

THE LAST P.O.W.

by

MARVIN GREEN

The Korean War ended in 1953. Not long afterwards Miss Elise returned to Gladstone and promptly began devising escape routes.

Her favorite was the one which led from the basement window above the laundry machine. It ran along the hedge that separated her house from the Wassermans' and then proceeded down the driveway in the dirt along the concrete retaining wall. In rainy weather, the men would be obliged to crawl on their bellies and emerge all wet and muddy in front of the Wassermans' front porch. When the gutter sewer was clogged, their shoes filled. Often they stumbled and sprawled headlong, face down, right into the slime and the filthy water.

She loved watching Mr. Chronos, who operated the meat counter at the supermarket. He always stumbled.

Miss Elise relied on the escape routes to protect her reputation. During the war, she'd distinguished herself at the Federal Reserve Bank in Washington and now was First Vice President and Treasurer at National Bank of Gladstone. Although she'd perfected a method of embezzling modest sums to supplement her income, and although these sums had aggregated about 8 million dollars during the five decades since her return to Gladstone, she was regarded as totally scrupulous in all financial dealings. Having invested her capital with such apparent success, she was consulted by practically everyone who contemplated a major investment.

She'd met some of her gentlemen friends during financial conferences, selecting them for more intimate association on the basis of certain monetary considerations. Also she took into account qualities such as discretion, trustworthiness and physical agility.

The physical agility was the most important. The Wassermans, right next door, guarded her chastity even more carefully than she herself was thought to do.

Getting a man into her house was easy. She'd lend him a key and send him to wait at about 4:30 while Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman were still at work. She kept him in the kitchen by providing cold cuts, potato salad, sauerkraut and beer. She'd arrive at 5:30 or 6:00.

Getting the man out was somewhat more complicated. She'd set her bedroom alarm for 3:00 in the morning and allow the gentleman exactly one half hour to leave by one of the escape routes. Then she'd take a quarter sleeping pill, and she'd rest comfortably until 6:00.

Because of Mr. Wasserman's insomnia, he was always in his kitchen at 3:30. He'd be there reading last Sunday's New York Times, glancing out now and then toward Miss Elise's house to make sure she was safe from the prowlers he often heard but rarely saw. Some years ago he'd detected Mr. Chronos's heavy breathing and actually glimpsed someone crawling along the hedge. He dashed into his den, got his shotgun and did \$3,600 damage to the automobiles parked at the curb.

Mr. Chronos himself was not hurt. He deliberately lay in the gutter mud puddle until the shooting subsided. Miss Elise chided him about his cowardice and did not permit him to visit again until the next rainy night 3 weeks later.

In all of the years that Miss Elise had been pursuing what she regarded as her hobby, not one of her gentlemen friends had ever betrayed or confided her secret. For one thing, each was convinced he was uniquely privileged. Anything else was utterly inconceivable.

Despite the fact that men tend to boast of their conquests, especially when the woman is thought to be virtuous and beyond approach, her men remained steadfastly discreet. There were, after all, the special financial considerations. Each of them was desperately in debt. Each was totally dependent on her to continue loans which no other bank would make.

And then there was a further reason. Each man was terrified by her majestic and domineering personality.

Mr. Chronos, for example, physically trembled whenever the nightly television news forecast rain. He'd figured out that there was a glandular disturbance in Miss Elise. In the morning, he'd wear his older clothing, and he'd kiss Mrs. Chronos and the children goodbye with particular tenderness. He did so not only because of his awe of Miss Elise but also because he'd been on hunting trips with Mr. Wasserman and had ample reason to fear his erratic aim.

The bank messenger would arrive at his meat counter about noon. Mr. Chronos would read the summons from Miss Elise. He'd nod sadly to the messenger and would ask him to assure Miss Elise that he'd be in to see her later in the afternoon.

Invariably he was startled when he came into her presence. Though more than 6 feet tall, she augmented her height with fashionably high heels. She was erect. She was slender but gave the impression of muscularity. Indeed, her arms and legs were well formed and sinewy as a result of the exercises she pursued at the health club instead of eating lunch each day.

