

# fantastic

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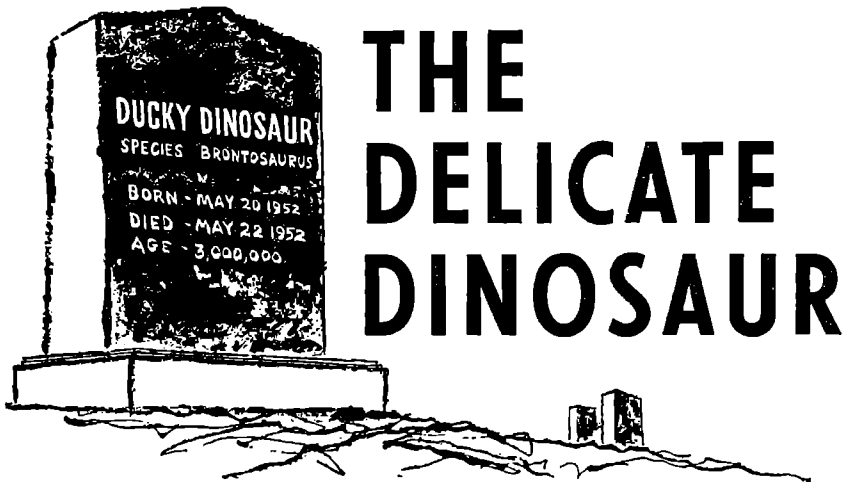
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By **WILLIAM MARKHAM ALTMAN**

*Seen any dinosaurs lately? You haven't? Then that makes you about the only one! Honestly, all the people who haven't seen flying saucers are sure that Ducky, the delicate dinosaur, just turned left at Twelfth and Main! Call it a symptom of the times . . . or, if you want the real story, listen to the strange tale of Luther Doolittle, promotor extraordinary.*

*Bill Altman is an associate director for CBS, has done TV scripts for such programs as Danger, Suspense, Studio One, and has twice won Avery Hopwood Awards at the University of Michigan. This is his first published work of fiction.*

**I**F the phone rings once a day, it rings fifty times. The voice changes, but it's always the same excited revelation: "Mr. Doolittle? I just saw Ducky!"

Ducky, I might add, is a dinosaur.

Now, as far as I know, *nobody* could possibly have seen a live dinosaur for the last couple of

million years. At least, nobody who is walking around loose.

Except me, that is.

My name is Luther Doolittle, and ever since I learned my way around a dictionary I've been arranging adjectives in a manner calculated to separate money from wallets. I've always snickered at the greenhorns who expect

a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow. Being in the promotion business, I hasten to add, of course, that I have peddled those same pots to earn my beer and beans. Only now I don't know who's doing the laughing. It all began two months ago — on a Tuesday — at Metropolis Museum.

I swung open the big bronze door and went in. Like most everybody else, I probably wouldn't have given a second thought to all the fossils, Phoenician gravy-boats, and early Sumerian bric-a-brac on display inside the museum, if it weren't for the fact that I couldn't figure why I got summoned here. After all, if a great museum wants a promotion job done, why not pick on a big outfit? Then I jiggled the thirty-five cents in my pocket — the only assets the firm had — and decided not to tinker with the wheel of fortune.

In front of a Greek mirror, I stopped to check the outer man. The inner man was scared, but good. I straightened my tie, ran my hand through my hair — purely a nervous gesture since I have a crew-cut for low overhead — and headed down the corridor past the Fifth Dynasty Egyptian wing toward the suite occupied by the board of directors.

"Go right in, Mr. Doolittle. The Board is expecting you." The secretary smiled, and I tried to walk suavely through the door

without tripping on the great oriental rug. I just made it.

"Archibald Buchanan," a voice was booming, "if you go through with this vulgar scheme to publicize Metropolis, I shall stop — at once — *all* my work on the flora and fauna of the Eocene era —" The voice belonged to Professor Wesley, a gigantic guy with a full beard.

"Don't talk like a fool," said Buchanan, a nervous little man at the head of the conference table.

"— Just as soon as my pension comes through!" He moved to sit down, but before he hit the chair he was up again with the clincher: "Including midget horses!"

"Oh, sit down, Wesley," Buchanan snapped wearily. Evidently Wesley was used to being told to shut up, because he did. He sat there pouting like a small child.

