley lay. But many of us living in that gray city in that gray time knew: any direction, and the farther away the better.

The Depression was not over then, in 1937, and for many in Binghamton and its umbilical villages, Endicott and Johnson City, the essentials of life were still hard to come by. The area's principal industry had been founded by two entrepreneurs from Massachusetts, Henry B. Endicott and George F. Johnson. The Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company, or E-J as it was usually called, was a haven of opportunity for a new generation of emigrants, especially from Eastern Europe. Upon leaving Ellis Island they made their way to the place they'd been told about in letters from America. "Which way E-J?" were the first words of English many of them learned, and they journeyed to those noisy red-brick factories in Binghamton, Endicott, and Johnson City — the Triple Cities — to join earlier

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migrants from Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Ukraine, and not a few Irish who'd come to find new lives in the New World.

There was a new industry in town, just starting to grow into the giant it was to become. Having taken over a modest clock-making factory, the International Business Machines Company made its headquarters across the street from one of the largest of the E-J factories. The company's slogan, THINK, glowered mockingly from above IBM's entry arch toward the shoe factory across the way. The street might as well have been a wall, dividing as it did class from class. The wages paid by IBM were fabulous next to those in the shoe factory, and IBM employees came mostly from more privileged sectors. At quitting time each working day the shoeworkers in their dark shirts, raveled sweaters or team jackets, and scuffed brogans marched down their side of the street, making for nearby bowling alleys and corner saloons where they'd dally a bit before going home. As they walked, some of them looked across at the white-collar IBM employees in their somber suits and ties or neatly tailored dresses, and chanted, "While you're thinkin', we're drinkin'!"

I was a senior in high school that year, bored with Cicero and Silas Marner, hoping to get to know girls who weren't nice girls. Perhaps one of those marvelously sculpted Polish girls whose father carved out leather soles at E-J's Harry F. Johnson factory, and whose appearance in a gym suit from across the exercise field aroused the yearning for promiscuity in a horny young man. Hoping, yes, but then fearful that I might thereupon be consigned forever to the furnaces of hell by Father Hannon of Saint Thomas Aquinas Church. Studs Lonigan, meet Bob Manning.

I was caught in deep melancholy. It had dawned on me that a diploma from Binghamton Central High School and the ability to run fourteen consecutive balls at the Ladas Brothers pool hall were not likely to carry a fellow far beyond Binghamton's city limits. I don't know which was more compelling, being bored or being broke. In any case, I had not much prospect of the means to college and I needed a job, something to support a two-cigarette-a-day habit and a desire to go dancing once a week with a girl named Bette, who was beautiful, willowy, and wonderful even though stubbornly unpromiscuous. Nothing to alarm Father Hannon there, though not for my lack of trying. (Ah, but even the *desiring* and the *trying*, we were taught at Saint Thomas, were in themselves mortally sinful.)

A schoolmate suggested I might find work in the pressroom of *The Press*, the city's afternoon newspaper. He showed me a picture of his old man, wearing a heavy apron to protect him from flying blobs of hot lead and a cocked hat made of newsprint; thanks to the stereotypers' union he'd made good money there for twenty-five years. I hastened to *The Press* in its twelve-story tower, the tallest building in all the Southern Tier of New York. The directory in the lobby of The Binghamton Press Building offered no guidance to the location of the pressroom, down in the bowels of the building where the roaring monster machines spewed out each day's newspapers. Envisioning these portals as my personal gateway to the Valley of Opportunity, I wandered into an alley and through a door marked City Room.

How ramshackle was my Valley! Compared to what I entered, newspaper offices today are computerized, hospital-sanitary, quiet as a convent. There is little about them to equal the charming dishevelment of the daily newsroom in those bygone days. The smallest of them shared with the largest a chemistry of sounds, smells, and disarming clutter that could only confound an inexperienced visitor. Surely, the scene suggests, no order can be made of human affairs by men and women so raggedly preoccupied.

I was enthralled. The large *Press* City Room smelled of glue pots, pipe tobacco, ciga-

rette and cigar smoke, and, since it was shortly after lunch hour, there was also a whiff in the air of spent scotch or bourbon whiskey. Sounds as bright to me as bird calls came from the clattering of the typewriters and the yattering of teletypes, and there arose occasionally, as if uttered by an angry crow, the sharp cry of “Boy!” or “Copy!”

A dozen men and three women labored in seeming serenity and self-preoccupation over typewriters or clutters of paper. A fourth woman, this one plainly distraught, emerged suddenly from a glass-walled corner office. “What do you want?” she inquired of me.