He'd been her high school classmate in the 40s. Now it was as if she hadn't changed at all. Granted there were undisguised wavelets of gray in her hair. Granted there were small creases of skin on her forehead and in the area around her mouth. There was also a vigor in her movements, a mellow firmness in her voice. When he closed his eyes, he actually saw her as a young girl, and he was conjuring teachers and other friends as well. Some of them were dead and gone for half a century.

She rose to greet him. Shaking his hand, she virtually forced him into the wooden chair that faced her desk. She handed him the ledger sheets of his loan account and allowed him to pretend to be studying them.

She said, "Mr. Chronos, I have always considered myself a friend of yours. The bank examiners will be coming soon, and we must bring your loan up to date. It occurs to me that you may be having special difficulties, perhaps problems of a personal character. We bankers are not heartless people. Here is a key to my home. Please go there, and I shall be along shortly. Help yourself to some dinner from the refrigerator. When I arrive, we will see if we can figure out some way to help you."

Mr. Chronos would put on his raincoat and trudge numbly down Keystone Street and then to her white frame house on Forest Drive.

It occurred to him that he was insane. From his 30 or 40 previous experiences, he knew exactly what was going to happen. But it was not possible. Perhaps his youthful fantasies were returning to plague him in his later years.

In high school, he'd admired and respected her. Everyone had admired and respected her. She was aloof without being snobbish. Her remarkable intelligence and her refined and pleasant manner simply differentiated her from her colleagues.

He recalled the time when her mother and father had both committed suicide. There were whispers of serious financial irregularities. Although she couldn't have been more than 9 or 10 years old, she returned to school in the afternoon immediately following the funeral. She reassured her teachers, persuasively explaining that it would be pointless and harmful not to carry on with her own life.

She moved in with an aunt. The white house on Forest Drive remained unoccupied until she returned from college and graduate school and from wherever else she'd been until the end of the Korean War.

Mr. Chronos always entered through the kitchen doorway which overlooked the vacant lot. The Wasserman's house was on the other side. Sometimes, at 3:30 in the

morning, he tried to sneak out via the lot. He'd be safe there from Mr. Wasserman's shotgun, and he would not have to damage his clothing in the mud. But Miss Elise would always apprehend him and lead him into the basement and drag him over to the window above the laundry machine.

On his first visit he needed a good half hour to squeeze through. In more recent years she physically boosted him while constantly bombarding him with threats to call his loan. He vowed to go onto a strict diet. Nowadays he could get out the window in something just over 17 minutes and was always relieved when at last he arrived in the comparative safety of no-man's land.

Actually, Mr. Chronos was rather fortunate. Mr. Peterson, the funeral director, was in much better physical condition, and she required him to leave by way of the upstairs bathroom window. This route entailed his descending from the second floor by a series of precarious hand- and foot-holds on the vines which girdled the south side of the building. The whole operation had to be accomplished directly across from Mr. Wasserman's kitchen. Had Mr. Peterson been only a trifle less agile, he would have been on the vines long enough to be wounded by one of Mr. Wasserman's virtually random shotgun blasts.

Mr. Gilchrist, the assistant cashier at the bank, was a small man, no more than 5 feet 5 inches. He was very fast. He used his size and speed to hide from Miss Elise whenever she wanted to confront him about the 15 or 20 dollar discrepancy that always existed in his petty cash account. She made it a point to catch him at least once a month. Handing him her key, she'd peremptorily order him to report to her house. The sauerkraut and beer gave him heartburn, but he was frightened and had no choice but to partake.

When the time came for him to leave, since he was too fast for Mr. Wasserman anyway, Miss Elise took him to the family room. She dispatched him into the drainage pipe which she'd installed across the vacant lot. The diameter was ample, but the pipe

was 32 feet long. Last winter children had built an embankment of snow across the far end. They poured water on it to make an icy slide. Mr. Gilchrist ruined his house keys and developed severe frostbite in the half hour it took him to chop his way through. Also he lost his eyeglasses and felt perfectly justified in purchasing a new pair with money from the petty cash fund.

Miss Elise took special pride in her style in accomplishing her objective with her gentlemen callers. She required herself to manage each occasion in such a way that the gentleman would be convinced her own participation was in no sense voluntary.

