

**GUARANTEED—
FOREVER!**

By Frank M. Robinson

Manning had spent his life exposing mail order frauds. But Forsythe's outfit topped them all. Its products were too good to exist—yet!

Clark Street, just north of Chicago's Loop, was the symbol of a million things, all of them bad, Manning thought. Bumpy paving bricks rutted with street car tracks and bordered on both sides by cheap saloons and quarter-a-night flop houses. Hot summer nights when the drunks clustered like flies on the sidewalks and Newberry Park was crowded with cranks trying to save the world and floozies just trying to make a living in it. Old magazine stores where a nickle bought a copy of an old comic magazine and a five spot bought photographs guaranteed to make a high school kid's eyes pop out.

Clark Street, where a thousand and one manufacturing gyp artists had office space.

He slowed the car and went through the motions of parking. He jockeyed it in towards the curb. There was a scraping sound, and he cut the motor.

"You ought to watch it, Fred," Wheeler said. "You scraped the paint."

"It's just a scratch," Manning said quietly. "Just the fender."

"You scrape a fender on these models," Wheeler said doggedly, "and you have to get a whole new paint job. It costs money."

Manning looked coldly at the fat man sitting next to him.

"The government's got money; it can afford it."

The fat man shrugged and changed the subject. "How did the biopsy come out?"

"I don't know." Somewhere deep inside Manning a dozen tiny hands plucked a pain nerve. "The doctor will send me a report in a couple of days." The doctor had already told him that morning but he didn't want Wheeler to know. "Let's forget it. Who's on the list this time?"

Wheeler pulled a crumpled newspaper ad out of his pocket. "The Forsythe Company. They make carburetors."

Manning leaned back in the seat and stared a long time at the faded store fronts that lined the street. He was only half listening to Wheeler. Malignancy, the doctor had said. He knew what that meant. Curtains. Humpty Dumpty was splashed all over the pavement and all the high voltage x-ray machines and all the little isotope capsules from the AEC weren't going to help a bit.

He forced the thought into the back of his mind and locked and barred the mental door.

"What's the sales pitch?"

"A hundred miles to the gallon."

"That's rather high. Most of them are content with fifty."

Wheeler grunted. "That's not all. This guy doesn't use gas. He gets a hundred to a gallon of water."

"What's he pricing it at?"

"About the usual range. Three forty-nine."

Manning frowned. "Let me see that."

The fat man handed it over and Manning ran his eyes down the ad. It was the usual ad, complete with the enthusiastic testimonials signed by "A. Z." of Salt Lake City and "Mrs. D. F." of Podunk Corners. After running end around all the glowing adjectives in the body of the ad, you got the idea you could get a hundred miles from a gallon of ordinary tap water when you used the Forsythe Carburetor.

The trade name was bad, of course. Simply, the "Forsythe Carburetor." Not the "Jiffy" or the "E-Z" or the "Little Marvel." But the price was right in there. Three forty-nine, with a double-your-money-back guarantee if not absolutely satisfied. The typical gyp ad. Something that promised a hell of a lot in the way of savings and mileage with a low enough price so the suckers would be willing to risk it.

"Let's go." Manning got out of the car, on the street side because of the high curb, and glanced at the numbers on the buildings. A few doors down, on the other side.

The building was a three story brick, and old. The office of Forsythe Carburetor Company was one flight up, at the end of a hallway where the wooden flooring creaked and groaned and threatened to give way at any moment. The lettering on the door was neat and precise; there was no buzzer. Manning knocked, an authoritative type of knock.

The man who opened the door was in his early sixties, Manning judged. Maybe a little more, maybe a little less. A big man, with thick shoulders and a head of black hair that was just turning to white and a friendly face with just

enough lines in it to show it had been around. You got the idea that being a pitchman was second nature, that he had been in the sales racket for a long time.

"Mind if we go in?"

The big man shrugged easily. "Sure, come on in. Didn't think any customers would call personally."

Once inside, Manning gave him a cold, official stare. "You Forsythe?"

The man nodded, frowning. "Something wrong?"