No one seemed to notice me except Professor Everett, who met me halfway across the room. "Nice of you to come," he smiled. We shook hands, and I wondered whether I should have wiped off the perspiration first. "Gentlemen," he announced, "this is Mr. Doolittle."

Wesley and Buchanan stopped wrangling and turned to stare. There I stood, a freshly uncrated specimen of *Species Promotiana* from the Madison Avenue excavations. I nodded nervously.

"Of Doolittle, Banks, Gold

and . . . eh . . . ?” Buchanan stopped.

“That’s all,” I said. Actually Doolittle was all, having recently and bitterly become sole and senior member, aged thirty-three. Jim Banks was now happily selling shoes, and Mel Gold had just upped and bought a farm outside Middleboro, New Hampshire. Likewise happy, just living for a change.

“Well, sit down, Doolittle, sit down,” Buchanan snapped, indicating the chair at the far end of the table. He kept peering and squinting at me through his thick-lensed bifocals. His mouth was always a little bit open, as if he were about to toss in a peanut at any second. Only, if you ever met Archibald Buchanan, you’d know he wasn’t the type.

“I have asked Mr. Doolittle to come here,” Buchanan began in his high, clipped voice, “to present him with our peculiar problem. . . .” He droned on, and I raised my six-foot-even straight up in the fifteenth century throne-chair I occupied. “Mr. Doolittle,” Buchanan was now saying, “would your firm take on the responsibility of — I believe the word is ‘selling’ — the museum to the public.”

I swallowed hard. It was all over, and I didn’t even have to close the sale! I was blissfully dreaming my way through a new office and reviving diplomatic con-

tact with the telephone people, when the axe fell.

“We have managed to make available,” Buchanan was still going on in his pedantic way, “one thousand dollars.”

A thousand dollars! It wouldn’t pay for postcards. Not to mention the fact that I couldn’t make a dime on the deal. Now that the bubble had burst, all the tension drained out. “Look, fellows, I’m all for spreading some of this Greek stonework around town. Good deal.” I nodded to a bust of Aristotle. “But it’s no soap.”

“I think I know what Mr. Doolittle means.” Everett spoke wryly, sparing me the pain. “The amount would be wasted, and the results nil.”

“On the nose,” I seconded.

“I see.” Buchanan was visibly shaken, because he closed his mouth. “Dr. Everett, the staff — a few of us, you know — pooled our . . . what little we had, in the hope that . . .” He never finished the sentence.

The poor honest guys! What did they think the world was like? “Professor Buchanan, even if the money were enough — which it isn’t — you’d still need a pitch.”

“I beg your pardon?” Buchanan said, peering again.

“A gimmick — a Cinderella story. Something to sell.”

Wesley was on his feet again. “If the people don’t want to know

their cultural heritage," the beard waved, "then they deserve to remain ignorant!"

"And they'll love every minute of it," I nodded in agreement.

"What about a pamphlet?" Buchanan glowed. "Describe the exhibits. You know: Greek section, North American section. . . ."

"North America is a department now. The new wing," Wesley corrected.

"Of course. I forgot." Buchanan turned to me. "A pamphlet!" he beamed.

Maybe I should have taken their thousand, pocketed five hundred, and made them happy with a little booklet. They'd never have known the difference, and I'd have been spared the two mad months I just spent in "happy valley"! Instead, I kissed that new office good-bye and explained: "I'm a square operator. Believe me, I *need* this account. But unless you have an angle to promote this granite warehouse, it's a waste of money."

"A modest brochure on midget horses? Fascinating!" said Wesley, getting into the act. No local green-sheet reader could have been more intense than Wesley was about these prehistoric gee-gees that pranced about millions of years before the first parlay player appeared.

"You'd be surprised, sir," I let him have it, "but the number of

people in this city who live and breathe midget horses would stagger you."

"If you'd come back to the twentieth century for five minutes, Wesley, you'd realize Metropolis is mortgaged to the roof." Buchanan sighed, closed his mouth, and Everett added solemnly: "We can't even afford to pay the electric light bill."

Valiantly, Wesley struggled to his feet. "I — I shall be honored to donate as many candles as are needed," he offered gravely.

"Sit down, Wesley!" Wesley sat. "Well, Mr. Doolittle?"

"It just won't work, Professor. Believe me." I made a weak attempt at a smile. "I'm sorry."