In Mr. Gilchrist's case, she badgered him for hours, enlarging on the criminal consequences of the petty cash situation. Surreptitiously medicating himself with Tums and Roloids, he'd cower between the refrigerator and the portable dishwasher. As soon as she was satisfied that her denunciations had become sufficiently violent, she swooned. With the advantage afforded by her height, she was able to collapse onto the kitchen table, always taking care not to knock over the beer. Also she skillfully laid herself out in a zigzag position such that the sauerkraut and potato salad never soiled her dress.

At these moments, Mr. Gilchrist's one instinct was to flee. He'd tiptoe into the family room and often got half way through the drainage pipe. Anticipating, however, that the next day Miss Elise would discharge him or else turn him over to the authorities, he always reluctantly returned and poured beer as a stimulant into her mouth.

She'd allow herself to come to. Staggering upstairs, she'd send him to the bathroom to fetch her headache medicine. When he returned, she was always undressed, under her electric blanket and unconscious again.

He had heard somewhere that it was desirable to slap the face of an unconscious person, but he could never persuade himself to attempt it. If she revived, she'd catch him in the vary act of abusing her physically.

He resorted to patting her cheeks and stroking her forehead. When these devices prove unavailing, he took her arms from under the blanket and massaged her wrists.

The idea of massaging her ankles always occurred to him next. Sometimes he was able to resist the temptation for as long as 15 or 30 minutes. Eventually the same base impulses which had induced him to trifle with petty cash now led him to trifle not only with her ankles but with other of her nether parts.

When her alarm sounded at 3:00, she allowed him time to shut off the buzzer and compose himself. He'd always pretend he had not been engaged in any of the mischief which he'd actually been committing.

Chuckling to himself that he'd outwitted her, Mr. Gilchrist was thereafter able to tolerate his journey through the drainage pipe.

With Mr. Chronos, Miss Elise also used swooning. He loved to reminisce about their high school days and inevitably would make some remark which remotely reminded her of her parents' tragic deaths. She'd cry out, beg him to assist her to her room, and then she'd collapse onto the kitchen table.

Although Mr. Chronos was accustomed to carrying huge sides of beef at the supermarket, he found Miss Elise's dead weight difficult to cope with. He respected her and did not trust himself to avoid unnecessary touching of her person.

Once, frantically searching in her basement for something in the nature of meat hooks or block and tackle, he discovered some plywood panels. In recent years, he'd taken to laying these on the stairs to form a ramp along which it was comparatively easy to slide her up to the second floor. Being of a domestic turn of mind, he was concerned with the damage he might cause to her dress. Therefore he would remove the dress and sometimes various other garments which he judged to be of a particularly delicate character.

The exigencies of getting her upstairs brought him into physical contact with her. This contact, plus the intoxicating memories of a quarter century ago, were his undoing. He found himself taking advantage of her on the floor alongside her bed. In case she unexpectedly revived, he was prepared to insist that he was merely wrestling her up onto the bed itself.

Mr. Peterson, the funeral director, had been one of Miss Elise's most difficult conquests.

He was a young man altogether dedicated to mortuary science. He had attracted her attention by neglecting his business in order to attend special post-graduate schools and national and international morticians' seminars. Although the people of Gladstone admired his skill and his professional acumen, he was so rarely available when somebody actually died that the funeral custom of bereaved ones was generally lavished on his competitors. The result was that he operated a handsome place of business that was encumbered more by first, second and third mortgages than it was by wakes and memorials to the departed.

Mr. Peterson's first visit to Miss Elise was frustrating to her. When she demanded he repay the bank his loans, he attempted to divert her with tedious discourses on the embalming and physical preparation of cadavers. On his next visit, she was just about to concede defeat but then had a brilliant inspiration. She proposed he use her body to illustrate some of the techniques he had recently learned at the morticians' seminar in Honolulu. He was thrilled and suggested that she would be more comfortable in her bedroom.

Although his sole intent was to provide a brief technical demonstration, a problem quickly came to his attention. She had fallen asleep. He could not arouse her. Under these circumstances, and in view of the fact that she had been bullying him about the money, he proceeded to wreak his vengeance upon her. He did so in the only way that seemed available to him at the time.