The innocent act, Manning thought. There's nobody here but us chickens, boss. He flipped open his suit coat so the badge showed. "We're from the Federal Fraud Investigating Agency, Mr. Forsythe."

He let it hang there. The usual response was a whitening of the face, a frightened look, and then a request for credentials. Wheeler was already reaching into his pocket for a sheaf of them; FFIA men had to carry enough credentials to sink a battleship. But Forsythe didn't whiten, didn't look frightened, and didn't ask for proof that they really represented the FFIA.

"I don't understand, Mister...?"

"Manning." He made himself comfortable in a chair by the desk and glanced around. It wasn't an impressive layout. Actually little more than a mailing room. Packages stacked up against the rear wall, ready for mailing, a wrapping table, and a Pitney-Bowes machine. Crude, almost too crude.

"How long have you been in the racket, Forsythe?"

Forsythe leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head. "You might say I've been a huckster all my life, Mr. Manning."

Life-long pitchman, Manning figured coldly. Helped the medicine man when he was a youngster and ran away with a carnival when he was in his teens. During the Depression he probably had a set-up on a street corner selling spot remover, dealt in nylons during the war, and saved enough to branch out in a big way after the war was over.

"Look, Forsythe, I don't know who put you on to this racket or whether you're fronting for somebody else or not, but it's no go. Somebody complains and then we have to crack down on you. We call it fraudulent use of the mails, con games, or what have you. And an incident under any one of them will get you ten to twenty at the local state penitentiary."

Forsythe didn't look at all worried.

"Have there been any complaints?"

Wheeler was standing by the door, carefully snipping the end off of a cigar. He said, "Not yet. But we like to stop trouble before it starts. And it costs good money to investigate, to run tests. We do the public a favor by warning you off the market, and we do you a favor by saving you a stretch in the little brick house by the river."

"There won't be any trouble," Forsythe said with an earnestness that seemed oddly out of place. "Actually the

carburetor will give you closer to two hundred miles to the gallon."

"On pure H two O, eh?"

Forsythe nodded cheerfully. "That's right. It's actually H sixteen O eight, by the way."

Manning felt a vein throb over his right temple. You try to do them a favor and that's what you got. Wise guys. The whole world was full of wise guys. All of them wanted to make a million overnight and they didn't care how they did it. And all of them thought they could get away with it. Okay, so Forsythe would have to learn the hard way. He stood up.

"You take cash or check, Forsythe?"

"What for?"

"For a carburetor." Manning paused, "The government will test it and the government will be the complainant. And I wouldn't advise packing up and leaving if I were you. We've got ways of finding you."

Forsythe pursed his lips. "What kind of a car do you have?"

"Ford," Wheeler said slowly. "A fifty-three model."

Forsythe picked a package off the stack in the rear and made out a receipt for the check. "You won't complain. You'll get close to a hundred and ninety-five."

Wise, Manning thought again, bitterly. He picked up the package. "See you around, Forsythe. Soon."

Outside, Manning shot a glance back at the building and the neat lettering on the second floor window. "I think we ought to test that carburetor ourselves. And I think we ought to check up on our friend Forsythe."

Wheeler looked surprised. "Why so eager? The Bureau will test it."

Manning started the car. "It'll take six months for the Bureau to get around to it. And in the meantime, our wise friend will be making hay while the sun shines."

Wheeler laughed. "Hell, he'll be lucky if he makes his rent. Didn't seem like a bad guy, though."

Manning's hands tightened on the wheel. "He's a huckster, Ray. A cheap, grafting little huckster who's too damn big for his britches. And I'm going to see that he gets exactly what he deserves."

Wheeler looked worried. "Don't ever get too personal about it, Fred. You gotta have an objective viewpoint all the time."

Maybe he was making too much of it, Manning thought coldly. But when everything else went to pot you liked to ... bury yourself in your work.

"More coffee, Fred?"

"Yeah. Cream and sugar it, Judy." He poked at the thing on the table with a pencil. "What do you think of it, Ray?"

Wheeler nibbled at his sandwich, looking like a slightly overstuffed beaver. "I don't make a damn thing out of it. It

doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before. What did you take it apart for?"