"I have spent my life," said Buchanan wistfully and to no one in particular, "happily pouring over the complicated credit system of ancient Babylon. My spare time I have devoted to the museum's finances." He sighed. "Both are now equally defunct. Very well, gentlemen," he resolved, "facts are facts. We shall close Metropolis next week."

"I wish I could suggest something. I . . ." Never in my life had I been more sincere, and in my business that was saying a lot.

Everett shook his head, and all the bright front was gone. "It's a crying shame. So *much* work to be done."

Even Wesley thought of someone else. "But Dr. Preston can't

stop work on the dinosaur egg now!"

"It's too bad," shrugged Buchanan.

I had slipped away from the mourners and was easing out the door, so when Wesley threw his rabbit-punch, it hit me right in the back of the neck: "But the egg may rot! Time is of the upmost —"

I think I cocked my head the way a dog does when you make a face at it. Not sure I had heard right, I turned around. "Did you say a dinosaur egg . . . would rot?"

"How long do you think it will keep?" thundered Wesley, as logically as the Mad Hatter.

"Isn't it . . . I mean, isn't it a little overdue now?"

"It has been on ice!" Wesley triumphantly explained.

"Dr. Preston found this egg in an Alaskan glacier — perfectly preserved." Buchanan extended his hand as he made the explanation. "On behalf of the staff, Mr. Doolittle, I wish to thank you for your . . ."

But I couldn't hear him. Inside my head a Geiger-counter was popping off like crazy. "An egg . . . a dinosaur egg — like this — is rare?" I stammered.

"Priceless," said Wesley. "Next to midget horses, nothing so —" Then he smiled gently.

"The only one in existence."

Buchanan was proud.

"And it's been in the deep-freeze all this time?"

"Just a lucky find." And again Buchanan offered his hand. "Well, Mr. Doolittle, it has been —"

"Gentlemen, I accept your offer!"

"What?" Buchanan was confused.

"That egg may not look like much, but it's pure gold! It's the fairy tale! Where is Dr. Preston?"

"In the icebox — in the basement."

"Gentlemen, relax. Metropolis is out of the red!"

"But I don't —" Buchanan's mouth was open again.

"This egg may be the greatest discovery since the omelet!"

I banged on the door of the room they called the icebox. Actually, it was one of those temperature-controlled places. A tall, sad-looking man opened the door.

"Dr. Preston?" I said breathlessly.

"Nope," he shook his bald head. "I'm Dudley Jameson. Janitor."

I saw the broom in his hand as I brushed past him to a young woman who was adjusting an X-ray machine. "Where's Dr. Preston, Miss?"

"I'm Dr. Preston," she said, turning around to face me.

"Well, how nice," I said, staring at her. Pick the most unlikely





looking girl in the world to be an archeologist, and it would have to be Janet Preston.

She brushed back a brunette curl from her forehead. "Who are you?"

"Doolittle, Luther Doolittle. I'm going to publicize Metrop —"

"Oh, yes. I've heard." She froze. "There's nothing down here to publicize." She turned her pretty face away, brushing me off like a half-baked theory.

"The egg. Where is the egg?" I asked excitedly.

"Right there." I swung around to see. "Be careful," she cautioned. "Don't touch it!"

There it sat, and I'd nearly knocked it off the table. It was about the size of a football, sort of grey-colored, and it rested on a plaster of paris base.

"What a beautiful sight." I sniffed at it. "Still good?"

"It's in a state of suspended animation."

"I know, but is there anything inside?" I asked impatiently.

"Mr. Doolittle," she pulled her jacket tighter, "can't you go somewhere else? Publicize Dr. Wesley's midget horses."

"The public wants to know about this egg."

"But I have months of work to do!" She took off her glasses, and she looked even better.

"Look, Dr. — er . . ."

"Preston," she snapped.

"In front of the Preston?"



"Janet."

"Janet." I turned it over in my mind. "I like that."

"That's just for friends!" and back went the glasses.

"Janet, listen. This museum can't get credit to buy letterheads. We're going to get it back on its feet!" Evidently it was colder than I realized, because I sneezed.

"God bless you," she said mechanically, and turned the switch on the X-ray machine. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm busy."

"This is the only angle in this whole fossil factory." I was desperate. "Nobody wants to hear about King Tut —"

"King Tutankhamen," she corrected me.

"Or him either. De Mille has done that."

"But who cares about eggs?"

"Not eggs. *The* egg!" I pitched it hard.

"I — I don't like the whole idea. It's not . . . scientific."

