



SWIFT ENTERPRISES PRESENTS

Miss Illoquacia Trent's They Call Me 'Efficient'

By T. Edward Fox

Whether accompanied by the modifier “Super-” or “Ultra-” the plain fact is that Illoquacia Trent—always called Miss Trent at work—is exactly that. She is the super-, ultra-efficient glue that holds the front office of Tom Swift Sr. and Tom Swift Jr. together.

Her work has been her life and her life for more than two decades has been at Swift Enterprises.

She has worked tirelessly, often far beyond the call of her profession, to ensure the smooth running of *her* office as well as the administrative concerns of Enterprises.

Now, facing a health crisis, she must make the decision of whether to tell her employers and to fight it, or to find the very best person possible to take her place, leaving Enterprises and the Swifts without letting them know of her condition.

What ever is a secretary to do?

This book is dedicated to that marvelous cadre of strong individuals we call 'secretaries.' A good one means all the difference in the world. One hired for anything less that efficiency—you've see the type—can bring down any organization. If your ego feels that it must be massaged by a different title, such as “Executive Assistant,” then... what can I say. To me, SECRETARY on a name plate says a whole lot more!

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FOREWORD

If you ask me, there is no better thing for a company than to find than “that” secretary. The person—man or woman—who can take hold of the front desk, support the boss to the very best of their abilities, and to ensure than anything that might make a negative impact if mishandled is expertly taken care of. Invisibly.

I've worked for the two Toms for several years now and have seen the power of Miss Trent. She commands that desk outside of the Swifts' shared office with the skill of a 5-star general and the finesse of a ballerina.

To my shock and horror, Miss Trent came to me with what she termed, “A mild condition that I'd appreciate your help with, Greg.”

It turned out to be a life-changing occurrence for her. While her condition was not going to prove fatal, it was nonetheless a terrible blow to her both physically as well as emotionally.

I'll let her tell you in her own words, but her hand at the helm will be, and is, missed by everyone she interacted with.

Greg Simpson - “Doc”

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CHAPTER 1/**“I Pride Myself...”**

IF THERE is anything about me that you should know before commencing your little read, it is that I take great pride in the efficiency of my work. Given that I have not been blessed with the sort of looks or verbal skills that quickly attract men, I have had to take comfort in the fact that I am the best at what I do.

And, I must tell you that what I do is to completely run the working lives of two of the nicest and most intelligent men in this entire universe.

Well. I say ‘universe,’ but given that young Tom Swift—the son of my primary employer, Tom Swift Sr.—has been traveling out in space since he was barely eighteen years old, and that he and his father have been in contact with some terribly interesting aliens from... hmmm. I am not exactly certain where they might originate. Needless to say, they could be more intelligent than the two Tom Swifts.

I must amend my statement. I work for the two most intelligent men on this planet. That I know of. Or, rather, of which I know.

Now I find myself feeling the need to apologize for my grammar. It is my weak point. I dangle participles and split infinitives with the worst of them. That is one of the reasons I was so pleased to finally learn how to operate one of the computers that young Tom created.

He may call them ‘Little Idiots,’ but I call mine a little piece of research nirvana. It wasn’t always that way—

Oh, dear. How far have I digressed? Let me read back what I have typed.

Fine. I will not delete the above, but rather I will ask for you

to assume that everything from the end of the second paragraph has been an aside. Something you might normally read as a footnote.

My position with Swift Enterprises has been as the Executive Assistant and Senior Secretary first to Mr. Swift and these past few years in a lesser role to his son.

I sit at my desk most days, unless running the occasional errand around this giant facility for one or the other of my gentlemen. Everything has a place on my desk and side table and there is precisely the correct amount of space for everything. At a moment’s notice I can place my hand on anything.

Anything.

Be it a file, a phone number, a reference to any area of any project past and present here at Enterprises, or even a piece of scrap paper on which someone might jot down a note.

Anything.

I have taken just five sick days in the almost forty-eight hundred days of my employment. Three of those were to have a small operation on my heart last year. The other two are none of your business.

There is practically nothing that phases me regarding my work. There is the occasional individual who cannot get it into their heads that I must be referred to as Miss Trent. Never by the familiar. My sainted grandmother was the secretary to a Senator from the state of New Hampshire, the Honorable Jacob Harold Gallinger.

In all the years she served him, from his election to the U.S. Senate in 1890 and through his “retirement”—her genteel term for his having died while still in office—he only called her by her given name of Henrietta one time, and that was on the occurrence of her seventieth birthday and only then under the influence of alcohol.

As she told the story, she told him, "Thank you for your birthday wish, Senator, and I will remind you that it is Mrs. Andrews."

He never made the mistake again.

According to her, to be efficient and thought of as totally professional, it is imperative that formality be adhered to at all times.

At least, at work.

To my casual friends I have been generally called Illoquacia—a name my mother saddled me with in the mistaken belief that it meant "eloquent" in one or another foreign language. To continue. My best friends call me Gracie.

I have the dearest of friends. Most are, surprisingly, male. None are of the inclination toward marriage at this late date having all been previously betrothed and widowed before turning sixty.

I will not disclose to you my actual age. Suffice it to say that I am on the dignified side of fifty years, and well below the posted national speed limit on freeways circa 1970.

Oh, my. I just caught myself in a lie. No. Not the age thing. My name. Specifically, people who call me by my name.

The young doctor here at Enterprises, Greg Simpson, calls me Illoquacia. He is a very nice man and competent physician. I went to him before my operation to get his opinion. He told me:

"Illoquacia. You are known far and wide as being indispensable here at Enterprises. Of course, you must have the operation. They do the tests one day, operate the next and you go home the following morning. It's a piece of cake. Just ask Harlan Ames. He's had a couple stents installed and feels better now than he did for years."