“I’ve come to see about a job,” I said.

“How did you know there’s a job open?” she asked.

“I didn’t,” said I, about to explain that I was looking for the pressroom.

She interrupted. “One just opened up. Three minutes ago.”

The door of the glass office burst open and a stocky, dark-haired man appeared, eye-glasses swinging from a black ribbon strung about his neck, a frock coat encasing his big frame. “Woodruff,” he shouted at the woman who had been talking to me. “Goddammit, where’s my sauerkraut juice?”

That was my first sight of Tom Radcliffe Hutton. He was an imposing figure, then in his mid-forties, standing about six feet or slightly under, with a huge crop of black curly hair, a handsome but cloudy visage, a well-bunched body that moved with a smoothness suggesting strength. He was, I was to learn, a good horseman and sometime polo player, and I once saw him pick up two bushel baskets of apples, one hand grasping each basket by its slim wire handle, and carry them as if they were bunches of violets. He’d already had two, perhaps three wives, and was living with one of them, or a mistress, on a farm a few miles outside town which he insisted on calling a “ranch” — and woe betide any of his underlings who called it a farm. Hutton liked to keep his origins obscure, but it was understood that he was born in upstate New York, with some brush strokes of Indian blood in him (“Someone before him slept on the wrong side of the blanket” was a local way of saying it), and his swaggering western manner came from several years of living and newspapering in Texas.

On that autumn day in 1937 Tom Hutton had in a customary fit of rage fired one of the newspaper’s five copy boys. The boy’s offense seemed to be that he, a recent graduate of Syracuse University, had been favoring with increasingly ardent attention a new young lady reporter of somewhat limited talent but irresistible physical attributes. These attributes were the reason Tom Hutton had hired her, and in his view they were not to be enjoyed by anyone but him.

So there was an opening for one copy boy. It was Hutton’s practice to hire only college graduates, but it was now October. There would not be another graduating class until spring. His secretary, the homely and warm woman who’d accosted me, and whose name I was to learn was Helen Woodruff, introduced me to her boss as a candidate for the job. I did not know what a copy boy was, what one was supposed to do, though upon observing several of them responding to the cry of “Copy!” as it affrighted the City Room air, I deduced that their function was that of “hunkers,” as Hollywood then referred to studio lackeys who were employed to be sent out for coffee and to have matches struck on them.

Tom Hutton sourly looked me over as I fidgeted in my scuffed \$3.95 Thom McAns and a run-down suit of electric blue serge on which I still owed Harry Prew’s Haberdashery some \$21 of its original knockdown price of \$29.50. He swung his spectacles from their black cord with a peculiar twist of the wrist that reminded me depressingly of the back-hand stroke of Simon Legree.

“What are you doing out of school?” he snapped.

I explained that Binghamton Central High School, at which I was a senior, was running on a split-session basis and that my schooling finished each day at noon.

“If you can get in here by twelve-fifteen for the early stock market returns, and if you can buy a new pair of shoes (looking at my feet with distaste) and eat on eight dollars a week,” he said, “you’ve got a job. Slackjaw over there” — he pointed to a sad-faced man standing like a lonesome crane in a far corner of the City Room — “will tell you the routine, and we’ll soon find out whether you’re to be a newspaperman or a grocery clerk.”

I quickly discovered what Hutton meant by that. The five copy boys and a small band of ten to twelve young reporters stationed in Binghamton and several surrounding bureaus in *The Press*’s five-county fiefdom were considered to be trainees. We made up Tom R. Hutton’s School of Applied Journalism. My admission was the result of a happy accident and quite unorthodox, but thanks to Black Tom’s stormy temper (It was not always unprovoked: he once fired his own son from a reporter’s job because the son threw an Underwood typewriter through his old man’s glass office wall) I had an opportunity to matriculate in a college of a kind I think did not exist before and never will again, an institution that was capable of assuaging though not erasing my disappointment and sense of inferiority at not being able to move on from high school to college.

Tom Hutton was a strange man — brilliant, selfish, and generous at the same time, frequently infuriating and ruthless, often charming, and capable of an arrogance that was majestic in its intensity. His politics ultimately became appallingly right-wing. At that time, though, I came to admire him even more than I feared him, although those emotions often ran neck and neck, and I’ll be forever obliged to him for having brought me into my craft.

At that time *The Binghamton Press* ranked as one of the finest small-city afternoon papers in the United States. This was due in part to the drive and talent of Tom Hutton and several good men he hired, but even before he arrived in the City Room, almost from its inception shortly after the turn of the century, *The Press* was an exceptionally good newspaper because the man who founded it was determined that it be. This determination, it must be stated, came out of no great humanitarian impulse but out of a peculiar sequence of events.