When her alarm rang at 3:00, he shrewdly resumed his lecture, completing it precisely at 3:30 as he stepped out her bathroom window onto the vines on the south side of the building.

Miss Elise considered Mr. Peterson the least satisfactory of her friends. It had become impossible for her actually to remain awake during his discourses. Often she was not even sure that he had in fact wreaked his vengeance.

By contrast, Miss Elise had a favorite companion. He was a man whom she regarded as exceedingly dangerous to her. He was Mr. Hotspur.

Mr. Hotspur was the choir director at the All Brethren Church. He'd presented himself to her immediately upon his arrival in Gladstone some 4 or 5 years ago. He'd exhibited his credentials, which consisted essentially of a diploma from the choir directors' college that the All Brethren Church Council maintained on the outskirts of Laredo, Texas.

There were at that time only two dozen members of the church in Gladstone. The Council had instructed Mr. Hotspur to organize a choir in the expectation that such a group would quickly attract numerous converts.

Mr. Hotspur determined that an organ would be indispensable to his functions. Having heard it was the policy of the bank to make small loans to all churches, however unreliable they were financially, he called upon Miss Elise.

Miss Elise formed an instantaneous affection for Mr. Hotspur. Accordingly, she induced him to purchase the organ in his own name by undertaking a personal loan which required him to make payments of \$13.20 a month for the next 14 years. Since Mr. Hotspur drew no salary but lived on meager donations of food from his parishioners, it was inevitable he would default on the very first installment.

Miss Elise immediately summoned him to her home and threatened to foreclose on the organ. In this instance it was Mr. Hotspur who swooned, partly out of fear for the consequences to his choir and partly out of malnutrition.

Miss Elise was genuinely alarmed. She dragged him to the plywood ramp, which was still lying about from Mr. Chronos's last visit. She hoisted him upstairs to her bedroom.

Even though the unconscious Mr. Hotspur was totally ineffective on this occasion, Miss Elise greatly enjoyed his visit. She lay motionlessly next to him until 3:00 in the morning. For the first time in her life, she was experiencing an acceptable outlet for her strong maternal instincts.

She quickly conceived the idea of converting Mr. Hotspur's monthly payments into weekly installments of \$8.13 each. As he continued to default, he gradually grew strong on the regular diet of cold cuts and potato salad.

Mr. Hotspur persisted in fainting at each mention of the organ, but he began to revive about midway up the ramp. While thereafter Miss Elise found it impossible to maintain a strictly maternal relationship with him, she was under the impression that he was unconscious throughout.

There were two reasons Miss Elise considered Mr. Hotspur dangerous.

First, he was totally inept physically. At the end of his first visit, she elected to dispatch him by Mr. Peterson's route through the bathroom window. In endeavoring unsuccessfully to open the window, he slipped in the bathtub and sprained his right wrist. This mishap necessitated an alternate departure through the drainage pipe and rendered him unable to use the organ at choir practice for the next 3 weeks. On subsequent visits, he got entangled in the hedge or else fell from the vines. Twice he got his foot stuck in the agitator mechanism of the laundry machine. On one occasion he was wounded in the buttocks by a lucky hit from a shotgun pellet. Since he was again unable to use the organ at choir practice for a protracted period, he was obliged to file a written report with the All Brethren Council to allay their uneasiness at his seeming inactivity in Gladstone.

The second reason for Miss Elise's concern was her disturbing conviction that she'd known Mr. Hotspur by another name when she'd worked for the Federal Reserve Bank in Washington during the Korean War.

If Mr. Hotspur was in fact Henry Haskins, then she'd known him intimately and, indeed, she was the mother of his illegitimate son.

But this conviction that he was Henry Haskins was entirely intuitive. Perhaps it was a quirk of her mind. Perhaps it was a reaction to a gross physical resemblance that was beclouded and distorted by an interval of more than 40 years.

Long ago she had destroyed every photograph of Henry Haskins. She was then in a fit of depression just before leaving Washington. It was her son's first birthday, and the adoption authorities were refusing to provide any information whatsoever.