Normally I would have corrected the good doctor regarding my name. The thing is, he is the sort of man, both handsome as well as professional, who I just can't speak up to. And so, I call him Greg and he calls me Illoquacia.

Everyone else calls him 'Doc,' a nickname first handed him by one of Tom Jr.'s good friends, Bud Barclay. Bud is always joking around and giving nicknames to the things invented here. I'm certain that at first Doctor Simpson bridled at the informality.

But, everyone started calling him 'Doc' and soon he figured out that it was a sign of affection and not a diminishing of his position.

Leave it to Bud Barclay to make the familiar the given thing.

I suppose that if he began calling me by my first name I would surrender and not correct him. He is, after all, a most handsome young man.

*Oh, to be once again young and fair
With silver ribbons in golden hair*

That is part of a favorite poem from my youth. Even an old woman such as myself is not immune to the charms of a young man such as our Mister Barclay. Handsome, athletic and very taken.

The lucky girl? None other than the daughter of Tom Sr. and younger sister of Tom Jr. Her name is Sandra and she sports the sort of beautiful blonde hair that a teenager has naturally and that more mature women spend small fortunes on in salons. Without achieving the same results.

Sometimes I envy her youth and beauty and attractiveness. Wait, I hear you say. *Aren't those last two redundant?*

Not in my mind. There are millions of very pretty young girls and women who are not the slightest bit attractive. Just look at the current crop of pop singers for evidence. Not a natural

bosom or fully developed brain between them. Cosmetically as perfect as possible—God help the men they marry who finally see them in the morning, *sans camouflage*—but with ugly personalities.

Sandy Swift is an absolute opposite to that. Very pretty, very bright and very much the interesting and fun person to be around.

Lucky Bud.

I have the feeling that someday she might just take this whole place over.

Well, back to my world and the world of reality.

I was born a Miss and have remained so all these... ah. I'm still not saying my age. I have remained the maiden although certainly not the untouched. In my earlier years I had a nice succession of beaux. Some were wonderful friends and some were my lovers.

No one male suitor lasted more than a single year. With some, I became listless and anxious to know more, see more and do more with my life. With others I was apparently the millstone in the relationship. Fortunately, and with few exceptions, I remained friends and correspondents with many of my male friends. Most found romance and lasting—or temporary—relationships with others and some of those fell off of my contact list.

Some are still among my dear friends today.

I have two habits that have been so much a part of my life since my teenage years that I cannot consider shaking them. The first is my love of fine malt whisky. Not some tatty old blended scotch but delicious single malts from Scotland. Even a few from Japan and Australia and one from an artisanal distiller on the opposite coast of these fine United States.

Each and every night except on the eve of my heart operation

and the following five evenings I have had a single drink. Always in a special glass designed to allow maximum olfactory enjoyment. Always a single portion.

The second of my habits is much newer to me but something I hold to be a deep source of enjoyment.

Chess. I play a mean game of chess and have been told by those who supposedly know that I should have gone professional. I can think of any of a hundred reasons why not.

I am not sure why I do so well. The thing is, I can see what the board will look like several possible moves further down the line and use that to avoid getting myself into trouble. Possibly, that is the secret to master and grand master level chess. Whatever. I find that there is great joy, comfort and satisfaction in lining up all those pieces and strategizing your battle.

Perhaps I should have been a military official?

I find chess almost as satisfactory as my job. I line up pieces, understand how they can and should be moved in any given situation, and then make sure that the proper actions are taken.

It is most satisfying, indeed.

CHAPTER 2/**“It Certainly Is *Not* On Your Schedule!”**

IN ALL of the years I have worked for the Swifts, the most difficult thing has been keeping everything on schedule. There have been times, I must admit, that I have yearned to have found employment in a slower-paced company and for a man—that would be Tom, Sr.—who’s attention isn’t the object of demand by so many other people.

I will assume that you have read any of the popular magazines and newspapers over the years, and that you are well versed with the business in which Swift Enterprises is engaged.

For the few who may have been forced into reading this without any foreknowledge, let me just say that my employer, and his son and this entire company, design and create most of the gizmos and thingamajigs that power, move and supply our nation. And, the world for that matter.

Many of Mr. Swift’s inventions have won wars, meant the safe creation and delivery of nuclear power, and even supported the early days of the Space Shuttle program.

His son, Tom, Jr., started out before he was even ten years old when he designed some sort of device that sent moving pictures from deep within the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific.

One day I hope you get the chance to hear about how he made it snow during a very dry Christmas. I don’t understand what that actually entailed, but that isn’t my job. My guess is that young Tom made snow out of some old garden hose and a bit of bailing wire. It wouldn’t surprise me in the least.

So, here at Swift Enterprises I keep both of my Swift men on track and on time and generally facing the correct direction. It

means keeping not just a single schedule, and not even two. I actually keep a full four schedules, constantly juggling and arranging and double-checking all of the comings and goings of Tom and Tom, plus the development schedule for everything happening at Enterprises, and finally the royal request log.

That is the schedule of all the requests from anyone inside our walls and also from people outside who wish to gain an audience with, or beg for the appearance of, one or both Swifts.

It isn’t actually called the royal request log, but the initials, RRL, are easier to explain that way than their actual meaning. Response Requisition Logistics.

In any given day I will receive nearly three-dozen items of mail directed to Mr. Swift—the senior one—plus another five dozen for Tom, Jr. On average, three of those actually make it off of my desk for each of them.

The sad part is that a majority of them are what the more cruel-minded individuals refer to as “begging letters.” Whether from legitimate individuals and organizations or from scam artists, most can be paraphrased by saying they state, “Since you make money hand over fist, I think that it is a good idea that you send me some of it. I’ll use it for a good purpose. Promise!”

