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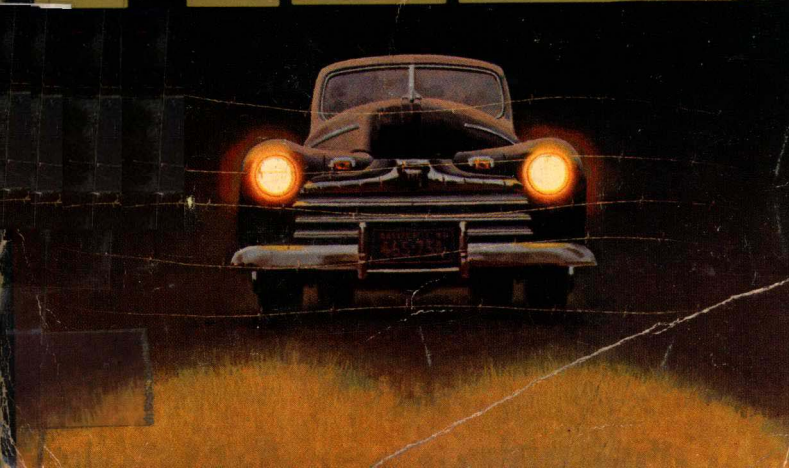
JOSEPH WAMBAUGH

THE ONION FIELD



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JOSEPH WAMBAUGH

THE ONION FIELD

A DELL BOOK

FOR THE CHILDREN:
Laura, Kurt, and Christine Hettinger
Valerie and Lori Campbell

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Note to the Reader

There is no way to thank properly the sixty persons whose intimate revelations to me permitted the telling of this true story, nor would the book have been possible without the help of scores of others who provided the thousands of pages of evidence and the mountain of clues needed to understand fully the most maddening case of any detective's life.

The re-creation of events was at all times done as accurately as possible. The strange relationship of Gregory Powell and Jimmy Smith could be re-created in great detail, thanks in part to a frank, unpublished autobiography written by Jimmy Smith during the trials.

The courtroom dialogue was not re-created. It was taken verbatim from official court transcript.

The names of two minor characters have been changed by request: the priest, Father Charles, and the juror, Mrs. Bobbick.

After having lived so long with this story, the investigator must implore the reader to respect the privacy of those men and women who let the truths be revealed, who let their story be told.

JOSEPH WAMBAUGH
Los Angeles, California

The wild insistent pipes and the marching feet defiantly answer that there is no more death.

A piper's incantation

The gardener was a thief. That's the thing that bothered him most. The trials didn't bother him so much anymore. It was strange how much he used to fear the trials, but not now. He just went to court and testified when he was told, then went back to his gardening.

For a while they feared the trials would continue clear into the new decade. But now they assured him it was almost over, and 1970 was still eight weeks away.

Sometimes the gardener wore a hat, the battered wide-brimmed straw he was wearing today. Mostly he wore it to keep the sweat out of his eyes, not to protect himself from the sun. The gardener loved the sun. He hated dark places, hated the night in fact, and sometimes sat up until dawn. No matter how tired he was and how much work he had to do the next day he was always glad to see the daylight come.

"Would you like some iced tea?" The old woman had come out on the porch without the gardener seeing her.

"No ma'am, I just have to trim back this juniper," he answered, squatting in the grass, his shears poised.

"That's a blue pfitzer."

"Yes, I know. It's one of the tallest junipers. It's very pretty," said the gardener. He was trying to remember what he'd learned about the blue-green juniper while landscaping with his friend. His friend knew all the botanical names. For the last year, though, he'd been working alone. He preferred to be alone these days.

"You know about junipers? How nice," said the old woman.

"I used to know the names better," said the gardener, removing the straw hat and raising his sweat-stained dusty face to the November sun. Yes, I used to remember, he

thought. But so many things were slipping away. It was getting so hard to remember.

Then the gardener glanced at a "no parking" sign on the street. He stared at the red arrow on the sign and something flashed in his mind, an indefinable glimmer. He began getting afraid for no reason at all, and a throbbing pain started at the base of his skull. He crossed the small yard to the mower because he didn't want to talk to the lonely old woman today. The fear was weakening him and the pain was ferocious. He wanted to work it off.

The gardener yanked the rope and the motor caught and he was behind the mower, the engine roaring in his ears. The pain was spreading like fingers of blood, spreading from the tiny spot at the base of his skull. He knew it would flood over his head until his entire skull felt crushed by a merciless bloody hand. Sometimes then it would go away.

Even the pain would not stop the gardener from thinking about his crimes. As he walked behind the mower, the pain pulsing clear through his eyes, the gardener thought of how the first time had been.