"But it's salable!"

"The answer is *no!*" She may have been a Ph.D. and a scientist, but that will of hers was all woman.

"Do you or don't you want Metropolis to stay open?"

"Of course I do, but —"

I got up steam and rolled on. "Have you any right, Janet, to stand in the way of shoving culture down this city's throat?"

"I —"

"Of course you haven't!"

Her sales resistance was breaking. The more it cracked, the prettier she got. "But my work?"

After that, I didn't give her a chance to say anything. I wound it up: "You're going to work. As you never did before." I took her shoulders in my hands. "What do you say?"

"All right," she sighed, and I saw her eyes were clear and blue. "What do you want me to do?"

"Hatch that egg!"

Her mouth worked furiously, but for a second nothing came out. Then, "You're mad," she blurted angrily:

"Try an incubator. Try digitalis. I'll make this icebox more famous than Frigidaire! Newspapers, television —"

"But my reputation! Every scientist knows that egg is dead."

"But the public will want to believe it's alive! They'll worry about . . ." Then the name came to me. ". . . about Ducky. That's it! Ducky the Dinosaur! They'll watch every move he makes." I think I was even selling myself. "All the world loves a baby!"

"A baby!" She stood up, all trim five-feet-five of her. "Get out of here!"

I was already writing my first press release aloud: "Ducky, three million years old, is about to break forth! Bridging the gap across millions of years from murky pre-

historic times to the century of the atom, an egg —”

“Can I help?” Dudley, who had been sitting near the door watching our tennis match, eagerly interrupted.

“Absolutely, Dudley. *You* are god-father to Ducky!”

He beamed, a man with a mission.

“This is a horrible mistake!” But Janet was punching in the dark.

“Let me worry about that. Dudley — where can I work?”

“There’s a storeroom next door.”

“I wouldn’t think of working anywhere else.” I bent over the egg. “I’m going to hatch you, Ducky, and all America is going to root for you. Dudley, go find me an incubator.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, dropping the broom and sprinting out the door.

In a desperate, defeated monotone, Janet kept repeating, “It won’t work. It’s madness. It won’t work.”

“That’s beside the point. This egg is going back in the nest!” I whispered to it gently: “Ducky! Hatch, Ducky! The world is your oyster!”

I set up shop in the storeroom and pounded out press releases all night. My typewriter rested on an unidentified sarcophagus, and I sat on a crate stencilled: EGYPTIAN

HEADGEAR. FRAGILE. Dudley, happier than he’d ever been, served as copyboy. All night long he rode the subway, going from city-room to city-room, dropping releases as I typed them. The next day the most staid and respectable morning paper carried an eight-column streamer: *Metropolis Museum Attempts to Hatch Dinosaur Egg!* The afternoon tabloids were even better.

Half of that thousand dollars I sank into a singing commercial, and pretty soon everybody was humming:

*What can make your life much happier?  
Ducky makes your life much happier!  
Send in your crisp, green bills today —  
Help speed Ducky on his way!*

The contributions poured in, and we had to hire fifteen girls to sort the mail and count the money.

Ducky caught the imagination of the country, and within forty-eight hours he — or she or it — was a national institution. For three solid days I called every newspaper man I knew, planted feature stories and sold rights to the name *Ducky Dinosaur*. Every promoter in the business wanted to buy in. Baby foods, rattles, children’s soap, all carried the magic phrase. Even plain chicken eggs from New Jersey claimed to have “that rare, sweet, prehistoric flavor”. Within a week the small fry had deserted the interplanetary space routes of TV, and manufacturers of yesterday’s fast-

moving neutralizer-ray guns were tearing their hair and quickly re-tooling for maces, axes and lion-skins. *Variety* headlined the public excitement: *Ducky Soap Series Boff!* Talk about giving away gold bricks! It was an adman's dream.

Even *The Daily Worker* got into the act and front-paged a scathing editorial. Ducky, they screamed, was a Wall Street device to stave off economic collapse.

Never in history had a people waited more breathlessly than they did for the hatching of this two-and-three-quarter pounds of eggshell.

Through it all, I kept thinking about Janet Preston. Actually, I didn't see her again for a full five days.

"Phenomenal! Simply phenomenal," said Buchanan at the board meeting.

"It's all a lie! A fraud!" Wesley was still doing business at the same old stand.