Most are from the same sort of people who appear from the woodwork claiming to be a long-lost ‘relative’ whenever someone wins some money from a lottery. A few are organized criminal organizations that look legitimate until you dig into them a bit.

Some are requests from organizations such as the Red Cross and food banks from hard hit areas. As the Swift Enterprises Charitable Trust already gives millions of dollars to such groups, I merely refer them to our most recent gift and thank them for their hard work.

It doesn’t stop them from sending us something the next

time a tornado tears up a barn in Iowa—oh, gads! That sounds awful for me to say something like that. I apologize. Anyway, I often receive a more personal note from those groups after they receive my, “We have given” note. They are universally grateful. Most offer some note of apology for what a few have admitted to be “pestering.” A few explain the specific need they may have.

Those few make it into the letters that I give to Mr. Swift and to Tom.

Back to the RRL.

In a week’s worth of letters there will be at least two dozen requests for one or the other, or even for both, of my Toms to appear at some function. Graduation time is particularly trying as everyone seems to believe their request is the most important— “You must agree that Bob’s University of Cleveland is the preeminent school of its kind, and merits your appearance. We assume that you will waive any appearance fees...”

I personalize letters for all of these explaining that the nature of Swift Enterprises work precludes us from making any promises X months/weeks/years in advance and that we are certain they will want to engage another speaker who can commit as soon as possible.”

Now that email seems to be the vogue, the numbers have skyrocketed for all sorts of communications asking for Swift time.

Of course, at the top of the priority list are folks from both our U.S. Government as well as foreign governments. Next come politicians and then industries from around the world.

At the very bottom of the list are the people who claim to be a “great inventor such as yourself...” who just want to show us their latest “this will change the world as we know it” box of tricks.

Years ago Mr. Swift made a mistake of agreeing to see one such man who brought in a box of wires, tubes and dials and claimed that it was a machine that would one day replace the monaural and stereo radio. Of course, he didn’t have it working at that time and just needed a partner willing to put in a few million dollars, et cetera. Mr. Swift thanked him and said “No thank you,” but the man became angry.

Five years later when The Swift Construction Company began building a 4-channel radio receiver, the man sued Mr. Swift for “theft of patented invention.”

He didn’t have a patent or a leg to stand on, but it tainted Mr. Swift’s opinion of dealing with that sort of person, so they never get anything other than a “Not interested” letter.

I did a little study once a year ago and discovered that if Mr. Swift agreed to each and every appearance request, he would be busy just over one hundred eighty hours a week. I will give you a moment to pickup a calculator to compute that one.

Young Tom would be busy about ten fewer hours, but his time is becoming more and more sought after.

Among the most frustrating things I go through in my position begins with one of the Toms poking his head out of the door or their shared office and asking, “Can you just check to see if I have the time to...”

My answer is almost always that they do *not* have any time on their schedule for whatever it is.

Mr. Swift has this look he gives me when he is most determined that I make time for him. He nods once, looks down and then at his watch—pointedly—and then back at me, asking, “Is that for certain, Miss Trent?”

That’s when I know I have just been told to make time for him. Or, for some unannounced visitor.

Young Tom is less obvious with non-verbal clues but more

vocal about his insistence.

In the long run, this only occurs once or twice per week, especially with Tom, Jr. He is so busy with his constant series of inventions, space ships, submarines, robots and radio chats with a group of aliens none of us have ever seen.

He knows he can't take a lot of time out from those activities or everything would fall so far behind schedule.

One thing he did drop on me several months ago was a request to clear five whole days so that he could go on an undersea swim with his friend, Bud Barclay. They had crossed the entire Atlantic Ocean more than a year before using a new underwater suit that evidently makes air and possibly food out of nothing and goes like that absolute blazes.

Then, he suddenly wanted to do it all again, but this time taking along several remote controlled cameras attached to some sort of torpedo. All this so that he could help a young college student make a documentary program about Tom.

I tried. Oh, how I tried to talk him out of it. He had three important meetings during the days he wanted to be away. One was with the Prime Minister of England and another with a consortium of businessmen from Japan. The third was a one-day vacation day so that he could take his young lady to the beach over in New Jersey.

Somehow I knew that him missing the date was going to be the most difficult. I never told him, but the girl actually cried when I called her. I know she showed Tom nothing but a brave face, but she was quite hurt.

In the end, he had to postpone his video swimming trip by a week. And, his student friend was just fine with that. Tom had his date and met with his business and government contacts right on time.

And, Swift Enterprises came away with three major contracts that eventually meant more than fifty million dollars in profits

to the company.

Money that might have—and probably would have—gone elsewhere if Tom had done exactly what he wanted to do instead of being corralled by “Mean old Miss Trent!”

And, the fate of Tom and his lady? Let's just say they are still together and closer than ever.

Do you see how indispensable I am here?

CHAPTER 3/**My Desk—My Fortress**

THE UBIQUITOUS 'they' say that, "A messy desk is the sign of a messy mind."

Generally I discount anything attributed to 'they,' but this one instance hits home with me. With more than seventy secretaries spread throughout Swift Enterprises, it would be impossible for anyone to be in charge of all the support staff.

It would be impossible for me to operate at the level I do if I allowed my desk to become random and haphazard. Or, messy.

Even though I am not in charge of Enterprises' secretarial staff, I have been referred to as 'The Queen,' and do not mind that it is usually spoken in whispers and behind my back.

So, the way things run is that each manager is responsible for their own secretary. Not that I would want it any other way, but when I do get out and about, usually delivering contracts or other documentation that needs to remain as hard copy, I have noticed something that is both gratifying as well as bothersome.