He had been walking through the store as part of a job, when he saw something he needed: masonry drills. He needed them for some cement work he was doing on his duplex. He had picked up the drills and put them in his pocket. And that was that. He couldn't believe it until it was done. But his heart began pounding then, more from excitement than fear. Or was *it excitement? It was so hard these days to recall all the emotions clearly. The crimes he could remember as if they just happened. The feelings were what eluded him.*

All thieves start small, the gardener thought gravely, as the shower of grass in his face helped him forget the pitiless driving pain. He used to think about the night in the onion field all the time—before he became a thief. But now the crimes he had committed overshadowed all else, even the four men and the death in the onion field.

Chapter 1

The night in the onion field was a Saturday night. Saturday meant impossible traffic in Hollywood so felony car officers did a good deal of their best work on side streets off Hollywood and Sunset boulevards. On those side streets, revelers' cars were clouted or stolen. F-cars also cruised the more remote commercial areas, away from intersections where traffic snarled, and the streets undulated with out-of-towners, roaming groups of juveniles, fruit hustlers, desperate homosexuals, con men, sailors, marines.

Nothing the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce said could camouflage the very obvious dangers to tourists on those teeming streets. Most of the famous clubs had closed, the others were closing, and Hollywood was being left to the street people. The "swells" of the forties and early fifties had all but abandoned downtown Hollywood and were gradually surrendering the entire Sunset Strip, at least at night.

In spite of it all, Hollywood Division was a good place for police work. It was busy and exciting in the way that is unique to police experience—the unpredictable lurked. Ian Campbell believed that what most policemen shared was an abhorrence of the predictable, a distaste for the foreseeable experiences of working life. It wasn't what the misinformed often wrote, that they were danger lovers. Race drivers were danger lovers. That's why, after Ian and his old friend Wayne Ferber had crashed a sports car several years before, he had given up racing, though he would never give up police work.

He felt that the job was not particularly hazardous physically but was incredibly hazardous emotionally and too often led to divorce, alcoholism, and suicide. No, policemen were not danger lovers, they were seekers of

the awesome, the incredible, even the unspeakable in human experience. Never mind whether they could interpret, never mind if it was potentially hazardous to the soul. *To be there* was the thing.

Karl Hettinger was newly assigned to felony cars and Ian was breaking him in. The partnership had jelled almost at once.

"You were in the marine corps too?" Ian asked, during the monotonous first night of plainclothes felony car patrol.

"Communications." Karl nodded.

"Really? So was I," Ian said, flickering his headlights at a truck coming onto Santa Monica from the freeway.

"The voice with a smile," Karl said, and they both grinned and made the first step toward a compatible partnership.

Each man learned after two nights together that the other was unobtrusive and quiet, Ian the more quiet, Karl the more unobtrusive, but a dry wit. It would take two men like these longer to learn the habits and tastes of the other, but once learned, the partnership could result in satisfying working rapport. There is nothing more important to a patrol officer than the partner with whom he will share more waking hours than with a wife, upon whom he is to depend more than a man should, with whom he will share the ugliness and tedium, the humor and the wonder.

"You dropped out of college in your final semester?" asked Ian during their third night. "So did I. What were you majoring in?"

"Agriculture, beer, and poker, not in that order," said Karl, who was driving tonight, a slow and cautious driver who now wore glasses at night, finding he had some trouble reading license plates.

"I was in zoology and pre-med. Looks like we're both out of our elements."

"I'm taking police science courses now," said Karl.

"So am I," said Ian. "You must know something about trees, don't you?"

"Probably not as much as I should," said Karl. "An ag

major has to know a little bit about tree and plant identification."

"I'm really involved in trees now," Ian said, becoming unusually garrulous as he always did when something interested him. "I'm landscaping my house, or trying to. You know anything about fruitless mulberry?"

"Not much."

"Well, it grows big and wide and fast. Instant shade. I like that. I get impatient waiting for things."

"You have to be patient to make things grow."

"Sometimes I think that's why I'm a policeman," said Ian. "Not patient enough. Antsy, my wife calls me. I guess I just have to be free and moving around."

"I don't know why *I'm* a policeman," said Karl. "It just happened. But I like it. I couldn't have a job where I was closed up inside four walls and a roof. That's the latent farmer in me."

"The best thing is that no matter how boring things get, like tonight for instance, something might be right around the corner. A little action I mean," said Ian.

Karl touched his cotton shirt, open at the throat, and the threadbare sport coat. "I'm glad not to go back to uniform."

"One thing to remember is that all those working hours you spent in patrol refereeing family beefs and writing tickets and taking reports—we'll use all that time in felony cars for one thing: to find serious crime on the street. You're bound to run up against a hot one once in a while. You just have to be a little more careful working this detail."