"But Wesley — over a million dollars in contributions!" Buchanan was holding up some of the bigger bills as I came into the room. "Mr. Doolittle, it's wonderful. The nation has taken Ducky to its heart."

"It has also reached for its pocketbook," I added, "and that's the test."

"Not everybody!" said the

voice of doom sourly. He waved a little magazine at me. "*The Anthropological Journal* has debunked us."

"What's the circulation?" I asked.

"About five hundred."

"Forget it," I said.

"Those crowds," clucked Buchanan at the window. "It's like the World Series."

And it was. About twenty hulking Pinkerton men struggled vainly to preserve order in the line that stretched for blocks, waiting to get a peek at the egg in its chrome-plated, glass-enclosed incubator. Every once in a while someone would shriek excitedly that he'd seen the egg move. It was impossible, but the oftener it happened the longer it took to wipe the doubt from my mind.

Buchanan got serious. "Mr. Doolittle, may we stop now? And put Ducky back in the icebox?"

I think it was right then — in the middle of that sentence — that I realized what had happened. Ducky back in the icebox? They just didn't understand. "Ducky doesn't belong to you any more. He belongs to everybody." They were confused. "If he goes back in the icebox like an ordinary egg," I went on, "that crowd out there will slit your throats!"

Even Everett, the eternal op-



timist, was worried. Oh, he didn't say much, but I could see it in his face. The more Buchanan and Wesley wailed about the museum and what was happening to its reputation as a bulwark of science, the more scared I got. There just wasn't any way out.

Funny thing, though, my fright was a picture of Janet slowly pulling the trigger of a shotgun aimed right at my head.

"Our reputation. It's in peril!" Buchanan was almost frantic.

"What?" I asked, coming back to earth.

"It's in the ashcan. We're a side-show," echoed Wesley glumly.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. Instead, I just looked out the window at the long line of believers.

Everett sounded almost con-

trite as he said, "It's true, Mr. Doolittle. Two more of our staff quit today."

"And baby makes three!" Janet Preston wheeled into the room like a runaway filly. "Professor Buchanan," she said angrily, but looking straight at me, "I haven't been able to get near that egg in a week."

"Now, Janet — I mean, Dr. Preston, don't worry. . . ." I floundered.

"Don't worry!" She backed me into Aristotle's corner. "I'm the laughing stock of the archeological world. And that egg will never hatch. Never in another million years!"

"One hundred and fifty million Americans are ready to call you a liar," I fought back, pointing out the window.

"You —!" She couldn't find

the words. "You phony copy-writer! I hope you spend the rest of your life promoting — *bird-seed!*" She looked so pretty when she got angry that way.

"The campaign was a success. Wasn't it, fellows?" They nodded unhappily, as if I'd asked for confirmation of their own death sentences.

"Only one person is mad enough to suppose that that egg will ever produce a dinosaur!"

"Don't be so sure." I said. "The egg is perfectly preserved. You said so yourself, Dr. Preston." I had to believe it!

"That shell is as empty as your head." She brandished two X-ray plates, and the trio swooped down to gobble.

"Holy Mackerel, let me see!" I grabbed the plates and ran to the window. It was true. A herd of hungry squirrel couldn't have done a better job of emptying that shell. The worst had happened!

"And I'm leaving!" She snatched the plates out of my hand. "Perhaps a few newspapers would like to see these negatives!"

"Janet, wait!" I was at the door.

"Now, what good would that do, Dr. Preston?" said Everett, throwing oil on the waters. "Besides, we need you here." He was smooth all right.

"Need me?" Janet repeated sarcastically. "For what?" She spun around, livid, to face us. "To baby-sit for that incubator

in the lobby? And you! You ought to be on exhibit here!" She swung. My face snapped up with the sting of the blow. "That's for Ducky!" She wheeled, and headed for the door.

"Quite a wallop for a little fellow," I said wryly, rubbing my cheek.

She turned and came back. "And this is for me!" This time she got the other cheek, and she was out the door before I could say ouch.

"Mr. Doolittle, please! Don't let her leave. Not with those X-rays. . . ." Buchanan wailed.

As I reached the refrigerator room I slowed down. The door was ajar and Janet was sitting at the work table, her head in her arms.

"Janet?" I said quietly.

Startled, she looked up, and I could see she'd been crying. "Please leave my icebox, Mr. Doolittle. At once." Her voice was as frigid as the atmosphere.

"The name is Luther," I said gently, drawing my coat-collar tighter.

