

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE BLUE CHIPS

美小说

An absorbing novel
of the ethics and strife of
big business medicine
documented down
to the last
test-tube



JAY DEISS

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For Catherene . . .

Author's Note

This book is a work of fiction, though it deals with one of the most complex fields of modern science – medical research. It was begun on Cape Cod, continued in Rome, finished in Positano.

The characters, the corporation, the laboratories, all were created by imagination. My gratitude must be expressed, however, to a small group of flesh-and-blood persons – a doctor of medicine, an industrial executive, a biochemist, a mycologist, a virologist, a laboratory technician – whose perceptive discussions and criticism of my manuscript have helped to ensure that fiction was firmly based in reality. For, in science, no fiction is stranger than truth.

PART 1

Chapter 1

UNLIKE most chemical plants, the odours which enveloped the hodge-podge buildings of Faber-King and Company were neither acrid nor repellent. On the contrary, the odours were pleasant and reassuring, rather like the yeasty aroma of homebaked fresh bread or the beer tap-room of an old-time bar. These scents were derived from towering microbiological fermentation tanks housed in structures which, nondescript on the outside, on the inside looked like magnificent modern cathedrals – shadowy, vast, and impressive. Nevertheless, from the agglomeration of old brick buildings, some dating back a hundred years or more, one could never have guessed that here was the greatest pharmaceutical factory in America, perhaps in the world. Its products ranged from liniment and laxatives to aspirin, vitamins, and penicillin; Faber-King was one of those firms which had grown by bits and pieces until it had become a giant of its kind.

As the taxi pulled up before the main entrance to the old administration building, Howell Winslow wondered for the first time what it would be like to design a plant from scratch, fully functional and also beautiful in its cohesion and simplicity – a plant which would express architecturally its purpose as the great cathedrals once had expressed man's aspiration toward God. The idea of designing a new plant, though it was outside his own sphere, suddenly intrigued him – imagine a factory which *looked* as though it were dedicated to mankind's health, to medicine's struggle against death. And it went without saying that the laboratories – inevitably attached to the factory – would be absolute models, the most advanced which technology could create. With an inward regretful sigh, Winslow relinquished the thought. Too much to hope for

— from *this* company, at any rate. Some day, perhaps — if management ever woke up to the real potential of real research.

Now he tightened the belt of his trench coat, made sure his grey felt hat was set at a decorous angle, and firmly clutched his brief case. Automatically he fumbled for his wallet, and from its thin well-worn leather folds paid the driver and tipped a dollar (it was a long ride across the Jersey marshes from the Hudson River). Then he turned toward the massive doorway marked by a bronze inscription: FABER-KING AND COMPANY, INC.

He saw before him a bare brick wall, four stories high, perforated here and there by small windows. And as always, even on this sun-bright day, all the fluorescent lights within were glowing. In a hundred years not a single board of directors had thought it worth the capital investment to open up the walls and let in sunlight. Recently, however, a new and taller flagpole, topped with a gilded ball, had been added, and the Stars and Stripes whipped eccentrically in the crisp spring wind.

As his foot touched the first concrete step, Winslow thought: What kind of a mood would the Old Boy be in this Monday morning? The first quarter was completed, and profits were up — but not enough. Due to declining penicillin prices and profits there were those who said the Company was lagging, and the Street had reflected a certain lack of confidence in the Company's stock. Rumours of impending change and reorganization had seeped all the way to Plant No. 2 in Illinois, and even the most theoretically remote of the scientific staff had questioned what the future held in store. But Winslow was not waiting. He had waited long enough. Too patiently and too long he had left his future in the hands of others. It was as though he had suddenly awakened from a protracted somnolence ... suddenly awakened into spontaneous action, like a dream which has continuity in reality.

He showed his pass to the uniformed guard, nodded pleasantly to the sleek young woman receptionist, and rang for the lift. Not for him the formalities: registration

and cross-questioning before one could stir from the foyer. As he waited for the lift, it struck him that the building seemed more than ever like a hospital: white-coated orderlies (really lab technicians) came and went ... a starch-capped nurse from the Company clinic ... young girls in white uniforms carrying racks of test tubes ... a display cabinet of medicaments in bottles and neat packages ... and above all the smell of medicine, associated with thoughts of life and death. Even in the automatic lift, with its aseptic grey metal walls, he felt hospitalized.

But the impression left him as he stepped off the lift on the top floor and walked down the corridor. These were business offices, like business offices anywhere. The partitions were one-third metal from the floor, two-thirds glass to the ceiling. All the lesser executives, with their secretaries, were on view. A few men waved casually to Winslow, as though they saw him every day. Electric typewriters whirred with barely audible clacks, young and middle-aged men murmured into microphones of dictating machines, lucite buttons on telephones flashed on and off, and an office boy quickly filled and emptied in-and-out boxes. Only an insider could know the desperate struggles for position which were taking place: stenographers to become secretaries, assistants to become managers, junior executives to become senior executives. To the casual observer all was calm within the atmosphere of brisk efficiency. Businesslike – Winslow thought. Why had no one yet coined the word *sciencelike*, to connote Efficiency + Depth?

