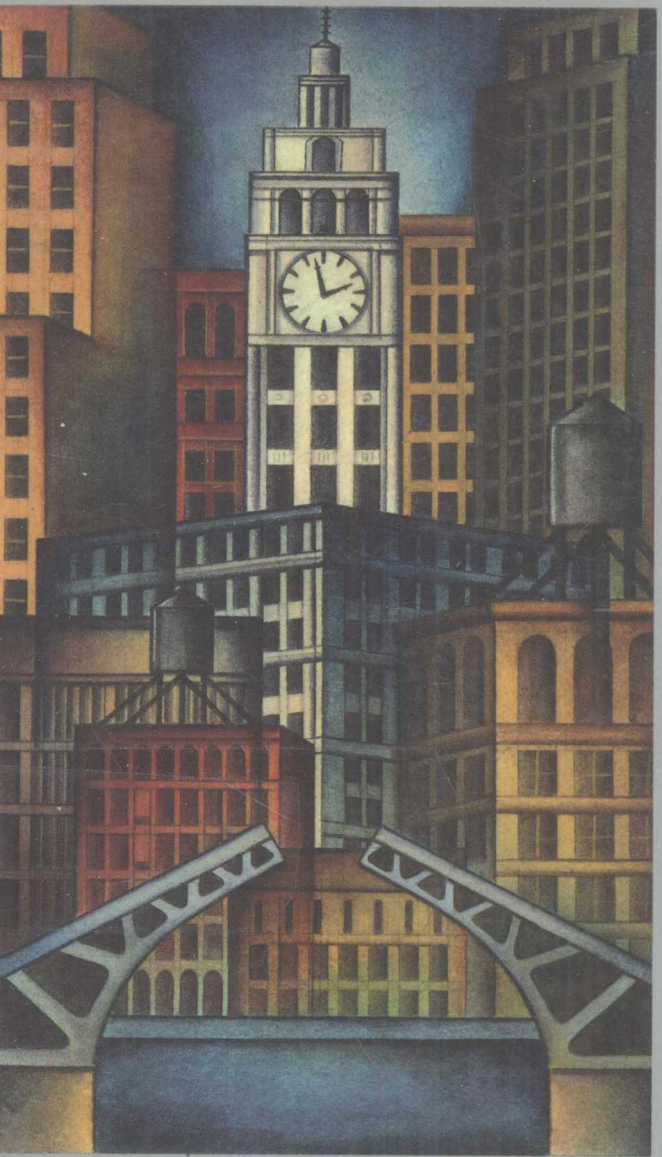
# Jack GANCE



# WARD JUST

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## Books by Ward Just

### Fiction

*A Soldier of the Revolution* · *1970*
*The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert* · *1973*
*Stringer* · *1974*
*Nicholson at Large* · *1975*
*A Family Trust* · *1978*
*Honor, Power, Riches, Fame and the Love of Women* · *1979*
*In the City of Fear* · *1982*
*The American Blues* · *1984*
*The American Ambassador* · *1987*
*Jack Gance* · *1989*

### Nonfiction

*To What End* · *1968*
*Military Men* · *1970*

*To Sarah*

PART ONE

# 'Forties and 'Fifties

I VACATIONS were automatic and followed a pattern. The day after school ended we left the apartment on the Near North Side and drove to the Little Fort River Valley, where we rented a cabin on Big Lake near the Wisconsin line. This was during the war. The trip took two hours in the red long-hooded Buick, my brother and I in the back seat and our parents up front. In those days the country began just north of Chicago.

We rented the same cabin, tucked away in the woods beside the lake, smelling thickly of pine and mildew. We cooked our meals on a wood-burning stove and slept under Hudson's Bay blankets the color of milk with wide red stripes. From the narrow porch we could see the dock and the dinghy with its two-cylinder Johnson, and the royal blue lake beyond. Even at the end in June the ducks were still about and we could hear their calling. There were many canvasback ducks and a few geese, big and unwieldy beside the sleek canvasbacks. My father was always up first and from my bedroom window I could observe him on the porch, huge in flannel shirt and heavy twill trousers, a steaming mug of coffee in his hand. I watched him put the mug carefully on the railing, raise his arms, and take imaginary shots at the ducks wheeling overhead.

"Bang," he said softly. "Die, you sucker."

Big Lake was one of a chain of lakes, all of them connected by the Little Fort River. It was always fragrant and chilly in the mornings, the sun still low on the horizon, slanting through the high firs, glittering on the lake. The cabin was situated in the trees across the water from a high point of land that rose sharply a hundred feet or more above the lake. That was where the big bass and muskelunge were, in the deep water. There were no other cabins in the vicinity, so the days were eerily quiet and slow-moving. It was as far from the helter-skelter of the Near North Side as you could get.