"See what makes it tick—if it does. And I wanted to know who made it. A lot of manufacturers stamp their parts either with a trademark or some other kind of identifying symbol."

But the pieces that lay on the table before him didn't have identifying marks of any kind on them. They were beautifully machined, Manning thought. Nice machining and lots of chrome and the tolerances must have been out of this world. And so what?

His wife came back with a steaming cup of coffee and Manning dangled a doughnut in it. The simple things, he thought abstractly. That was what made life worth living, that was what he was going to miss.

"You got any idea how it works?" Wheeler asked.

Manning shook his head. "I don't think it works at all. A convincing hunk of machinery, something that looks pretty but does nothing."

Wheeler pointed a stubby forefinger at a small cube of metal, approximately three inches on the side, that was apparently the heart of the carburetor. "What do you think that's for?"

"I don't know. It's a sealed unit, something like they have in refrigerators and washing machines. Exactly what it does, I couldn't tell you."

"This doesn't look like the ordinary gadget racket to me," Wheeler said uneasily. "I think we ought to call the Bureau in on it."

Manning shrugged. "National will find out all about it when we submit our report."

"You going to open up the sealed unit?"

Manning hesitated, then shook his head. "No. If we open it before we test the whole thing, then Forsythe would say we tampered with the gadget and naturally it wouldn't perform as he claimed."

He reassembled it, then pushed it across the table to Wheeler. "It's your baby, Ray. You test it. I've got something else to do."

Wheeler carefully wrapped the gadget in a chamois and stuffed it back in the box. He cornered another doughnut and sloshed it around in the bottom of his cup. "What did you have in mind?"

"I'm curious about Forsythe," Manning said. "I want to know more about him. Who he is, where he comes from, that sort of thing. There might be more to this than just Forsythe, you know. He's just the sales front; I think there's an organization behind him."

"You want to be a hero, Fred?"

Manning smiled crookedly. "I couldn't think of a better time."

"You just never struck me as the type," Wheeler said quietly.

Manning felt a little cheap. The private eye type of thing wasn't his line: he was pushing it only because, win, lose or draw, it would make damn little difference to him.

The building agent was a small, balding man with a taste for two hundred dollar suits and a Michigan Boulevard office. He looked guilty when Manning showed his credentials.

"Anything I can do to help you, Mr. Manning—anything at all—just ask me." His forehead looked a little shinier than when Manning had first come in.

"I'd like to ask questions about one Harry Forsythe; he's running the Forsythe Carburetor Company in your building on North Clark Street."

The building agent looked cautious. "Is something wrong?"

"Could be," Manning said slowly. "We're investigating him."

"I'm not my brother's keeper, Mr. Manning." The agent laughed, a little hollowly. "You know how it is. We'll rent to almost anybody who comes along. They don't always tell us full details of their business although, believe me, we try to rent to only true Americans."

Manning felt tired.

"We're not chasing commies. This is just a simple case of fraudulent use of the mails. Nothing that will involve you in any way."

The man dabbed at his forehead with a light blue, silk handkerchief. He looked a lot more cheerful.

"We'll be glad to cooperate in any way we can."

Manning helped himself to a cigar from the open box on the desk. "Thanks. You can begin right now. Did Forsythe present any credentials or references when he rented his office?"

The agent held up his hands.

"We don't require references or credentials, Mr. Manning. They tell us what business they're in and that's about all we ask them."

"And Forsythe said he was in the manufacturing and sales business, right?"

"Actually a little more than that. He mentioned something about being in the antique business, too."

Manning felt incredulous. "Didn't you think it strange that a whole manufacturing business could fit in an office that was no bigger than this one, let alone an antique business? His carburetor is made of metal; it requires stamping, machining, spraying. A whole factory full of machines would be required!"

The agent started to sweat again.

"I think I told you that we don't ask them detailed questions, Mr. Manning. In this case it seems obvious that he's using the office only as a sales outlet. Somebody else supplies him with the carburetors."

Manning bit savagely into the end of his cigar.

"I thought of that. I've had his office shadowed for the last week. He's had everything else delivered to him—refrigerators and typewriters and sofas and stoves. But no carburetors."