In succession he passed a row of offices not glass enclosed, but most private, and whose tenants were indicated by small gilt letters on the doors. He knew the tenants, and they knew him. There were the hierarchy, the fortunate few, the goldenplated ones: the Vice-Presidents – in charge of Production, of Research (and Winslow walked more rapidly), of Sales, and the Executive Vice-President. Next came the Holy of Holies – holier even than the Old Boy's: the Chairman of the Board. And finally, past the Board Room, the Old Boy himself: George T. Saunders, President.

This door Winslow pushed open and entered. Here, too, all was without frivolity – the white walls relieved only by a postal-zone map; the polished battleship linoleum floor; the grey metal file cabinets; the grey metal desk protecting a colourless young woman.

He knew her slightly, especially by teletype and the long-distance phone. He took off his hat. 'Good morning, Miss Morrow,' he said, and smiled. 'Dr Winslow to see Mr Saunders.' The smile was meant to be self-assured and rather stern, but in spite of his intentions he could not prevent his engaging buoyancy from coming through. This, for him, was a serious moment, and he felt somehow that he must impress Miss Morrow with his seriousness before he walked into the lion's den. He ought not, really, to have smiled at all, he thought. He must watch himself with Saunders; self-assured, yes – but filled with regret. No smiles. Only politicians had to present a smiling front ... not scientists and businessmen.

Miss Morrow stopped typing and looked up at him solemnly through horn-rimmed spectacles. 'Good morning,' she said in a faint voice, without returning his smile. Then she blinked. 'Why, Dr Winslow – how on earth did you get here? It's certainly less than half an hour since Mr Saunders dictated a teletype message to you in Illinois. Wanted you here not later than noon tomorrow. And now ...!' She adjusted her spectacles and took another good look at him, as though doubting his embodiment.

'Mental teletype,' he said, and grinned – but there was a slight twist to the grin, occasioned by a sudden defensiveness, a sudden unease. Mr Saunders was not in the habit of issuing such peremptory summonses to Dr James Howell Winslow. Normally the call to a conference came through normal channels, through old Dr Merriweather Morris, Vice-President and Director of Research. He was Winslow's superior; an antediluvian scientist, in Winslow's opinion, but as a man sad, soft-spoken, and patient. Yet the summons itself was no more irregular than Winslow's presence at that moment in Saunders's office. It was almost as if a conspiracy existed; and Winslow could not

shake off the mixed feelings of surprise, chagrin, and guilt which possessed him. It was impossible that Saunders could have foreseen Winslow's presence, because Winslow had kept his mouth shut, confided his plans to no one. He had, in fact, even dissembled to the extent of taking a few days' leave for a pretended holiday in Chicago – later he could always say that he had changed his mind. So what on earth could Saunders want of him? The grin changed to a frown.

'I really don't think Mr Saunders expects to see you today, Dr Winslow,' Miss Morrow said. 'Besides, he's awfully busy. Several members of the Board –' She coughed apologetically. 'Tomorrow –'

'Let's surprise him, and see how he reacts,' Winslow said. 'Why not?'

'Well, all right,' Miss Morrow said, almost whispering. 'The circumstances *are* unusual. He ordered me not to disturb him, but I'll take in a note.' She peered through the horn-rimmed spectacles, and waited for approval.

'Thank you, Miss Morrow,' Winslow said, with all the formality due to the queen of the front office. 'I appreciate your help.'

She smiled a faint acknowledgement, and scribbled something on a slip of paper. Then, wraithlike, she slipped through the inner door, into the presence of the Old Boy himself.

Winslow, restless now, removed his trench coat and dropped his brief case on a file cabinet. He chose an aluminium chair indiscriminately, sat down, crossed his long rangy legs, and watched three anonymous stenographers work busily at electric typewriters. All three, robotlike, wore the earphones of electronic dictating machines, and were so perfectly trained that they gave no hint of awareness of Winslow's presence. Somehow the girls, like all identical machines, were stamped from the same dies. And, as they seemed less than human, Winslow quickly forgot their presence.

He folded his lean, strong hands and waited – but he could not keep his fingers still. Shortly he found that he

was punching one hand against the other, and only with the muscular discipline of a one-time practised athlete forced himself to stop. He was aware that he had reached one of those crises in his life which was likely to prove a major turning point. But which direction? That was the question. If only this abrupt and unexpected summons from the President did not serve to obscure the issue, did not divert him from his avowed and carefully-thought-out purpose. It was impossible to evaluate the summons – and any attempt would be nothing more than guesswork. His personal experience with Saunders was so limited ...