"Don't worry, I will." Karl nodded. "By the way, you ever cruise around behind the bar up here on McCadden? In the parking lot?"

"Parking lot? Don't think I know it."

"You just go north on McCadden from Sunset till you smell it, then go east till you step in it. It's like a zombies' convention back there. When I worked vice I used to see a lot of activity at night. Probably hypes more than anything."

"Let's check it out tonight," said Ian, pleased to see that his new partner was energetic. Good police work made time race.

"Hey look at that," said Ian on their fifth night, slowing as they passed a wooded acre in front of a white Spanish colonial home on Laurel Canyon. It was a balmy evening because the warm Santa Ana winds were blowing, and the canyon was a respite from the Hollywood traffic.

"Whadda you see?" Karl asked, twisting abruptly in his seat, tensing for a moment, as he peered through the smoky darkness in the woodsy residential valley.

"Liquid amber," Ian said, admiring the foliage almost hidden by tall shaggy eucalyptus. "You should see them in the fall. They change colors like flames. Beautiful. Just beautiful."

Karl shook his head and grinned.

Ian Campbell never noticed the grin. He watched the trees. The eucalyptus reminded him of a park in the heart of the city where the smell of tar filled the air and had once ignited a boy's imagination.

Ian had been a bookish romantic youngster—a dreamer his mother called him—and even as a high school senior, loved to dawdle for hours by the pits and stare into the tar until he vividly imagined great Pleistocene creatures there.

The boy could guess how it was when Imperial Mammoth went to the tarpits to die. Or rather *went* to drink. The pool at night looked inviting to Mammoth and the ominous bubbles rising were of no consequence. Nor was the black slime that slithered between his toes and climbed sucking his ankles. Panic struck when, loin deep in water and having drunk his fill, he tried to take his first step out and found himself trapped in the tar.

Mammoth was bewildered after the first surge of terror. He stood fifteen feet tall and his curved tusks even measured a greater length. Yet with all his might he could not drag his hairy bulk more than inches through the tar. His fearful bellow paralyzed the other creatures of the forest.

The great bellowing pipe suddenly blew a plaintive blast, and upon hearing it some of the creatures were filled with grief and dread because they instinctively knew death was upon him. Many of the predators, despite their

fear, were then drawn to him and themselves would die that night locked to his flesh, sucked down by the tar as they fed.

Ian Campbell heard Mammoth clearly as he lay there on the grass and stared into the dank pond, like ice varnished black except for the gaseous bubbles plopping on the surface in the moonlight. It was very dark despite the moon, and quiet, and the tar smell was everywhere. Ian heard how Mammoth sounded at the last: plaintive, yes, but defiant.

Somehow Ian *knew* that Mammoth would be defiant at the end. And Ian suddenly had the urge to jump to his feet and sound a call which he was sure somehow would drift across the ages to Mammoth who would sense what every piper knew—that there is no death.

Then to prove it he stood, adjusted the braces on his teeth to better taste the reed, and breathed deeply of the tarry chewy night air which could be blown into a tartan bag.

His silhouette there on the grassy knoll startled a little girl who was strolling with her father through Hancock Park along the path just north of Wilshire Boulevard. The child stopped and gasped as the silhouette took shape in the darkness. It had three horns which protruded from the side of it. It was tall, slender, erect, its head thrust back from a length of horn distended from its mouth. Then the sound came out of it—eerie, baffling—and she started to cry from fear. Her father picked her up and laughed reassuringly.

"It's a bagpipe, honey. It's just a boy playing a bagpipe."

Ian Campbell never heard her cry. He was preoccupied, struggling to get the reeds vibrating the right way. Sometimes they just wouldn't snap in there. In their own way the pipes were much harder than the piano. With no chords you just couldn't put harmony into them, and the timing and grace notes which embellished the melody notes meant everything. He took a deep breath, moistened the valve, and was careful to keep an imperceptible pressure on the bag with his elbow, hoping to keep the constant flow through the reeds. He blew and hoped, and on top of everything else the reeds began to chirp!

Ian tossed the three drones off his shoulder and began

pacing disgustedly. For this he had pleaded with his mother to sell his piano. For this crazy instrument! Three hundred years ago Pepys heard one and said, "At the best it is mighty barbarous music." He was dead right, thought Ian.

The boy glanced at the tartan bag. It was a Campbell tartan, of course, for his clan. As always it stirred memories of the race, of fighting men with huge claymores, and the Campbells who sided with the English king against Bonnie Prince Charlie, and who slew the Macdonalds.

Then Ian discovered that he was unconsciously marching the twelve-foot square, caressing the ivory and ebony shaft, pressing ever so lightly on the tartan bag with his elbow. So he boldly threw the drones over his shoulder and without a moment's hesitation played "Mallorca."