The secretaries that seem to have everything in their little corner of the world fully contained and under control seem to always be the ones with the clean, neat desks and workspaces.

Unfortunately, the opposite is also generally true.

I did have a chat with Mr. Swift several years ago regarding this state of things, and he just chuckled and shook his head.

"Miss Trent. While it isn't practical to enforce any particular method of work on anyone here I am left wondering where we would all be if you were in charge of the world. Everything in its proper place, everything running smooth as can be. You are

an amazing woman. We're fortunate to have you at Enterprises and I freely admit that I would be lost without you!"

So, if I can't control the neatness of anyone else, at the very least I can take—and have taken—full control of both my desk and my entire office space.

Perhaps a small visual tour will help you. Although there is a beautiful, solid oak double-door that can be closed to the main hallway here in the Administration building, I choose to leave it permanently open.

Except, of course, when it is necessary to close it such as during fire alarm practices. Or, on the occasions where a foreign dignitary is visiting and our Chief of Security, Harlan Ames, dictates the closure as an extra security measure.

Other than that, even in the evenings when I go home, the doors are open.

Standing in that doorway if you look straight to the rear wall you see the floor-to-ceiling wooden door leading into the Swifts' shared office. It used to be just Tom, Sr., but now that his son, Tom, Jr. has been here for several years, he has a desk and area taking up about a quarter of the rather massive office.

I'm certain that Mr. Swift is glad of the company.

So, again, from the hall entrance, my desk sits at a forty-five degree angle to the door, and to your right. Between my desk and the front wall is a single chair I call the 'waiting chair.' Although there is a comfortable sofa directly across my office from the desk, I prefer to have single visitors use the chair. It keeps them from being able to look into the larger office in case the door is left ajar.

Ditto, it prevents them from hearing anything. The location of that chair was carefully chosen.

The walls are all painted in a light, pleasing blue, and the only thing on the wall is a reproduction of Renoir's *Near The*

Lake, something I take solace in seeing whenever I look up.

To the left and right of Mr. Swift's door are my file cabinets. Large, oak and totally lockable, they are the resting places for thousands of documents, patent applications, correspondence and other important papers.

I can locate anything in those cabinets within one minute. It is something I have guaranteed Mr. Swift and his son, and I have never come up wanting when challenged.

There are a few lower cabinets in my space, including one that hides a small refrigerator in which I keep fresh milk and cream for coffee, fresh roasted coffee beans—in a sealed container, of course—that can be ground as needed, and a few snacks known to be favorites of both the Swifts as well as their senior executives.

Anything else can be obtained from our very well stocked canteen.

I also keep a complete medical emergency kit in one entire drawer. That includes the defibrillator our Doctor Simpson obtained for us following an unfortunate visit by a Spanish business group. One of their members had a heart attack as he left their meeting with Mr. Swift.

Doctor Simpson got there as fast as he could, but it was too late. From that point on, he insisted that each and every building and floor have its own 'shock box' as he called them.

In all, my space is about twenty feet wide and sixteen feet from front doors to the wall I share with the Swift office. There is a lot of clear space that I keep just that way.

There is one potted plant in the front corner next to the sofa. For a few years it was a lovely Benjamin Ficus. Then, with some very careful lack of attention from me, it became a slightly brown ficus, followed by a withering ficus, and finally followed by a beautiful silk imitation Benjamin Ficus.

Recently, I did pick up a small ornamental—silk—miniature fig tree for my desk. It, like the ficus, requires only weekly dusting.

I find that both the plants and I do best when watering is not necessary.

The entire office is kept exactly as I want it, but my pride is my desk. It is wide and deep and solid. It is made from mahogany that was left its natural color but coated in a protective shellac. It lives and breathes and retains the heat from my arms if I rest them on its surface.

It is my work place and it is my fortress.

From behind this desk I track and shape the way things happen in the upper echelons of Swift Enterprises.

From behind its comforting solidity, I have command of who and what gets past me and into the inner sanctum.

I always have a little laugh when watching particularly cheesy western movies when the landowner exclaims that the robber baron will get his way, "when they pry this homestead from my dead, lifeless hands!"

That is precisely the way I feel about my desk and my position here at Swift Enterprises.

Several months ago Mr. Swift called me into the office and asked me to have a seat across his desk from him. He had a very serious look on his face as he asked me if everything was to my satisfaction.

"Well, yes it is. Why might I inquire are you asking?"

"I come through your office out there every day, sometimes a dozen or more times. Now, I have no complaints, it is just that it always looks like someone has come in and stolen something. You have all that space and only the very edges have furniture or cabinets against them. Would you like to have some money

to redecorate it?"

I had to laugh at the suggestion.

To answer his quizzical look at me, I said, "Mr. Swift. I keep the outer office just the way I like it. I don't want to make waves, and I will certainly redecorate it if you insist that I do, but it really is what I want it to be."

"But, it is so imposing and organized," he said.

"And that," I informed him using a tone of voice I borrowed from an old third grade teacher of mine, "is precisely why I keep it like that! I don't want people coming in and seeing something that makes them all relaxed and informal. I *want* them to feel a little overwhelmed before they go into your office. It's the same psychology some people use by having their chair a few inches higher than the one their visitor sits in."

"There's a lot more to you than meets the eye, isn't there, Miss Trent?"

"Yes, Mr. Swift, there is! However, I suppose that my eventual replacement might take you up on your kind offer."

"Miss Trent. I have the suspicion that when I am marched out of here with a gold watch and to the tune of 'Don't You Come Back, You Rascal,' that you will still be manning, or ladying, your seat outside these doors."

"I'd like to think so, Mr. Swift. I really would."

CHAPTER 4/

It Really Doesn't Hurt That Much

I SUPPOSE that the trouble began several years ago. I had reached my... let us just say that it was a milestone birthday and leave it at that. My habit had been to walk the two flights of stairs from the lobby of our administration building to where I keep my office.