"In my book it's mud!" she flared, turning away.

"Of course," I said gaily, "I — I hate the name Luther."

"Check!"

"My friends call me Lou."

"What friends?" She spun around to face me. Her eyes were all misty, and she pursed her lips defiantly the way women do when

they're trying to be brave. My future as a promotion man — even the very real possibility of a stretch in the clink — didn't matter at the moment. I could take anything but her loathing for me.

"Janet — it's my fault, this mess," I said, feeling very small. "But you can't leave Metropolis like this."

"Watch me!" she said, grabbing an instrument case from the shelf.

"Where will you go?"

"There's always an expedition to — to . . ." She made a grotesque little face, and the tears broke through. ". . . To Afghanistan or somewhere."

"The museum needs you."

"No they don't." She wiped away a tear and began throwing instruments into the case.

"I need you." It came out simply. It wasn't what I'd planned to say, but it was true.

"All anybody needs is that stunt of yours. That Ducky Dinosaur. That three-million-year-old annuity!" I sneezed and she said, "God bless you," very perfunctorily.

I tried to pull my coat tighter. "Can't we go somewhere where it's warmer, and talk?"

"I'm quite comfortable." I could see her breath.

"I admit this whole Ducky Dinosaur pitch was my idea, but —"

"Sporting of you. Please pass the microscope."

"— But I only did it because the museum was in trouble. And I happen to think that all this is worth saving."

"You did it because you have the soul of a commercial." She snatched the microscope.

"No, Janet, look —"

"*You* look!" she demanded, holding up a little green box. "*Ducky Dinosaur Food*. Plain turtle-food! A million packages in a million homes!" Viciously, she flung it to the floor.

"It brought in twenty thousand dollars. To carry on research."

She looked at me, frightened. "Luther, you've got to stop all this."

I smiled weakly. "How?"

"Tell them the truth. Tell them that egg has as much chance of hatching as the ones in their own iceboxes." She was being so logical. To her it was so simple.

"Darling, they —" I stopped myself. "Janet, they wouldn't believe me."

"Why not?"

Then it hit me: the whole horrible wonder of it. "Because I've created a myth." I ran my fingers absently across the plaster base on which the egg had rested. I was trying to spell it out for myself as much as for Janet. "A fairy tale that's just logical enough to

pass for the real McCoy." I looked at her. "A fairy tale, Janet, is a thing of awe, and not to be laughed at." I sat down and shook my head. "No one would believe me."

She was staring into space too. "It certainly is a mess, Luther." I sneezed again, and this time her "God bless you" sounded almost tender.

"Janet, you can't leave Metropolis. I — I feel responsible."

"How very logical," she flared again, but I acted fast.

"I'll call off all publicity. No more releases. No more pictures —"

"And Ducky out of that incubator?"

"Ducky back in the icebox," I promised. "Will you stay?" I asked contritely.

"I'll stay." It was the first time I'd seen her smile, and I saw she had dimples.

I put my hands on her shoulders. "Janet? You're the most . . . the most wonderful . . ."

"Yes, Luther?" she sounded breathless.

". . . The most wonderful archeologist I've ever known."

It was so good to hear her laugh. "That's the nicest compliment anyone ever paid me."

"I can do better," I said, edging closer.

"We'll . . . talk later." She slipped away. "Go get Ducky out of that incubator. And no tricks?"

"No tricks!" I said happily.

I practically floated upstairs and into the main lobby where the incubator stood. Dudley was peering into the case and talking excitedly to two uniformed Pinkerton men. "All right, boys," I said to the two cops. "Go home. It's all over. Ducky is through."

"He sure is!" said Dudley, hoisting his broom like a spear. "Ducky has arrived!"

"Arrived?" I stared. "Where?" Then I peered over, through the hinged glass door at the top of the incubator. "Holy Smokes!" I tried to say, but it came out as a gurgle.

There, sitting like royalty on the blue plush cushion, were *two* halves of the eggshell. The impression was for all the world like every calendar picture you ever saw of a little chick stepping out into the world. Only the chick was *missing!*

I wanted to get out. My stomach felt the same way. "Listen, fellows: we've got to keep this quiet, understand?" They nodded, but it was the excited nod of small children being told not to play in the nice new sandbox.

There was an explanation. There had to be. It could have been a slight temperature change; the egg may have had a crack in it for these few million years; or more likely, some mother's little darling had probably reached his paws in to touch when the guards'

backs were turned. Whatever the reason, Janet would never believe it.