My mother, my brother, and I always played killer Parcheesi after dinner. My father sat reading in a chair by the fireplace, the radio turned low. He listened for bulletins of the war, and when one came he would put his book down, turn the volume up, signal for us to stop rattling the dice cup, and grimly listen to the news. He was thirty-nine in 1944, too old for the war. He said they didn't need old men, they had enough young men; and the war wouldn't last forever, unless they were even more stupid than he thought. Never underestimate their stupidity, though. They thrived on it, so don't expect an end to the war any time soon. The politicians were corrupt and the generals vainglorious.

After Parcheesi we all went onto the porch and lay down, head to head so that our bodies looked like points of a star. We watched for meteors and falling stars. I tried to divine the thoughts of my mother and father. My father never liked these evening séances, but Mother made him do it; it was nice, touching heads in the darkness and pointing at the Milky Way, listening to the rustle of night creatures. Then my brother and I would be sent off to bed and my mother and father would stroll down to the dock and sit in canvas chairs in the darkness, drinking highball nightcaps. I knew they were there by the red glow of the cigarettes, the smell of the tobacco, and the clink of the ice cubes, though that may have been the wash of wavelets against the stony beach. The night

was always still and secret. My mother and father talked in tones so low that I never heard what they said to each other.

Their oldest friend lived nearby in a large house on Egg Lake, the largest of the chain. He had been best man at their wedding but had moved away from the city, north to the Wisconsin line, where his life was simpler and not so raw. I didn't like Chicago's rules, so I moved to the sticks, Carl said. He maintained that he was a country boy, "just a country lawyer trying to make a living," but he didn't look like one or act like one. Carl Fahr looked like a man of the world, as debonair, buoyant, and lithe as Fred Astaire.

On the second or third day of our vacation he would come to call in his Gar Wood speedboat, arriving with a mighty roar around the point of land, the boat skidding as he slid it around in a wide dramatic turn, the water flying in a huge fan. Approaching the dock, he would cut his engine and the boat would heave on its stern, pushed by the swollen wake. Then he would reverse gear and the boat would halt, roaring, agitated water all around it, the wake curling now onto the small beach next to the dock. We all cheered and applauded. Carl had his white yachtsman's cap low over his eyes, so he had to lift his chin to see properly. He was as tall as my father but slight; he went with the boat as other men go with a pipe or a fedora. He tied up expertly at the dock and hopped from the Gar Wood with an almost dainty step, shaking hands with my father and embracing my mother. They all talked at once, laughing and firing questions at one another. Then my mother went inside to prepare a pot of coffee. The three of them sat on the canvas chairs on the dock, drinking coffee, catching up.

My brother and I were there to say hello, and to admire the speedboat, whose lines were lovely and economical and curvy as a bull's horns, and as lethal. The brightwork was polished and the mahogany varnished to a luminous shine so

that you could see your face in it through the tiny weblike cracks. The leather seats were soft, like the well-worn seats of an English sports car. The leather smell mixed with gasoline fumes was intoxicating. In a machine like that you could go anywhere, north to Mackinac or south to St. Louis, always attracting attention. It had been built years earlier in Sheboygan, and built to last.

When my mother and brother left to go to the store for provisions — Carl would stay for dinner — I remained in the boat, sitting in Carl's place, slowly turning the wheel and making engine noises, *vroom vroom*, until my father told me to stop it and Carl said never mind, it didn't matter, kids loved the Gar Wood almost as much as he did.

"He'll screw up the mechanism," my father said.

"No, he won't," Carl said.

"It's your boat," my father said.

Carl smiled at my father and slapped him on the back. "How are you, old Vic?"

My father moved his shoulders as he habitually did when he felt hemmed in. He looked at me moving the steering wheel and scowled.

"They giving you a hard time?"

"No more than usual," my father said.

"Look at it this way," Carl said. "They're bastards. The hell with them."

I was listening carefully, trying to discover the meaning of the conversation. My father and Carl Fahr seemed to inhabit a twilight world where shadows distorted the meaning of things. It was a world of innuendo and sudden darkness, often formless. Just then I was worried that they were talking about us, my mother and me, though I was certain that couldn't be it. Their "they" was another and more remote "they."

"Easy for you to say; you're here in the sticks. I'm there. I'm where the money is." My father leaned back in the canvas chair, his legs straight out, his hands drumming on his thighs.

"That's why I got out."

"Maybe too soon," my father said.

"What the hell," Carl said. "I have enough."

"Bastards, give them an inch —"

"Victor, you know what I think? I think you shouldn't fight City Hall quite so hard."