It was good. The best he'd ever played it. And he tried "Major Norman Orr Ewing," the song which would earn him a medal in the novice class of the coming Winter Games. He played and played and marched the twelve-foot square, lost in the music.

His mother did not allow him to play his pipes in the apartment. But what did it matter? Living across the street from Hancock Park and the tarpits was perfect for a piper. What better place to march than here on the turf out in the open, under the stars and lights off Wilshire Boulevard, with no sound but distant tire hum, smelling grass and ferns, and the tarry air so thick you could taste it. The seventeen year old solitary piper sucked the tar-laden air, and blew it through the blowpipe, his fingers striking alertly, and imagined the bag would somehow be better if magically cured by tarry fossilized air from another age.

Chrissie Campbell sat outside on the porch of the apartment waiting for Ian and enjoying the evening. In the distance someone was playing the radio loudly and from time to time she would catch bits of music, and later the laughter when the debris inevitably crashed from the swollen closet of Fibber McGee and Molly. Then the station was changed and the dialer stopped for a moment on a program of classical music and she tried to identify the piece being played by the violinist. She was reminded of her husband, Bill Campbell, the tall, curly haired doc-

tor who had also played violin and was now dead five years. She sighed and wished for him. It was easy to wish and remember on nights like this, bright and balmy, when something like Indian summer comes to Southern California.

They had met at Manitoba Hospital where she worked as bookkeeper, she born in Saskatchewan, daughter of a railroader, her family even more Scottish than his Highlander people because hers were originally from the Hebrides and spoke Gaelic. It was natural that these two Scottish Canadians should meet there in the hospital and fall in love, and that in the hard times they should emigrate to America where things were said to be better.

They had good years in Valley City, North Dakota, the small college town where they lived almost on the bank of the Cheyenne River, on flat land near wheat fields and homestead trees.

The Depression was almost as hard on a doctor as it was on farmers and other town workers, but it was a very good life until after the war began, when the physician began to die from cancer.

He was in fact dead for the year he continued to draw breath. Many of their talks, their secret talks, were of death because he diagnosed his own illness and they had to prepare for it. The Depression and the illness drained them financially and there were long serious conversations riddled with merciful lies from her.

"You're not afraid are you, Chrissie?"

"No, Bill, I'm not."

"You're a strong capable woman, you needn't be afraid about making your own way."

"I'm not afraid, Bill. Really I'm not."

"The more we talk about California the better I like the idea."

"Yes, so do I, Bill."

"The war has made things boom out there. There's a great need for people. You're certainly not too old to find a good job."

"I'll raise a strong son, Bill. I swear it."

"You're not afraid, Chrissie?"

"I'm not, Bill. I'm not."

And when she was alone with her thoughts during that year and for some time afterward, the fear would come.

She never told him of the smothering fear which came always in the night and had to be defeated.

Chrissie believed she had some salvation in the inherited blood of dour and steely men. Her people were from the Isle of Lewis, the northernmost island of the Hebrides, tempered by the icy Atlantic brine which blasted their faces for centuries. She had their strength and she knew it. More than that, she had their capacity to endure.

It was Chrissie Campbell's theory that she could give Ian culture and discipline, and that these were two great gifts, perhaps all she could ever really give. After Bill's death the discipline was essential for them both.

"You're too strict with me, Mother. You're just too strict, and *don't* say someday I'll thank you."

"I won't say that, Ian."

"You're just *too* strict, Mother."

Chrissie found work, first clerical, and then as an auditor and bookkeeper, and now with the war three years past, they were living in the Park La Brea Apartments, in what was certainly an upper middle class neighborhood. It was very hard to pay the rent, but what a marvelous neighborhood for Ian, who could spend every day across the street in Hancock Park. And he had to be near a park or he'd be arrested for the noise he made with those infernal pipes.

It had been disappointing to sell the piano for bagpipes, especially since she had started Ian on the piano at the age of four, and Chrissie had had a few of the passing dreams that mothers of young musicians have. The piano was the perfect instrument to help instill culture and discipline. The pipes were another matter, a wild, almost willful instrument which undeniably stirred your blood, but with a key (if you could call it that) which could never be duplicated on piano, so that she wondered what all the years of piano had really done for him except to win him a contest he cared nothing about, where he played Rachmaninoff so well.

But if he wouldn't be a piano playing doctor, at least he'd be a doctor, that was certain. And what a physician he would be! Chrissie imagined him ten years hence, a tall, curly haired intern like the one she married, but taller, even *more* intelligent, and sensitive, with a resolute mouth and classic jaw, one of the finest she had ever