That goes for my getting from building to building. I walk even when the weather is inclement. The only times I have been known to drive is if I am called upon to travel outside of the confines of Swift Enterprises on an errand. Well, that and I drive to and from work. It isn't the five miles, mind you. It is the lost time.

Anyway, Mr. Swift asked me to take a batch of signed contracts to the Legal department one afternoon several months ago. I gathered everything together and headed down the hall to the stairwell.

By the time I reached the bottom I was panting and felt small beads of perspiration forming on my forehead. Leaning against the wall, I felt my face and then put one hand under my arm. I have found that I can tell with fair accuracy what sort of temperature I am running by that method.

I felt as normal as usual, but the perspiration was coming a bit faster. Taking out my handkerchief I dabbed my face and neck and soon felt fine.

When I returned to the administration building I started to take the stairs and then thought better of it. I arrived at my floor in the elevator where I came face-to-face with Tom Jr. and his friend Bud.

"Hey, Miss Trent," they chorused, both with wide grins on their faces.

“And, hello back to you both,” I responded.

They stepped aside to let me pass, but as I did Tom inquired, “Are you feeling okay, Miss Trent? You look a little, um, pale.”

I thanked him for his concern, told him it was just a little cold or something, and returned to my desk. Pulling out a small mirror I keep in my top desk drawer, I checked my face. As Tom had said, I was pale.

Any paleness or flushing or embarrassment that comes to my face is very visible as I use only a minimal amount of makeup. Oh, how I dread seeing some of my female friends; the ones that have resorted to multiple layers of cover-this and hide-that and conceal-everything. Not a square millimeter of skin is left to be seen from collar to hairline.

Just as an aside. I allowed a young woman to provide me with a free makeover in one of the department stores down in Manhattan a few years ago. It was the most excruciating thirty minutes of my life sitting there as she wiped and daubed and slathered and rubbed first one liquid and then another into my face.

By the time she had completed her work I believed that I knew what a wall covered in graffiti must feel like.

I know I hated the heaviness of everything. And, when I looked into her little, round mirror I was appalled. Appalled and aghast. And, suffering not little amount of anguish!

The troweled-smooth creature I saw before me was hideous. I wasn't there, just all of the goop and gunk and the ridiculous bright blue eye shadow she had thought might suit me. Ugh!

Back to more recent times.

I felt better at the end of the day but opted to take the elevator once again. At home, I poured myself my little drink, filled the bathtub with nicely warm water and climbed in. I was so relaxed by the end of the bath that I crawled into bed,

without having any dinner, and fell fast asleep.

3:00 a.m. came and I sat bolt upright.

I had gone to bed before 7:00? I had not eaten? This wasn't the Illoquacia Trent I knew. Not by a long shot. Something, I decided, was really wrong. I got up, fixed myself a cup of strong coffee and scrambled eggs on toast, and sat thinking until it was time to get ready for work.

By the time I arrived at my desk—promptly at 7:55—I had resolved to ignore it.

It took another several weeks of little aches, pains and some coughing for me to give the company doctor a call. He is a lovely young man and I have come to trust his opinion.

It required a small amount of juggling of his schedule as well as mine to find a mutually acceptable time that afternoon, but we met in his office at 3:45.

“So, what's been going on, Illoquacia,” he inquired.

“I think by now you should be calling me Gracie. It is less formal.” I did tell you that I liked him. I was happy to have him call me by my nickname.

I described the stairs and my perspiration and the evening events to him. He took notes using an old-fashioned pad and pen, not one of those little computer gadgets. He asked a few more questions and then ushered me down the hall to one of the examination rooms.

“Hope you don't mind, but I have the feeling I need to wiggle you around a bit and press on a few glands. I'll step out and you can change. See you in about three minutes.”

With that, he left me alone to divest myself of my outerwear and wrap myself into an examination gown. Our Doctor Simpson knows that a few of us remember the old days when such 'gowns' were made of cloth and kept hidden those things

that should not be viewed by others. My current garment was light blue with a variety of large and small dogs on it.

The more personal exam will go undescribed. I am no prude, but I refuse to go into personal details. Suffice to say that he remained fairly vague in his responses until he took a good listen to my lungs.

Following the standard, "Take a deep breath and hold it... exhale, and again..." his hand and stethoscope head stopped and remained over my right shoulder blade for more time than I felt was standard.

Greg came around to face me. "I'm hearing some congestion sounds in there in the back of your lung that I'm not hearing much of anywhere else. We're going to need to get an x-ray to see if it is anything to investigate. It could be a small infection. We'll know more in half an hour."

"But, I've got to get back in time for Mr. Swift's 4:45 meeting with the Atomic Energy Commission. Can we do this tomorrow, please?"

The look in his eyes told me that it couldn't.

"Don't worry. I'll call him and explain that I'm keeping you after class. Okay?"

"I wish you wouldn't. I didn't tell him I was coming to see you. I haven't told him I was feeling a little poorly," I explained. I took out the cell phone I had been given, and refused to use except in emergencies, and called Mr. Swift's personal number. After two rings, he answered it.

"I'm stuck on my errand, Mr. Swift. Can you manage the meeting without me?"

He chuckled and assured me that it would be fine.

The x-ray, now that they are done electronically and not on the old style film, took just moments to shoot and view. By the

time it was ready, I was back in my clothes and sitting in Greg's office sipping a cup of tea.

"The bad news is that it isn't a simple infection, Gracie," he began sitting opposite me. "In fact, I'm pretty sure that it is a tumor. What we don't know—" he said hastily, holding up a hand to keep me from asking the inevitable, "—is what type it is. Whether it is benign or not."