Before *The Press* began publishing in 1904, the one afternoon newspaper in town was *The Herald*. Old-timers remember it as a paper that served the community well. Its editor was described in *Collier’s* magazine as a man who “has never yet seriously strained himself by undue endeavors to run away from a fight.” In the days when *The Herald* was enjoying its cock-of-the-walk dominance, one of the dramatic business stories in town was that of the Kilmer Company and its remarkable patent medicine, a Kickapoo joy-juice sort of potion concocted by one Jonas Kilmer. Anticipating by many years the language of today’s health food trade, he combined what he called “the active medicinal properties of swamp root, field herbs and healing balsams,” heavily laced the potion with alcohol, and peddled it around the country as a miraculously healing elixir called Swamp Root.

Swamp Root cost very little to make and sold very well, especially in the South. But Jonas’s business was a modest one until his son, Willis Sharpe Kilmer, decided he had little to learn at Cornell University, quit after his second year, and prevailed on his father to let him apply some sales promotion to the product.

Young Kilmer became one of the pioneers in patent medicine advertising. He bally-hoed Swamp Root’s magical powers to heal a broad range of afflictions. There was hardly a part of the human body to which the concoction would not bring balm, but the



*The Herald* responded with a full account of the proceeding, including a list of fourteen co-respondents.

If they had stopped there, Beardsley and the newspaper might have forfended disaster. Instead, they began to attack Swamp Root.

First the paper printed a mock testimonial from a man in California who had consumed ten bottles of Dr. Jiggem's Kidney Invigorator; he died of another ailment, but his kidneys survived in such a vigorous state that the undertaker had to pound them to death with a club. This in itself was enough to fire up Kilmer's unruly temper. Then the editors caused to be bruited about town the story of one of the Kilmer company's famous urinalyses. It seems that an anonymous wag had dispatched a young lad to a nearby drayman's, there to procure a pint or so of urine from an aged Percheron. It was appropriately identified as the specimen of a male Caucasian of intermediate age and sent off to Dr. Kilmer's plant for analysis. Soon thereafter the dread diagnosis arrived: Citizen Doe was on the brink of the most painful, the most debilitating kidney ravage, and unless he was prepared to meet his Maker forthwith he should consume Swamp Root with diligence.

*The Herald's* staffers did not know it, but they had signed their newspaper's death warrant. To attack Kilmer's privacy and his honor was one thing; to attack his precious elixir was an act of war. "That damned sheet won't last long after I get after it," he was quoted as saying.

Kilmer cried all the way to the offices of his lawyers. There he commanded deeds to be drawn and contracts let for construction of a building that was to be of such size that for many years to come it would be the tallest, the most imposing, in that part of New York State. Inquiries went to newspaper offices in New York, Chicago, and other large cities, seeking the services of editors, reporters, critics, printers, stereotypers, pressmen, advertising salesmen, and others required to produce a daily newspaper. Soon construction began on The Binghamton Press Building of twelve stories. Work went speedily, and early in 1904 Binghamton's second afternoon newspaper rolled off the presses. Almost from the beginning it cast *The Herald* into shadow; the older paper survived for several years, but in a state of steady decline, and then succumbed (an affliction of the kidneys, no doubt). That left *The Press* dominant in the afternoon, and its only competition the pallid morning daily called *The Binghamton Sun*. *The Sun* gasped along for years, a sort of waif. And long, long after Willis Sharpe Kilmer had savored (and pocketed much profit from) his revenge and had passed to his reward, *The Sun* was absorbed into the prosperous *Binghamton Press*, a newspaper sired, as it were, by a small bottle of horse piss.

While I had no acquaintance with Willis Sharpe Kilmer, I could claim a close friendship with one of his horses. He raced a string of some of the finest thoroughbreds in America, including Sun Beau, Sun Briar, and the great Exterminator. Across the street from a house in which I lived during my parents' few relatively prosperous years were luxuriant pastures and barns that made up Kilmer's summer stables. Not far beyond them was his own half-mile racetrack encircled by an always freshly painted white fence. In those pastures Exterminator spent much of his late years, alternately frolicking and loafing near where, violating Kilmer's No Trespassing signs, we Kneeland and Rotary Avenue kids played pick-up baseball by day and ring-a-levio by night. A pony named Peanuts, fat and round as a barrel, was Exterminator's constant companion and playmate. The old champion would go nowhere without Peanuts. When we clambered over the fence to pet and feed Exterminator, we had to bring two of everything — apples, sugar cubes, carrots — because he would not eat unless his mascot ate with him.