Within two hours, *The News* had an extra on the street: *Ducky Hatches. Flies Coop!*

The museum's switchboard was jammed. Every woman within fifty miles of Metropolis called to swear she'd seen Ducky in the backyard. The size, shape and color varied with the local dogs and cats, but the insistence was rabid.

"But — but it's impossible!" Buchanan pleaded with the egg-shell as he bent over the incubator.

"What's the difference," I blabbered frantically. "The word is out!"

"It's a fraud," thundered Wesley. "That shell was always empty."

"Don't say that, professor." Dudley was very hurt. "He just hatched, that's all," and he smiled benignly — the smile of a believer — at Wesley's confused face.

"Now look here, Jameson," Wesley started to lecture. Then he realized it was no time for logic. "Doolittle, you've got to squelch this thing!" he demanded.

I thought of Janet, and went cold again. I turned to Professor Everett, who hadn't said a word. "I'll make a phone call. Please find Dr. Preston. Try to explain that I didn't — didn't —"

"Don't worry," he said gently, and I made tracks for the conference room to phone Harry Rosenthal, a friend of mine on the *Globe*. Harry was a smart newspaper man. He could kill the story.

"Harry, please! If there is such a thing as friendship," I yelled into the phone, "kill this story! What do you mean it's a federal case?" Then I saw a copy of the paper lying on the table. I froze. The headline was blunt and typically factual: *F.B.I. Joins Search for Beloved Monster*. "Believe me, Harry." I was practically on my knees. "Your wife did *not* see Ducky. No dinosaur was ever in that egg, and — hello? — hello!" He'd hung up.

I raced toward the door, bumping into Buchanan on his way in. Dudley and Everett followed him into the room. "This is terrible. Just terrible!" For a few moments there was silence.

"You don't suppose, Everett, that — that Ducky actually hatched?" Buchanan meant every word of it. I plunked into a chair, my head whirling. Even Buchanan was adding two and two and coming up with five!

"Don't be childish," chided Everett, and I felt better. "But it does seem strange, doesn't it?"

"Gentlemen, you're all scientists!" I fairly shouted. "Use your heads!"

Dudley, the ace eye-witness, winked at me slyly, as if only he



and I knew the secret. "You can't fool me," he laughed.

"I — I can't *fool* you?" I said a little blankly, and then Janet flew into the room. I ran to her side. "Janet, you don't think I —"

She didn't say a word — just glared, took aim, and let fly with the flat of that right hand of hers. Then she turned and marched out.

"I don't know what to do," I moaned. "I don't know what to do."

"Don't do anything," answered Dudley brightly. "Just wait. Everybody's looking for him. Somebody'll find him."

Somehow, from out of the noise of my pounding heart and the whirl going on inside my head, an idea struggled through. "Dudley, that's it!"

"That's what?" he asked, bewildered.

"I'll find Ducky! Excuse me, gentlemen," I apologized, and headed for my bailiwick in the basement.

Inside the storeroom I absently hung my coat and hat on the outstretched arm of an Etruscan discus-thrower. My head had stopped spinning. It was just sort of numb. I stubbed my cigarette in the already full cornucopia, obligingly held for me by a terra-cotta Roman lady, and sat down to write the story of Ducky's drowning.

I gave the exclusive to a famous

commentator and he broke it that very night: "Flash! Here is another exclusive! Ducky the Dinosaur — now get *this*: Ducky has just been found about thirty miles south of Newark." Then he slowed down to appropriate sadness. "But the beloved Ducky found the world too tough. Ducky is dead! And now for some —"

Within twenty minutes every wire service was carrying the story. Reporters, photographers, and eager-eyed witnesses inundated the erstwhile quiet hamlet of Bakersfield, and tied up traffic on U.S. Route 9 for four hours. The Herald-Examiner expressed the public shock: *Ducky Found in Jersey Flats — Dead!* I made arrangements for the phony funeral, and then went to sleep for ten straight hours.

It was a very nice, simple funeral, *sans* corpse, and even Wesley was sad. "I hope when my turn comes I have as nice a one." The service consisted merely in mounting a little wooden plaque beneath one of those niches in the wall of the main lobby, the kind used for busts of famous men. We felt like everybody who ever lost a faithful pet, and somehow the plaque summed it all up:

DUCKY DINOSAUR  
*Species Brontosaurus*  
BORN MAY 20, 1952  
DIED MAY 22, 1952  
AGE: 3,000,000 YEARS

Later, a stone statue would be placed in the recess for all posterity.

