Chapter 1

GRAHAM STANDISH, the newly appointed athletic coach and head of the department of physical education in West Mackenzie High School, stepped down from the Black Diamond, crack express of the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company, just in from Philadelphia. Blond and bareheaded, his close-cropped hair organized in the G.I. fashion, he stood on the station platform holding a traveling-bag and looked around to get his bearings. A black signboard suspended from the station roof flashed in gold letters the word, "Mackenzie." Before the station, the Susquehanna River, at that precise point describing an elbow bend, flowed placidly southward. An ancient steel bridge, reverberating under the flow of traffic, started its span of the river directly above the station, connecting the city proper with West Mackenzie, its residential section.

A middle-aged gentleman came toward Standish. He walked with a peculiar forward motion as though he were climbing a hill. He was angular and loose-jointed and bent at the shoulders so as to form the living reproduction of a question mark. His eyes were riveted appraisingly on Standish as he approached him.

"Mr. Standish?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Meredith."

"Oh, hello, Professor Meredith." They shook hands. "Nice of you to meet me."

"Not at all. I'll drive you to your boardinghouse. You can have your trunk picked up later."

Austin Meredith, principal of the West Mackenzie High School, led the younger man to a gleaming cabriolet parked near the station. They entered and settled on the front seat. Meredith started the car, nosed it into the current of west-bound traffic and moved out on the bridge. "Did you have a pleasant trip?" he asked.

"Very pleasant, thanks. It's beautiful along the Susquehanna."

"We think so."

"I've never been in northeastern Pennsylvania before."

"I hope you're going to like it."

"I'm sure I will."

At the end of the bridge Meredith turned north on a street marked "Susquehanna Avenue." It ran parallel with the river.

The professor cleared his throat. "Mr. Standish," he said, "as we notified you, school begins tomorrow. I shall be busy the next few days getting our program launched, so I wanted this chat with you before we hit our stride."

"Yes, sir."

"You see, we have an unusual development in our school system. This being a mining community, naturally there is a hybrid population, a mixture of Americans, Irish, Italians and Polish. Our social stratum is varied and conflicting. The result is, complications are before us constantly. We must work with the sons of coal operators and daughters of miners. It presents some real problems. Right now conditions are becoming tense. Probably

you have read in the papers about the anthracite coal strikes."

"Yes, I have."

" I'm afraid we must anticipate increasing friction between the children of some of our civic leaders and—well, children of the working class. Of course, the situation will extend into your department as well."

Standish nodded. He wasn't at all sure he liked the picture. He had played in major sports at the University of Maryland. He had grappled with grimmer problems fighting under General Omar Bradley in Europe. But those had been in the province of physical combat, not social. Thinking of this difference, he frowned.

"Let me be frank with you," Meredith went on. "Unless we handle things discreetly, we shall find ourselves in an unenviable position. In your department you can help considerably."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Specifically, I expect you to give preferment to the American element. It's important that you do not offend the sons of our influential citizens, some of whom are on the School Board. It is to your advantage and mine that you pursue such a policy. A couple of men on the Board have let me know by the grapevine that they want their boys to play first-string football."

Standish pursed his lips and his green eyes flashed. "Professor Meredith," he said, trying to control his voice, "at the very beginning of our relationships I'd like to spread my cards on the table. During the war I became a Christian. As—"

"A person's religion is his own business," snapped Meredith.

"As a Christian man," Standish continued, ignoring the interruption, "I try to apply certain simple basic principles. One is that I never hold men's persons in admiration because of advantage."

They drew up before a large grey house on upper Susquehanna Avenue. Professor Meredith allowed the motor to idle while they talked. "Standish," he said, and Graham could not fail to see a steely glint in his eyes, "I am known as a reasonable man. For fourteen years I have managed to get along well with my staff. I too have a few basic principles. One is that I expect the full co-operation of my co-workers. . . . The High School Assembly will meet tomorrow at nine. I shall see you then. Meanwhile, I trust you will like your new home. Two of our other non-resident teachers are staying here."

Standish reached for his traveling-bag and climbed out of the car. "Thank you for bringing me over," he said.