It was characteristic of Mr. Hotspur that he did not know whether he was or was not Henry Haskins. He'd been found wandering recklessly on a battlefield in Korea. His identification tags were gone. His memory was obliterated. There was not one person anywhere who recognized him or claimed him. And it was characteristic of him, too, that his ineptitude seemed to spread to everything connected with him. As Miss Elise discovered, a fire in the Pentagon had destroyed thousands of fingerprints, including, peculiarly enough, those of Henry Haskins.

In her more rational moments, Miss Elise rejected the identity which her intuitive processes had established. If Mr. Hotspur was really Henry Haskins, he would not have slipped in the bathtub while attempting to open the window. He would not have gotten his foot stuck in the laundry machine. He would have made the payments on the organ, and he would have thrashed Mr. Wasserman for wounding him with a shotgun pellet.

Henry Haskins, the paragon of masculine virtue against whom Miss Elise contrasted Mr. Hotspur, had become a paragon more by lapse of time and trick of memory than by actual qualification.

He'd been a brash and popular man at Penn State, and they'd met there in the late 40s. Though he'd had his choice of several young women, he relentlessly pursued Miss Elise. She was the better athlete. She had an infuriatingly aloof manner. If the manner grew out of painful shyness, if it concealed her desperate longing for him to like her, he never realized it.

There was a war on, and she did whatever he wanted. He graduated with an ROTC commission. When they met again in Washington, he had become engaged to a wealthy young woman from Philadelphia. Nevertheless he'd insisted on reestablishing the relationship. As soon as he learned of the pregnancy, he transferred himself to a combat outfit, and she never heard from him or of him again.

In her less rational moments, Miss Elise was convinced that Mr. Hotspur was Henry Haskins and that she loved him. His ineptitude seemed to compensate her. She was happiest when he tumbled from the vines, when she saw him crawling through the mud, when she heard Mr. Wasserman cocking his shotgun.

She was unhappiest when she thought of her son. This coming March 1 would be her son's birthday. In January she formed a plan. After lengthy negotiations with the adoption authorities, she succeeded in ascertaining only that he had three children of his own and that they all lived somewhere in the eastern half of the United States. On March 1 she was going to put her 8 million dollars into an anonymous trust for her grandchildren.

In mid-February a crack team of bank examiners arrived in Gladstone. Long suspicious of Mr. Gilchrist's petty cash account, they'd mapped out a massive audit of his records. Inevitably they came across Miss Elise's more extensive machinations.

They confronted her late in the afternoon. For 4 or 5 decades she'd been expecting and dreading this moment.

She promised to meet them again in the morning. Then she walked home. She'd forgotten her umbrella, and there was a heavy drizzle which froze and rendered the sidewalks treacherous.

She found Mr. Hotspur huddled under the overhang of the kitchen door. It had escaped her that today was the weekly default day for the organ payments. Mr. Chronos was there as well. The rain had brought him from his meat counter at the supermarket. And Mr. Gilchrist, convinced that he would be arrested, had fled from the bank and was hiding out in the drainage pipe. He didn't know that she, too, was in trouble, and he'd come to beg her for help.

After spreading cold cuts onto a plate and serving the sauerkraut and potato salad and beer, she excused herself to go upstairs to change clothes.

For almost a half century she'd had a small valise all packed and ready to go. All she had to do was drop it out the bathroom window. Though the Wassermans were home now, it was very dark. The vines would be easy for her.

Strangely, however, she'd never quite realized before that there was no place to go.

She locked her door and sat on her bed.

She was able to reach Mr. Peterson, finding him en route to an embalming conference in Montgomery, Alabama. She paged him at the airport and instructed him to cancel the trip.

She swallowed 75 sleeping pills. Listening to the laughter from the kitchen, she was trying to recall the irregularities that had caused her parents' deaths.

Sleep enveloped her as she struggled to review the anguished days in Washington.

Her last thoughts were regret. She'd neglected to ask Mr. Hotspur and his choir to officiate at the funeral. She'd tormented him. The bank would be foreclosing on the organ, and nobody would be around to protect him.

The men in the kitchen began to wonder that she didn't return. Eventually they got up their nerve and went upstairs to investigate. They milled around and then battered open her door. It was much too late.