The once mighty racing champion, the pastures smelling sweet and barns washed in sun, the grazing horses, and the flashes of roan, chestnut, and black that streaked 'round the training track — all brought a vicarious sense of luxury, something unattainable, forbidden, but so close we could almost taste it, to that plain middle-class street with its almost identical two-family houses of stucco and wood, with their almost identical garages, almost identical Fords and Chevrolets parked in the driveways, and their identical Philcos sending the voices of Amos and Andy through every screen door on a hot summer's night.

We never saw the man who owned all of this but heard that it was but a fragment of his wealth, that he owned in addition not only the biggest house in town, but a far more splendid horse farm in Virginia, two country estates, and a huge yacht named the Remlik (Kilmer spelled backward) that could take him to any port in the world, and did.

Now that I was to work for his paper, perhaps I would meet the possessor of all this. But by then, Willis Sharpe Kilmer was not much enjoying his riches. He was terminally sick and living in seclusion in his turreted stone palace on Riverside Drive or at his plush cottage on a lake fifteen miles out of town.

In my time at *The Press* he never put in an appearance. When he died on July 12, 1940, at the age of seventy-one, a deluge of prose and photos engulfed the front and several inside pages of *The Press*. A lengthy but judicious replay of Kilmer's life, clinical reports of his long illness, messages of mourning from the high and mighty, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and New York Governor Herbert Lehman, photographs of Kilmer in jaunty fedora with his beloved racehorses and his seagoing yacht reminded the citizenry of what it already knew: the rascal had lived a rich life on the proceeds of those hogsheads full of dark brown juice that had irrigated the kidneys and assaulted the livers of America. Tom Hutton pulled every stop on his Wurlitzer to fill almost half the editorial page with an effusion that began, "The Commodore put out to sea last night," and got more fulsome with every one of its eighteen fat paragraphs. Every available body on the news staff was dragooned into the three-day orgy of mourning-in-print. Through all the bustle one heard occasional expressions of concern over what might happen to the newspaper. But nary a tear was shed.

That was almost three years after I became the youngest and most unprepared student in Tom R. Hutton's School of Applied Journalism, suddenly privileged to watch and learn from men (and a couple of women) who had come to town from the outside world to contribute their experience and wisdom to this homely little manufacturing city on the banks of the Susquehanna and Chenango.

Tom Hutton fashioned his own way of weeding out those who did not soon show the talent to be newspaperman or -woman. The copy boys and all young reporters with less than two years' experience were required every six months to assemble in the City Room of an evening and submit to an overpowering examination prepared by Black Tom. About three months in advance he assigned a reading list composed by whim. The examination consisted of three hours in which we were to respond to Hutton's questions about the books on that list. Then we were dispersed around the quiet of Binghamton at night to seek out some sort of news or feature story, return, and before ninety minutes in all had passed, write it as if for a real newspaper deadline. I still recall with fright the moment I was handed that first reading list. Save for the meager forays into literature that a mediocre small-city school system required, I had vented my lust for reading on *Tom Swift*, *The Rover Boys*, the *Poppy Ott* stories, and tattered copies of *Captain Billy's Whiz Bang* passed surreptitiously among the boys in the Kneeland Avenue neighborhood.



Suddenly my very future lurked in the pages of these works I was supposed to read, absorb, and be prepared to be queried about only a few weeks hence: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*; Emerson's essay "Compensation"; Twain's *Is Shakespeare Dead?*; the six cantos of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (it was then that I began to realize how tiresome were some of the prescribed virtues if always practiced); Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur"; Kipling's *Kim*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*; and a couple of contemporary books on politics or public affairs whose titles I have forgotten. It was a list to challenge even the brightest of the dozen others who were to take the test, all of them with four years of college behind them. To me it was more like the trumpet of doom. Passing grade was to be 50, as determined by Tom Hutton's personal grading system, and anyone who failed would be invited to seek other employment as soon as a replacement could be found.

What tribulation those next few weeks piled on me. Preparing for final high school exams, scurrying to prove to Hutton and the newsroom's high command that I could hustle as effectively as the college graduates, staying up late to devour that daunting pile of works on Black Tom's list, I could see but one outcome: humiliation, a noble career nipped even before its budding, dismal retreat from the Valley of Opportunity.