After the funeral, we all gloomily filed back into the board room. Janet sat with her hands folded primly in her lap. She hadn't spoken to me since Ducky took his walk. I wanted to reach out to touch her, but I knew it wouldn't work.

Dudley broke the mood by announcing, wanly, "Well, I better get back into my sweeping clothes," and he left.

Outside, the crowds were weeping like children. A whole romantic dream had ended for them. Buchanan thanked me for getting the museum back on its feet. "Mr. Doolittle, in spite of —"

"Everything?" I said.

"Yes. I suppose now you'll be going back to Doolittle, Banks, Gold and . . . er . . ."

"That's all," I half laughed. The wheel had come full circle.

"And now we can send Dr. Preston to Alaska," said Wesley, breaking out of his cloud of gloom.

"Janet?" I queried. "Alaska?" She shot a quick nervous glance at me, mumbled something about her shiny nose, and quickly left the room.

"This time, though, to look for midget horses." Excitedly, he launched into a peroration; but as far as I was concerned, he was talking to thin air.

Janet was sitting on the stone bench under Ducky's niche in the wall when I found her. "Janet? Is something the matter?" She shook her head, trying to hold back the tears. "You're crying," I said. "Why?" I turned her face to see.

"Don't do that!" she snapped angrily, and started to go.

I pulled her down gently. "Please. I have to talk to you. What's all this Alaska business?"

"You heard Dr. Wesley," she answered, avoiding my eyes.

"Do you like midget horses as much as all that?"

"I hate them!" she said in a high little squeak, and she broke into sobs.

"Is it because you want to get away from me? Have I done something to hurt —"

"Have you done —" She gaped. "You came to Metropolis, tried to hatch a three-million-year-old egg, nearly started a national riot, and now you ask have you done something!"

"You don't really believe I broke that eggshell."

"I suppose not." She shrugged.

"I didn't."

"All right, Luther, you didn't." She got up. "Excuse me. I have to go to Alaska —"

"I don't know how it happened, believe me." I turned her around.

"That's the trouble with you, Luther. You go around lighting firecrackers, and then act per-

fectly amazed when they go off." She stepped away. "I wish you'd never come to Metropolis. I wish I'd never met you. I wish . . ." and she started to cry again.

"Why?" I asked excitedly.

"Because you've hoodwinked one hundred and sixty million people!" she lashed.

"They love to be hoodwinked," I said softly.

She was trembling with rage. "We just had a funeral for a *dinosaur*," she said in desperation. "Of all things — a dinosaur that was never even *born!*" She worked her mouth, trying to make sense of it. "And still nobody will believe he's dead! I'm not even sure myself!" she wailed. "What's your next step, Mr. Doolittle? Artificial respiration?"

I shook my head. "Ducky's still alive."

"Oh no!" She was frantic. "Not again!"

I drew her down on the bench beside me and explained. "I'm not sorry any of this happened. We gave a lot of people a real live fairy tale — and that's a rare commodity." She wiped a tear from her pouting face. "Everybody spends his life looking for something to believe in. Take me, for example. I've known lots of girls —"

"I believe every word of that." Her chin went up.

"So just when I'd about de-

ecided that Cinderella was only a Disney movie, you —"

"Came into my life." She nodded like the traffic cop who's heard all the answers.

"You're ahead of me," I laughed.

"Way ahead." She stood up.

"If I hadn't found you I'd just have gone on looking for you, and —"

Her back was to me. She lowered her head, then turned around and smiled wanly. "Would you, Luther?"

"Absolutely." I pulled her down again. "I can't follow you to Alaska — I get colds too easily." She laughed. "Hello, Cinderella," I said.

"You no-good copywriter," she answered happily.

When I came up for air I saw it — in that niche in the wall. It was the right color — sort of grey — and the right size, too. Sitting pertly on its hind legs like a squirrel, it *winked* at me — I swear!

"Janet, quick!" I pointed.

She turned to look, dropping her purse. I picked it up and looked back again, open-mouthed. But Ducky had evidently jumped off. At any rate, he was gone.

"It's nothing, darling," she said.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's nothing." Only I wasn't really sure. And I don't think I ever will be.