Once before, he had been called to headquarters from the remoteness of Illinois, called to the front office, called to the very desk of the Old Boy himself.

It was wartime, and out there on the prairie they were driven nearly mad by repeated demands from Washington and from the Old Boy for more penicillin – that miraculous drug which for the first time in all history was being mass-produced. But the difficulties were immense, for there was more gold in sea water than penicillin in the fermentation broth – and sometimes merely a sneeze or the flicker of an eyelash would seem to destroy the potency of days or weeks of work. Mysteriously, even under conditions of absolute sterility, the penicillin they harvested would become contaminated. Why? Why? There was no answer to that question.

But there *had* to be an answer, Winslow told himself. The miracle was man-discovered and man-directed, though for thousands of years man had looked at his mouldy bread without understanding its power to heal. And if the biochemistry of the penicillin mould was yet unknown, it was not magic – it followed the laws of nature and was therefore knowable.

Everything, they had done everything to humour the fickle mould. The corn-steep liquor was pure and tasty, the temperatures were exactly right, the bubbling air in the giant steel tanks was beyond all question sterile. Noth-

ing could come from the outside, not the smallest microbe, to upset the productive chemistry of the mould.

Within – the contamination had to come from within.

And in Winslow's mind for days – eating, working, sleeping – had been only that question: *why from within?* That was how, following the curious dialectics of life and death, he had discovered that the contamination was derived from the mould itself.

Then, his mind leaping, he had developed a process – certain controls simple enough in themselves but enormously complex theoretically – which sharply cut the ratio of failure. Not content to leave the testing of his theories to the chemical engineers, he himself had worked day and night over a pilot tank, until at last he fell asleep with his hand grasping a sterile-air intake valve. When he woke, and the supervisor told him the batch was pure and potent, he had laughed happily and said, 'Hey, fellows – I feel just like a prize brewmaster in a brewery. Bring out the steins!' He had been naïvely proud – a young father handing out cigars – and his colleagues laughed at him as he had laughed at himself.

But there had been other, even deeper, satisfactions. He was particularly happy because his process had been made immediately available to all other companies producing penicillin – with government intervention, there was no possibility of an exclusive Faber-King patent. Now, Winslow thought, maybe there will be enough penicillin for those non-military emergency cases almost always turned down by Washington because of shortages – the old on the brink of the death, the young on the threshold of life. He was glad for the children; and sometimes he speculated on how many thousands of lives his extra penicillin might save ... He thought of children as more valuable than soldiers.

So he had been called to headquarters, to the front office, to the desk of the Old Boy himself. He was presented with a scroll – a document in Old English gilt letters citing him for meritorious work – and a warm handshake from the Old Boy. 'Your next pay-cheque will reflect a rise – as

much as government regulations will allow,' the Old Boy had said, with a hint of apology in his voice. 'Of course, with a Faber-King patent, and your process ours alone – well, *then* your pay-cheque would be mighty different. Of course you understand this, Winslow.'

Of course. But the pay-off was not the pay-cheque. The pay-off was the consuming passion, the breathless probing of the dark unknown. Not that he ever said it exactly that way to himself. But he felt it, knew it. The dream, the inner dream, and the outward effort of his daily life – both had but one objective. *Not power over men, but power over nature.* That was the thing ... the big thing ...

Miss Morrow closed the door to the inner sanctum with noiseless delicacy, but not before the echoes of a booming voice could escape. Miss Morrow appeared puzzled and slightly upset.

'At first he was angry,' she said, building up her own role as a heroine. 'It's a *very* important meeting. And then he read the note. "Delighted," he said. "Tell Dr Winslow I'll see him at eleven o'clock."' She sighed faintly. 'I'm so glad it turned out all right.'

'Thank you, Miss Morrow,' Winslow said. 'Next time, I'll bring an orchid.' To his astonishment, she blushed, and he felt encouraged to ask the question which now was of most immediate concern. 'By the way,' he went on, with elaborate casualness, 'does Dr Merriweather Morris happen to be in the meeting? He doesn't know I'm here, and I thought –'

Miss Morrow hesitated. It was against regulations to reveal the presidential calendar. 'Do you want Dr Morris to know you're here?' she said, reverting again to near-whisper.

Now Winslow hesitated. 'Let me put it this way: I want to see Mr Saunders first.'

'Oh,' Miss Morrow said, and sighed. 'Well, Dr Morris isn't in the meeting. In fact, I haven't seen him this morning – so I don't know whether he's in the laboratories or in his office. And if I do see him, I'm sure I'll be much too