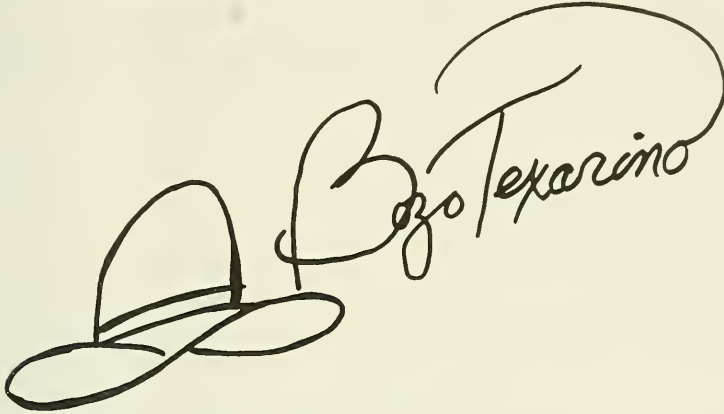
But weep not. The worst did not come to pass.

Hutton knew what he was doing, though we at the time did not. His reading list was conceived to find soft spots even in the best read of the college graduates. His merciless examination questions anticipated few if any passing grades. Provocation, stimulation, were his aim. He did not care, for example, whether we could extract a moral from Kipling's *Kim*, but cared instead what lesson Kipling's prose offered to a newsman. "Verbs, son, verbs!" he later thundered. "Read Kipling and you learn to use active verbs. Avoid the passive. Use the active whenever you can." Twain he thought (as did Hemingway) to be the greatest of all American writers, and also the best pricker of the pretentious and the pompous. Twain's uproarious downriver argument between the riverboat captain and his deckhand over whether Shakespeare or Bacon wrote the works of Shakespeare evidenced both these attributes in the work of Mr. Clemens, attributes to be cultivated if possible in an aspiring newsman.

Fortunately Hutton attached more importance to the second part of our ordeal than to the classroom exercise. Having failed miserably to deal with Hutton's questions about the books I had so hastily and in most instances superficially read, I plunged out into a gentle spring night to seek a newspaper story that might meet his test of being readable and somewhat plausible.

The streets were almost empty. The Strand and Star movie theaters had just let out and downtown Binghamton was going to sleep. A train whistle keened in the darkness. The sound made me think of my uncle John, oldest of my mother's four brothers. He was a trainman on the DL&W who usually wore clothes that gave off a smell of wheel oil and cinders that I found romantic; thinking of him made me think of the railroad stations a few blocks away. There were two of them, the Erie on one side of a wide gauntlet of tracks and the DL&W on the other. I made my way past the DL&W station house toward a dark tower a few yards beyond. A solitary switchman sat high above, smoking and waiting for the 10:12 from Scranton to approach. I shouted to him through an open window, asking if I could climb up. He welcomed the company, and when I told him I was the nephew of a fellow railwayman, John Brown, he said, "Why, John and I are old friends." Then he began recalling their times together during their first days on the railroad. I had found my feature story.

For half an hour the switchman spun railroading yarns; some of them were probably even true. I wrote assiduously into my treasured new possession, a slim stenographer's notebook purchased for fifteen cents from Hamlin's Drugstore. He told me for example of a man down El Paso or San Antonio way who drew on idling freight cars a large chalk-scrawled graffiti boldly proclaiming that Bozo Texarino had been there. The switchman said that hardly a day passed that he did not see Bozo Texarino's signature on a freight car or two passing through Binghamton. He pointed out two boxcars, one brick red, the other a dirty brindle, on a nearby siding and I climbed down to look. Bozo's signature, big and bold, looked something like this.



Bozo had been marking cars for years, the switchman assured me, and his signature could turn up anywhere in the country where two rails ran. For years thereafter I gazed at boxcars standing in freight yards in Long Island, Chicago, in Boston and Washington, as far away as Boise, Idaho, as close as Horseheads, New York, and I watched the flanks of trains slowly passing as I waited in my car at RR crossings all over the Eastern seaboard, to see whether Bozo Texarino was alive and announcing his exuberant presence to the outside world. A friend told me many years later that he had seen what he thought was Bozo Texarino's bold mark on cars in Seattle. I never met Bozo's signature again.

Was the old switchman pulling my leg? I hope not, for I tailored the anecdotes he told me into my first newspaper story. I did allow, though deep down in the story and grudgingly, that some of them may have been the imaginary travels of a stationary man. The piece was never published, of course, but it softened Tom Hutton's dismay at my seeming illiteracy. The switchman and Bozo Texarino: true friends in need. They had saved my job and gotten me promoted from copy boy to cub reporter. 🐉