The agent looked a little smug. "It's a free country, Mr. Manning, he can order what he wants. And if your men didn't see any carburetors, then I would start to worry about their reliability. Forsythe must get his carburetors from somewhere and he must have them delivered."

Manning flushed and stood up to leave. "And if I were you, I'd start to worry about whom I rented office space to. And I'd start to worry about the condition I kept my buildings in. I would've sworn that there were at least a dozen violations of the civic fire ordinance there."

"But really, Manning! I had no...."

Manning started for the door. "Thanks for all the information I didn't get. And thanks for the cigar."

He stood on the street for a few minutes after leaving the building agent's office. It was a hot summer day, the only relief being the slight breeze that blew off the lake. The street was crowded with men in seer sucker suits, sweltering in the heat and mopping their foreheads. Young

girls in thin blouses and light weight skirts, as young girls always seemed to do, managed to look cool and fresh.

His last summer, Manning thought slowly. Take a good look and enjoy it while you can.

He walked slowly towards the Loop, looking at the scenery along the way as if he had never seen it before. It was a great world, he thought. But you didn't begin to appreciate it until you found out that one of these days you weren't going to be around any more.

He stopped in at a cigar store near Madison street.

"Some fine Havanas just came in, Mr. Manning."

There was a time when he had thought about cutting down on smoking. It didn't make much difference now.

"A half dozen should do it, Jeff."

The clerk wrapped them up. "Any razor blades or shaving cream? And we got a new order of fountain pens. Guaranteed to last a lifetime without re-filling."

Manning stuffed the package of cigars into his pocket. "No thanks. I don't care much for ball-point pens anyway."

The clerk looked a little disappointed. "Pens are kind of hard to move during summer; guess most people think of them as Christmas presents. That's what I tried to tell the man who sold them to me. They're not real ball-points, though."

Guaranteed to last a lifetime, Manning thought suddenly. A lifetime. Not just for a year or for a solid mile of writing—but a lifetime.

"Let me see one."

It looked like an ordinary pen, the style obviously patterned after a Parker. There was some engraving on the clip. Manning held it up to the light and read it. A Forsythe pen.

"How much?"

"Two forty-nine. Good looking pen for that price."

And what did you get, Manning thought, outside of a stainless steel clip and a fancy plastic barrel? Ten to one it leaked all over you the first time you clipped it in your pocket.

"Did you try them out before you bought them, Jeff?"

"Sure—worked pretty good, too."

For the first few days, Manning thought sourly. And then, like the one horse shay, it probably fell apart all at once.

"Wrap one up. And give me a copy of the newspaper."

He took the paper to the reading room of the public library at Randolph and Michigan and thumbed through it. Wheeler had missed a lot, he thought. There were Forsythe Carburetors, good for a hundred miles to the gallon of water; Forsythe pens, good for a lifetime; Forsythe lipsticks that would last for years; Forsythe hairbrushes with bristles that never broke.

All everyday items, all with impossible claims, and all attractively cheap.

Forsythe wasn't doing things in a small way, Manning thought slowly. But where did he get the goods? And who made them? And if Forsythe was a front, who for?

Clark Street in the late evening was a canyon of yellow street lights intermingled with the flicker of red neon. Manning stood in the shadow of a store front, watching the building across the street. The lights were out in all the windows; the building was dead.

He walked around the block and came up the alley in back. A cat leaped silently off a window ledge and Manning smiled to himself. No watch dogs. The rear door was locked but not barred and a thin sliver of strong steel inserted between the frame and the door sprung the lock with a small click. He closed it quietly behind him, listening for any sounds in the building. There were none.

He picked the lock on the Forsythe office and eased himself in. The crates and the packages were in the back room, a small filing cabinet by the window. He opened the cabinet and rifled through the two top drawers. There was nothing but mail orders from all over the country addressed to the Forsythe Company. A small but steady volume of business over a period of about six months.

The bottom drawer was something else again. Invoices between the Forsythe Company and the Timely Trading Corporation of Oswego City, New America. Shipments and receipted bills. Manning looked at them blankly.

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