Almost choking on my own words, I squeaked out, "What do you know? What if it's cancer?"

Greg took my hand. "You need to understand that cancer is just a malformation of cells. It isn't some strange thing from outer space that invades us. It is our own cells, just gone a bit haywire."

We talked more about different types of cancer. That terrifying word that can mean anything from "a small, easily removed lump" all the way to being a death sentence.

"What I'm seeing is pretty small. It's just surrounded with fluid. We're going to have to get you to Shopton General for some more tests and slide you in and out of big machines that I don't have here before we know what we might be dealing with. Chances are you are going to require radiation therapy and perhaps chemotherapy. We've caught this in what looks to be the early stages so there may be no need to operate.

"But, it doesn't really hurt. I barely feel anything. Just a little tightness when I inhale too deep," I argued.

He nodded and smiled at me. "Best time to get a handle on it. Now, can I call your boss and tell him?"

I shook my head. "I've got some vacation time coming that he had been pestering me to take. I'll arrange for a couple weeks off starting Monday. Will that do?"

He looked deep into my eyes and told me, "It will be a good start."

CHAPTER 5/**Impending ~~Doom~~ Retirement**

UNDER NO circumstances will I ever again suggest keeping information regarding your health from your employers. My belief was that my business is my business and that goes for my health as well. That all changed soon after my visits to Doctor Simpson's office. It took less than three days from my initial exam before I overheard a rumor in the cafeteria.

It was in no way malicious; the reporter was concerned about me. She had seen me go into the dispensary twice in two days, something I absolutely have never done before.

"I hope she isn't sick. I don't think she's ever taken a sick day off. Ever," she told a group of three other women. They all seemed to be concerned. Then, one of them turned and saw me.

You would think that a group of women, gossiping as it were, would immediately disperse and everyone would attempt to avoid the subject individual. Not these fine women. As one they came toward me, their eyes showing nothing more than care and questions.

I have never been a person given to emotional outbreaks. In my position, that is a liberty that cannot be afforded at any time.

My first thoughts were to rebuff the group—to deny as an outlandish suggestion what they were surmising. But, as I sat with them at a table near one corner of the large room, I was moved by their sincerity and outpouring of support.

Within minutes we had, as a group—no, as a team bent on beating the opposition—decided that I should ask for one of them, Millie Roberts, to be transferred to take care of the office Swift for the duration of my medical leave.

Millie is well known as being just a notch below me as far as taking complete command of an office goes. Her only fault was that she can be gently bullied by a boss, even when circumstances call for her to stand firm.

I have a world of respect for her and was soon 'talked into it' by these wonderful friends and working compatriots. Millie had already given her notice to George Dilling, the Chief of Communications. After working for the man she dearly loved for five years, her daughter had asked her to move down to Florida to help with a new set of triplets due in five months.

"I can just have George tell Personnel to keep me on. My kid can do without mama until after the brood is born. By that time, you'll be back in the saddle!"

And so, offhand remarks became a set of battle plans. I would submit to the medical ministrations of Greg Simpson and whatever specialists he referred me to. They would take out or put in whatever was necessary to get the tumor to go away.

And my ladies, my friends and support group, would be there to take care of me until I could manage on my own.

"Are you all sure you want to take me on?" I asked them, point blank. "If this is cancer, and especially if they have to operate to get the tumor out, I'm in for a fairly long road back to good health. Are you all truly certain that this team approach can hold us together?"

I was surrounded by a group of women doing impressions of bobble-head dolls. Every one of them was grinning and nodding.

I let loose and began to cry. Ten minutes later and with dry ducts, I hugged each one and kissed them on the cheek. "I swear that once I'm back that I'll be the first one to come to the aid of any of you that need me!"

And, as painful as it had been to open up and allow these fine

women into my very personal life, it was doubly difficult to tell both of my Mr. Swifts.

To begin with, I knew that I truly needed to speak with both of them at the same time. It was only by dint of my excellent and efficient schedule keeping and juggling skills that I managed to find a time five days later. At the very least, it gave me the weekend to prepare for what I needed to tell them.

I spent Friday evening sitting in front of the computer Enterprises had provided for my use; the computer that had initially gathered more dust than key clicks in the first two years it had been sitting on my desk. Once I learned how to use the thing, I became its nightly slave.

My intent was to write down the speech I would give to the Swifts on Monday. That evening I wrote the equivalent of more than thirty pages. After reading through the many versions of my thoughts and heavily editing them, I found myself no closer by midnight than I had been when I opened my front door at six.

Saturday was little better. I erased the file I had begun on Friday and started anew. For most of the day I would write a few sentences or even paragraphs, walk around for a little bit and then read what I had typed.

Nothing made sense. Nothing flowed out that was coherent or even totally factual. It was all emotional drivel. Oh, my god, how horrible it was to sit there reading the blubbing thoughts of a woman who was feeling very sorry for herself.

Several times I actually felt nauseous reading about how hard this woman had worked to get where she was today and how her work was her everything and how she just couldn't leave her bosses in the lurch for something that might be nothing.

By Sunday afternoon I resorted to drinking in the hope and belief that a relaxed Illoquacia Trent might be a more natural

writer. Boy, was I wrong!

Sitting at the desk after three neat whiskies I stared in disbelief at the words that had managed to escape from my obviously addled brain, down my arms and out my fingers. I looked at those fingers. Traitors! They had recorded phrases like, "I've given my all to this job..." and "You've never seen me in such a state, but..."

No closer to having anything on paper, I returned to work and to my desk and my realm on Monday morning at precisely 7:55 a.m. I was resolved to maintain my efficient exterior until I actually had something solid by way of medical tests and results before I would spring my condition on Mr. Swift.