There was a forced geniality to Meredith's manner as he held out his hand. "Not at all," he said heartily. "You and I are going to get along fine. Good-by."

Standish raised his arm as the professor drove away. Then, wondering how, in view of his own stand, his principal could entertain such an optimistic view of their future relations, he gripped the handle of his bag and started up the walk toward his new home.

Chapter 2

THAT EVENING AT DINNER Standish became acquainted with Mrs. Bliss, his landlady, and with her boarders. Mrs. Bliss he liked instantly. She was plump and amiable and exhibited a restrained humor which placed her guests at ease before five minutes had passed. His two colleagues, Standish discovered, were a Mr. Collins who wore rimless glasses, spoke with a Harvard accent and taught mathematics, and Miss Lafayette, attractive, diminutive and personable French teacher. The other boarders included a service-station manager, a bank clerk and a talkative spinster who managed a dress shop.

After dinner they all drifted into the living-room. Miss Lafayette sat down at the spinet and began to run through classical music. Standish took a position near her, explaining that he loved music with a consuming passion but could not, alas, so much as carry a tune. "By the way," he said, "are you descended from the Marquis Lafayette?"

She softened her playing and answered: "I understand so. But I doubt if you could get his excellency to admit it, were he alive."

"I've always felt a deep personal obligation to the marquis for his contributions to America," said Standish. "But never more than now."

She glanced up at him, smiling. Her teeth, milk white, were set as evenly as the white keys of the spinet key-

board. Her dusky complexion blended perfectly with her chestnut hair and cool brown eyes. She was wearing a full white blouse and a red dirndl skirt; most becoming, Standish thought.

"Thank you, Miles," she said.

"Graham is the name."

"I shall call you Miles. Miles Standish."

"I don't deserve it."

"But you do. You were a gallant captain too."

"Delete the adjective," he said, "and tell me where you learned about my dark past."

"Advance information."

Standish turned aside and addressed an imaginary person. "Herman," he said, "the girl is not only exotic, she's also mysterious."

"Who's Herman?" she asked, laughing.

"My invisible confidant. He's a gremlin I hooked up with in Germany."

She swung into the strains of *Clair de Lune*. "Hello, Herman," she said.

"Herman says he's glad to know you. By the way, what do I call you?"

"I was christened Nan."

"Christened," he repeated, quick to find an opening for a seasonable word. "Where?"

"In a Roman Catholic Church."

"Then you're a Catholic?"

"No," she said. "I used to be. Currently I'm a person without religion."

"I shall try hard," he said, "to convert you to Christianity."

Her expression became serious. She stopped playing

and placed one hand in her other. "You know, I like that," she said. "It's the first time in years anyone has taken the slightest interest in my religious life."

Standish looked around. The other boarders were submerged in popular magazines. He said: "Let's go for a walk, okay?"

She nodded.

They slipped out the door, apparently unnoticed. Dusk had settled over the Wyoming Valley. Across the river they could barely make out the outlines of culm piles silhouetted like the humps of dromedaries against the purple sky. To their north, Campbell's Ledge rose sheer from the river's edge, a huge tawny cone of rock reaching for the stars. From its peak, according to legend, one Captain Campbell, chased by Iroquois Indians, had chosen to fling himself into the river rather than to surrender to the savages.

They crossed Susquehanna Avenue and strolled along a footpath fringing the river.

"Tell me about yourself," Standish said.

"I'm twenty-three, my parents are dead, I finished Wellesley a year ago, this is my second year in West Mackenzie. I like Mozart, Emily Dickinson and Flaubert, especially his Solommbo. I love fresh strawberry sundaes and football. . . . Also, I'm engaged."

Standish experienced a shock of disappointment. "I'm not very observing," he admitted. "I didn't see the ring."

"There isn't a ring."

"Oh."

She lowered her voice to a murmur. "Bill's a psychopathic case in the Navy Hospital in Bethesda. He was a marine. He cracked up on Iwo."

"I'm sorry."

"That's about all. Now tell me about you."