My father sighed. "That's what they're there for." Then, looking around, "Where's whatshername?"

That would be one of Carl's woman friends, blond, long-legged, dressed in floppy shorts and a cotton shirt and wearing a baseball cap, always friendly to my brother and me. The baseball cap was the real thing, a gift from a Cub outfielder.

"Arlene," Carl said. "Didn't like the sticks. Went back to Aurora."

"The bright lights of Aurora," my father said.

"That's right, Vic. She left me high and dry." Carl smiled again and turned to look at the water. There was a little silence. "Do you want to go fishing?"

My father squinted at the sky. "It's bright as hell."

"I saw one jump on the way in," Carl said.

"Let's go then," my father said.

"What about Jack?" Carl said.

"Do you want to go?" My father looked at me.

"Sure," I said.

"Then let's saddle up," Carl said. Dad went into the cabin for our rods and tackle. Carl had live bait and plugs in the Gar Wood. It seemed to take them forever to transfer the gear to the dinghy, Carl being slow and careful stowing the rods and tackle. He handled them with respect and I watched him attentively, knowing that he was doing things properly, the way they should be done, the way a man did them, taking his time, making certain everything was secure. I was sorry to leave the speedboat, and Carl laughed and said you couldn't fish from a Gar Wood. It wasn't done. It wasn't allowed. It wasn't de rigueur. It was against the law. They catch you at it, you've had it.

"Whose law?" my father asked.

"Mine," Carl said.

"Christ," my father said. "I thought you were serious. They'll make any damned law, interfere with your fun. Make things difficult. I figured they made one against your boat."

Carl shook his head. "They don't give a damn up here."

"For the time being," my father said.

Carl looked at him. "By the way. You and the boy have licenses?"

"No," my father said. We were in the boat and Carl was standing on the dock holding the dinghy's painter. "Shit, I forgot. What difference does it make? Up here where they don't give a damn." Carl said nothing, just stood and shook his head. He wound the end of the painter around his wrist, reached into his back pocket, and took out two pieces of paper and a pencil. He said, "I figured." He leaned against the piling, asking me my vital statistics — age, place of birth, color of hair, color of eyes, weight — writing as he went. Then he asked my father the same questions. My father grumbled that he had never seen a warden at Big Lake, had never seen an unfamiliar *boat*, for Christ's sake, but Carl just smiled and went on writing. "You owe me a buck," he said when he was finished. "Jack's my guest. Here you are, Captain," he said to me. "Sign it, make it legal." I took this prize, the first official paper I had ever seen with my own name on it, carefully printed my name, Jackeson Gance, and put it away in my pocket.

So we went off in the dinghy, Carl manipulating the two-cylinder Johnson. He was in the stern and my father in the bow and I was amidships, on the small seat. When we were in the middle of the lake, Carl cut the engine, allowing the boat to drift in the direction of the deep water below the high point of land. The surface of the water was calm and unruffled as milk in a saucer, nothing moving except for water bugs and the huge Wisconsin black flies, sluggish in the heat. There were no ducks or geese. It got warm and then hot, and I trailed my finger in the heavy water, watching its minute

wake, imagining a great fish below, attracted by my fingernail. I imagined the lake teeming with fish, unseen, scavenging the bottom. I thought, Jack Gance, licensed fisherman. The men were casting with small plugs and I was trolling, daydreaming because there were no strikes. Carl had taught me how to pierce the worm with the hook so that the worm would be firmly fixed yet appear natural. The fish had to believe it was real, a fact. I moved the rod back and forth in a lazy swing, hoping that the worm's movement below was factual enough to catch the eye of a bass.

Carl and my father were talking about Chicago and the changes in the six years Carl had been gone. My father said that Chicago was a boom town and there was no telling how big the boom would get. Given time, Chicago would be a greater city than New York, if they didn't screw it up. That was a big "if," because they had always screwed it up in the past; it was the civic sport. My father talked about his real estate business. He was guessing that the growth — the way he said it, it sounded like underbrush — would be west and north. But probably it didn't matter where he bought property, because the growth would be everywhere, given time. There were only four or five people who decided things, and you tried to follow their lead; everything cost money. Then Carl was talking about the Little Fort Valley and laughing because the wiseguys had brought in slot machines and in one of the roadhouses there was "a wheel," all of this for the amusement of the summer and the weekend trade. Damned Syndicate, he said, you couldn't get away from them. And the authorities couldn't do anything about it, or didn't want to, or were afraid to. They're all the same, my father said. Carl said, They've come up here with a ton of money and muscle. He said that he'd done some legal work for one of them before he knew who they were and what they represented but, hell, they paid on time and in greenbacks. They scare you to death, Carl said. The one who was his client talked out of the side of his mouth like Cagney and it looked as if he was car-

rying, too, but he was so damned fat it was hard to tell. But no one cared, the one-armed bandits appealed to the tourists — can you imagine, tourists in the Little Fort Valley? Just the other day it was a wilderness. What did you do for them? my father asked. Carl didn't reply right away, and then he said they were buying property for summer cottages, themselves and their friends, and they needed title searches and the like. They were buying land piece by piece in order to keep the price down.