I needn't have bothered with the whole weekend.

I heard his footsteps coming down the hallway even before he turned the corner. You get so that you recognize these sorts of things after being with someone for many, many years. I can close my eyes and pick him out in a small crowd from just the sound of his breathing and from the way he smells.

Well, he walked around the corner into my outer office and stopped. Setting his briefcase down on the floor in front of my desk—he knows how I dislike having anything just plopped onto the desk I so carefully keep arranged—he came around to my side and reached out. Automatically, I took his offered hand and quickly found myself being gently pulled up from my chair.

"I know you as well as I know my wife and realize that this is taking a liberty that you have never offered, but I am going to address you as Gracie right now. Okay?"

All I could do was look into his grey eyes and nod.

"Well then, Gracie. I want you to come into the office with me and we will have a nice cup of coffee and wait for Tom to get here. I can see that you have something to tell us—"

"It's just that I—"

He shushed me and opened the door to his large office. Motioning me to one of the large, overstuffed chairs he and young Tom keep in there around a low conference table, he walked over to the coffee pot I had filled and placed there a few minutes before his arrival and brought me a cup.

“Black with one sugar if I recall correctly,” he said handing me the cup. “Sorry that I can’t offer you a single malt.” His grin told me that he was both teasing me and also serious.

I was astounded. It had never occurred to me that he might know what I drank for pleasure or how I liked my coffee.

We sat there sipping the delightful, hot brew for about five minutes before we both heard Tom opening the door.

He had closed the door and turned toward his desk before spotting us. Providing me with my second moment of amazement in just ten minutes, he set his computer bag down, crossed over to us and quietly sat in one of the other chairs.

“I would guess this is rather serious,” he stated nodding in my direction. “Is everything alright?”

I broke down. Everything came tumbling out. I was both relieved as it all was revealed as well as being a little angry with myself and my total lack of control.

As I wound down, young Tom moved from his chair over to sit right next to me. He gently took my hand and held it. The three of us sat in silence for, well, I’m not certain how long it was. Perhaps ten minutes... perhaps an hour.

Finally, Mr. Swift got up and refreshed both our cups. As he was handing me mine he said, “It goes without saying that we are behind you one hundred percent. We only care about you getting the best medical attention possible. You’re not to even think about the work here until you are better. Then, if you want to come back, you’ll be welcome with open arms and love.”

Young Tom nodded his agreement, then asked, “Does Doc know exactly what’s going on?”

I had to admit that I still needed to undergo some tests to see what my actual status was. “I felt that I should know everything before I bothered you two, but it all just came out. I’m sorry.”

Their chorus of “Nonsense,” and “Don’t be silly,” did not hit deaf ears. I immediately teared up again.

Finally came the question I was dreading. “Do you think that you are going to retire?” Tom asked me. While I’m sure that his father would have been slightly less direct, I could hear the concern in his voice.

“I’m not sure,” is all I could tell him. “It does seem that getting away from stress and tension is what they say is best for the patient. I just don’t know.”

But, I did. I think we all knew.

We talked for another half hour before a call from Doctor Simpson came through for me. I excused myself and went back to my desk to take it.

“I have you all set up for a day of tests tomorrow,” Doctor Simpson informed me when we spoke a few minutes later. “No arguments. I’ll drop by your house at eight and will be with you the entire time.”

“Unless they ask me to disrobe,” I informed him.

“Miss Trent. I am a doctor and I’ve seen... no. You’re right. When you disrobe I’ll step out of the room.”

CHAPTER 6/**Passing The Baton**

I HAVE BEEN working for the Swift organization for the past eighteen years of my life. First, at the old Swift Construction Company when Tom Swift Sr. was in charge of that company, and now I have been at Swift Enterprises since day one.

And, by this time tomorrow I will be a memory.

The tests went well and they found a cancerous tumor in my right lung. It was positioned in such a way that it was attached to what they called my right upper lobe main stem bronchus. At least that's what they wrote down for me when I asked the Oncologist who came in to talk to me about the diagnosis and treatment options.

I was glad that Doctor Simpson was sitting beside me during all of that. He would be my memory and would help me understand what all of the big words and strange concepts meant.

There were two pieces of good news.

The first was that the tumor was small and appeared to be fully contained. The Oncologist explained that he believed that an expedited operation would be able to get it all out with minimal surrounding tissue damage.

The second thing was that he was certain the operation, one that he was performing clinical trials on, could be managed by going down my throat and into the upper part of the lung. I would have no incision in my chest and not scaring.

The negative side of it was that about fifty percent of the patients who underwent this type of Bronchial Access Tumorectomy suffered some partial to total loss of their voice for up to a full year.

"Any for much longer than that?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"One. A much older woman who did not take care of herself post operation. Got an infection and went totally mute. That is not a probability here." He looked at me, knowingly.

"When do we need to operate?" I asked.

"I'd love to do this on Friday," he told me. "The sooner the better. It will take just about two hours, so assuming that we get you asleep and in the O.R by around nine, you will be back out of recovery and in your room before one in the afternoon."

Doctor Simpson added, "They'll be able to go back in without added anesthesia late in the afternoon to make sure you are all sealed up, let you eat solid foods on Saturday and Sunday, and then you should be able to go home on Monday, as I understand it." He looked at Doctor Brett who nodded his concurrence.

"We'll give you a week after that to heal and then start a six week round of localized radiation therapy. We now have machines that create a personalized cradle you lay your back and shoulder into, give you a few tiny black dot tattoos to help us position everything perfectly each time, and then you come back every day for about ten minutes of therapy."

In all of that, all that made it into my mind was the word "tattoos."

"Are they washable?" I asked.

"No, but they are not noticeable from about three feet away. We're talking tiny dots. Smaller than a pencil dot."

