

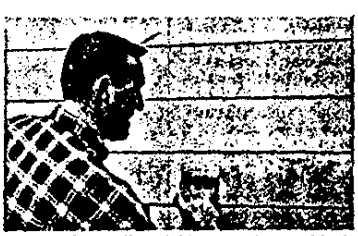
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(Continued from Page 136) he didn't. Only the poor worry about their debts. Hodge knew his role.

George Thiem was a long time reaching the startling conclusion that Hodge was stealing. Thiem kept looking for conventional graft. "He could have chiseled a hundred and fifty thousand to two hundred thousand," says Thiem, "and got by with it." You'd think that would be enough—for a rich man.

The nature of Hodge's office—stodgy title, stodgy duties—also helped the deception. The state auditor's job is an important one; the auditor ranks with the state treasurer and the attorney general. But his was not an office to be watched closely for news. In fact, Hodge had to maintain a public-relations staff to keep his name in the papers. When a man is trying hard to get publicity you don't suspect him of skulduggery. And you don't think of an auditor as having access to anything but records. What could an auditor steal, outside of papers?

Hodge reached the Illinois General Assembly in Springfield in 1947, as a representative from the southern counties of Madison and Bond. His good-fellow qualities made him popular. In his second session he was a minority whip. In 1951 he was vice-chairman of the revenue committee and ranking member of the appropriations committee.

His popularity with the voters grew steadily. He made as many friends as possible, had an excellent memory for names and did all the favors he could. Stopping for a few words of conversation, Hodge almost invariably said in parting, "Now, if there's anything I can do for you, let me know."

> The worst of wrestling with your conscience is that it's almost impossible to get a strangle hold on it.
>
> HAL CHADWICK

By 1952 he was popular enough to try for statewide office. Well established in the role of rich man indulging a liking for public life, he made it clear he would pay his own campaign expenses. He couldn't yet hope to be governor. William Stratton, state treasurer, wanted that. Hodge got the nomination for auditor.

Running mates recall that he had more money to spend than any other candidate. This is the origin of a theory that he was financed by gamblers with $200,000, the amount he says he spent, on his promise to get them the green light for wide-open gambling. The rest of the theory is that he stole, later on, under pressure to pay back the $200,000. The idea is romantic, but open to serious doubt. It's not sure that Hodge spent anything like $200,000 and gamblers are hardly so stupid as to think an auditor of public accounts would have the say on gambling. In any event, you don't need to steal $2,000,000 or so to pay back $200,000.

He talked of running for governor in 1956, but Stratton wanted a second term. Hodge made something of a ceremony of bowing out in Stratton's favor. But he was building his own machine. Most of the Republican votes are downstate. In some areas, they are pretty much under one-man control. Hodge cultivated downstate Republican leaders, and Democratic leaders as well. Nobody could have marshaled more votes than Hodge, at the moment Fate chose for his downfall.

Among those taken in by the rich-man pose, it appears, was H. Kendall Olds. A former United Press man and a good Springfield reporter, Olds had become Hodge's chief public-relations man. As George Thiem's investigation came to a thunderous climax, Olds felt sick and betrayed. He drove out to Lake Springfield and drowned himself.

Another who was close to Hodge without suspecting his dark secret, she insists, was Bonita Lillie. They met in 1953, when Miss Lillie, a rising young designer and decorator, was commissioned to redecorate Hodge's Springfield home. At the height of the scandal, Marcia Winn, of the Chicago Tribune, found Bonita in Los Angeles—"helping," Bonita said, "by being as far away as possible."

Marcia Winn is widely known for brilliant description and a deadly instinct for the jugular. Now she wrote so approvingly that fans looked twice to make sure this was coming from Marcia's usually saw-toothed typewriter. This was her appraisal of Miss Lillie: "a woman of education, breeding and charm," with "a piquant, heart-shaped face, large gray eyes and dark hair. . . . Her voice is soft and musical."

What was there about Hodge to win such a woman's love? Bonita found him "a scrub-faced, clean-cut man wanting to be a statesman." Far from knowing anything about his financial manipulations, she said, "I thought he was the most honest man I ever knew." The Hodge she knew liked her to read the Bible to him, especially the Beatitudes. This wasn't the Springfield playboy or the glad-hander. This was "a man who hurt inside"; who was, in Bonita's eyes, "the loneliest person I ever knew."

Bonita's forthright admission that she loved Hodge appeared likely for a time to cost Hodge another ten years in prison. In imposing two sentences of ten years, Federal Judge John P. Barnes had promised to substitute probation for the second ten-year term if Hodge made restitution.

At the disclosure of Hodge's romance, his wife, Margaret, balked at surrendering property, even refusing to vacate a luxurious penthouse in Florida bought by Hodge with stolen money. But Hodge's trouble seemed to arouse the judge's sympathy. As things stand now, Hodge is under a ten-year sentence to be followed by five years of probation—if he makes restitution. But the day after this reduction was granted, George Thiem discovered that in listing assets Hodge had left out two farms held in the name of dummies.

After Hodge's guilt had been established, the psychiatrists said he had always had a starved ego. His deep hunger for the spotlight, they thought, showed in his monogrammed shirts, his gadget-filled home, his habit of reaching for the check in restaurants, his delight in knowing celebrities.

A man like Hodge, the psychiatrists said, knows all along that he'll be caught. The sanctimonious speeches calling for honesty in government, they said, were "a way of confessing." They said Hodge would have done a better job of covering up except for a repressed wish to get caught.

If so, he repressed it well, George Thiem would say. The Daily News reporter worked for forty-two days before he stumbled on Hodge's secret; and for nearly two weeks of that time, Hodge was working frantically to cover up. With his strong political influence and unlimited stolen money, it seemed likely he might make it. Tension mounted so high before it was over that two Daily News men, both seasoned campaigners, were felled by heart attacks.

Editors' Note: This is the second of four articles. The third in the series will appear next week.

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