"No big deal," Carl said.

"Watch out for them," my father said.

"Yeah, Vic," Carl said. "I will."

In a minute they were talking politics, or my father was talking politics and Carl was listening while he snapped his rod, effortlessly sending the plug into deep water near the high point of land. My father said, God damned Dewey is a loser and Roosevelt is a winner and that's all there is to it. Dewey doesn't know anything about the country and that was why he'll lose and Roosevelt'll win. Roosevelt has the answer, tax and spend. And he has the power that comes with virtual dictatorship. And the booming wartime economy. That's his edge, my father said. Everyone has one. That's his. Might as well crown him King Franklin I. He and loser Dewey, what a great choice for the American people. God damned Easterners.

"There's nothing out there," my father said.

"Patience, Victor," Carl said. "Patience. Look at your son."

"Jack?" my father said.

I looked at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I said without looking up. I wanted to ask Carl what a Syndicate was, and what a one-armed bandit looked like. I was bored, dozing, watching my rod bend and dip. It seemed to me that we had been fishing for hours.

My father said, "There are a hell of a lot of fish in this lake, but they don't like us. They're opposed to us."

"They knew you were coming, Vic." Then, after a little pause, very quietly but with a fisherman's authority: "Jack, reel in a little. Victor, don't cast for a minute." Carl put his own rod down and leaned close to me. "I think you've got one." I began to protest, No, but when I started to reel in there was a sharp tug, as if the line had caught on something. Carl put his hand over mine, a cautionary gesture. Easy, he said softly. Just reel in, slow but not too slow, and easy. Don't jerk; pull. The fish made one little run, almost pulling the rod from my hands; it was amazing to me the way the line went out straight, as if it were alive, then stopped dead. The fish dove, loitering a moment near the bottom; and that was it. Reeling him in was like collecting an inanimate object. When I saw him at last, a foot below the surface, silvery and limp on the line, I began to smile. My fingers hurt but I forgot about them. After the first great rush of surprise, a tremendous calm seemed to come over me, and I knew this was just right, the way it was supposed to be; and now when I actually saw him, the excitement came back. I was filled up with it, with the satisfaction and the complete veracity of the moment, mine and mine alone. Carl maneuvered in behind me with the net.

"Do you want to bring him in?"

"You can do it," Carl said. "Bring him in a little."

"All right," I said.

"Good boy, son," my father said.

"Watch out, everybody," I said.

"You did real well," Carl said, sliding the net through the water, trapping the fish and bringing him to the surface so that we could look at him.

"Well," Carl said.

"I really caught a fish," I said.

"You sure did," Carl said.

"Is it a muskie?" Muskelunge were the fiercest fish in the lake and everyone wanted one.

"No," Carl said. "It's a little bass." He turned to wink at my

father. He was moving the net back and forth in the water, the fish trapped in the net.

"We can eat him tonight?"

"Sure," my father said. "You catch him, you eat him. That's a universal law."

I laughed. "And Ma cleans him."

"We'll see," my father said.

"It's great," I said.

"Bring him in, Carl," my father said. But Carl made no move to boat the fish, only continued moving him back and forth, trapped under water but alive. I felt rather than saw them look at each other.

Carl said, "He's a little small."

"What the hell," my father said.

"Under the limit," Carl said.

"What's the limit?" my father said.

"Believe me when I say that this one is under it."

"I don't care," I said.

"It's the kid's fish," my father said.

"It doesn't matter," I said. This was not the exact truth. I both wanted him and didn't want him; he was the evidence, but it didn't necessarily make him mine. Or did it? The fish itself mattered less than the excitement of catching him, making no mistakes, doing it the way it was meant to be done. Or so I told myself, watching him move sluggishly in Carl's net, the line moving with him. I struggled with this thought, not knowing what I really felt or wanted. I knew that I didn't want to hear them arguing. Their argument ruined everything. I had the vague idea that since Carl was the skipper of the boat it was his decision. I looked at each of them, waiting for an answer; but they were concerned with the argument and didn't notice me, so I turned back to the fish in the water.

"It's small," Carl said.

"Let the kid have his fish," my father said.

"Even if it's under the limit?"

My father laughed. "*Especially* if it's under the limit."