I looked at Doctor Simpson for support. He smiled at me.

"This is going to be a piece of cake, Gracie," he told me. "And, that new radiation therapy is amazing. You probably won't feel anything other than a little light tiredness or soreness. The

people I've seen at Enterprises who've gone through it just get a little sun tan or burn by the end of everything."

I asked him about Enterprises people who have needed radiation. "I've not heard of anyone going through this sort of thing," I told him.

"No, not like this but we have more than a dozen women who are breast cancer survivors and at least five of them have had this newer therapy. The most recent one is Millie Roberts and I'm sure she won't mind me telling you that." He named a few others and I was shocked to find out that all of the ladies who had agreed to be my support were on that list.

"How sick with the chemotherapy make me?"

Doctor Brett looked at me. "I thought you understood. You won't need any. Everything we know about this type of cancer and this operation, especially at this early stage, says that chemo is counterproductive. Just radiation, checkups every six months and some once per day medications for five years or so should do it!"

The next morning I made a few phone calls. Five minutes later, Millie came down the hall. As she stood there I just looked at her. "You know?" she asked.

I nodded. "Only as of yesterday. Am I just out of the loop or did you keep this a deep secret?"

"Well," she smiled at me and sat in the 'waiting' chair next to my desk, "I didn't make a big thing of it. It was a little tumor that I caught one day. Went to the doctor a couple days after that and had a biopsy the following week. Three weeks of tests and scheduling and it came out on a Thursday. I was back at work on Monday. That was three years ago and I'm healthy and free, so there's never been much to say."

How could I have not known? I am, in effect, the queen bee of secretaries here at Enterprises. My efficiency is renown. So, how could something as important as this—both to these

women and their families—have slipped through without my noticing?"

I asked Millie if she was bothered by this.

"Actually, Gracie," she confided, "If this had been more dire, if the prognosis had been fatal, then I would have run up and down the hallways wailing at the top of my lungs. As it turned out, it was only slightly more serious that having an appendectomy. So, nothing to shout about. Don't worry if you missed it. Most people did. In fact, the only reason Alice Bonham figured it out was she saw one of the little tattoo dots on my chest when I wore something a low cut. That was when she pulled down her collar a little and showed me some of hers."

She laughed lightly at the memory. Suddenly, and with that little anecdote and her laugh, a weight that had been building up on me was lifted. I laughed with her.

"Pretty soon, you'll be one of the 'too sisters, as we call ourselves. Survivors badge of honor."

She had already arranged to begin taking over for me that same day so we sat at the desk while I went over many of the little details that are specific to working with the big guns at Enterprises.

She caught on quickly and by Thursday afternoon I felt confident that she would do just fine.

Mr. Swift and Tom had arranged a nice party for me. Enterprises executive chef, Charles Winkler, provided trays of hors d'oeuvres as well as an array of pastries—including my weakness, chocolate ganache-filed philo pastry pillows.

More than a hundred fellow employees and friends attended. It was quite a send-off and I was even coerced into giving a little speech.

I had many, many people to thank. Chief among them were

the two Tom Swifts, Senior and Junior. I allowed them a moment of rebuttal each to counter my praises of them and their management styles. They were gracious.

Finally, I asked Millie to come up to the front.

“I want you to take a look at this wonderful woman,” I told the assembled crowd. “With eyes mostly open, she is stepping into the minefield of trying to keep these two men pointed in the right direction and on time. I hope that all of you give her your full support. If not, I can be back here in a few days, and *you wouldn't want that!*”

The group all laughed. It felt nice. It felt warm.

Not quite as warm as the heated blanket they just draped over me on this gurney. I've been waiting here in the operating room for about ten minutes. I've been poked a couple times and given things that make me a little loopy.

Also, I have at least two I.V. tubes dripping into my left arm. I can see the surgeon in the next room as he scrubs his arms with that orange-colored soap.

This isn't at all like they show on television. Instead of dark corners and machines with colorful dials, this room is bright. I can't see any of the machines but I have been listening to some music they have playing.

A nurse asked me what sort of music I preferred so I told her, “Classical, I suppose. No. Wait. I want something a little more sprightly. How about some jazz?”

She nodded and put on some jazz quartet music. It is soothing as well as invigorating.

“Hello, Ms. Trent,” a nice young man greeted me. “Can I have your birth date, please?” he asked as he looked at a clipboard. He is, I believe, the tenth person to ask me that this morning. I told him, mentally cringing at the year of my birth.

“Oh,” he said in some surprise. “I'd have thought you were at least ten years younger than that!”

Bless him, but as I said, he was a *young* man.

“I'm going to give you one more shot through the I.V. line. It will put you to sleep faster than you can count from one to ten.”

I looked into his young face. He must have detected my disbelief.

“If you don't believe me, let's have a little race. Get ready... set...”

He pushed the syringe needle into the I.V. line and began depressing the plunger.

“Go!”

“One, twooo, thrrrrrr.....” and that was it for me.

According to the clock that was about four hours ago. I've been awake for almost two of those just laying here, thinking. Thinking about my life, my job, my past and my future.

As I said before...

I have been working for the Swift organization for the past eighteen years of my life. First, at the old Swift Construction Company when Tom Swift Sr. was in charge of that company, and now I have been at Swift Enterprises since day one.

And, my cancer is now, hopefully, a memory.

By this time next Monday, I will be back at my house, recovering with the assistance of some wonderful women. I will be a survivor, just like they are.

Six weeks later I will be finished with my therapy.

Two weeks after that I will return from a vacation I just booked to Hawaii.

That next Monday I will come back to Enterprises. It may be to recommence my career as an efficient secretary and it might be as a visitor.

I'll make up my mind when I get to that point.

And, not before.