Standish rendered a capsule account of his twenty-five-year-old career. A native of Silver Spring, Maryland, he had attended the University of Maryland for one year. He had left school in 1943 to enter the Army. After the war he had returned to College Park, been graduated that spring, and in July received the appointment to his present post.

"You've left gaps my imagination will have to fill in," Nan said when he had finished.

"There's one I'd like to fill in for you."

"I'm listening."

"The whole direction of my life was changed one night in '44," he began. "I was lying wounded in a shell hole just as the Battle of the Bulge was forming, practically surrounded by Germans. I had a friend named Larson, a big Swede from Minnesota. He broke through the ring and pulled me out; how I'll never know. He was killed doing it."

For a minute they walked on in silence.

"He was the greatest guy I ever met," Standish continued. "He was a real Christian. He used to talk to me about believing in Christ but my mind was filled with all kinds of rationalistic ideas. His efforts didn't mean much until I saw him lying in the mud, torn to ribbons by machine-gun fire, and so terribly dead. . . .That night I became a Christian."

Nan sighed. "I'm glad you told me," she said. "And I'm glad you have a rugged faith. You'll be needing it the next few months."

"You mean the school scrap?"

"Yes. Dr. Meredith and the bluebloods versus the *hoi polloi.*"

"How do you stand?" he asked.

"Right where you're going to stand. With the underdog."

"Great. Let's shake on it."

They did. Facing each other under a leafy willow tree, with the September night air soft and warm about them, their hands joined in a firm clasp. And Standish, sensing that with Nan he stood in the shadow of a collision in which a fighting principle was at stake, felt a thrill he had known prior to great engagements in the European theater.

Chapter 3

PROMPTLY AT NINE O'CLOCK the following morning Professor Meredith called the High School Assembly to order. The Assembly Hall swarmed with healthy adolescents, tanned American boys in sport clothes and girls with bobbed hair, consciously trim, and sleek in pullover sweaters with sleeves rolled up to the elbow; swarthy Italian and Polish lads in multicolored shirts and leather-brown girls in starched white dresses that crinkled when the girls sat down; Irish youngsters with freckled faces, looking mischievous and droll. Standish, seated with the other members of the faculty on the platform back of the speaker's desk, glanced over the human checkerboard before him and realized that Meredith had stated the case accurately: the community indeed represented a hybrid population.

After the singing of *America*, Professor Meredith, hunched over the speaker's desk like a praying mantis, clucked his way through sundry announcements. Then he presented to the student body the President of the School Board, Mr. Fleming Schoonover who, he said, would bring appropriate remarks at this, the opening of the school year.

Fleming Schoonover stood up and beamed at the students. He was a study in grey. Thin grey hair, well oiled and parted in the middle, topped off a grey business

suit, grey necktie and shirt, and grey oxfords. Even the folds of a silk handkerchief protruding from his coat pocket fell into the color scheme. "I'll bet the fillings in his teeth are grey," Standish thought.

Studying him from an angle while he spoke, the coach instinctively distrusted him. His whole bearing seemed affected. Invariably (there were times when he'd forget to follow through) he would substitute "d's" for "r's" in his words. It was "vedy" in place of "very," "despond" for "respond," "deally" for "really." His gestures too smacked of artificiality. At times, impersonating Winston Churchill, he would grasp the lapels of his coat and break forth into rolling phrases. At other times he would tap the tips of his fingers unctuously, imitating pulpit pietists. At the end of every sentence he would rock forward and upward on his toes, standing momentarily like a diver about to take the plunge. There was no covering the fact that his importance powerfully impressed him.

Patently it impressed Professor Meredith, too.

He concluded his address in a crescendo of metaphors. "Students of West Mackenzie High School," he thundered, "let us, like General Wolfe at Quebec, storm the heights of learning st-detching before us, let us scale the cliffs of opportunity, let us ascend the mountains of p-divilege, let us assault the damparts of enlightenment. Let us, in the wo'ds of the g-deat poet Wordsworth, 'dise on steppingstones of ou'd dead selves to higher things above' . . . I thank you."

He sat down. A feeble round of applause rose from the students. It flickered and died out almost immediately. Professer Meredith, clearly embarrassed, dismissed the

Assembly. The students dispersed to their various classrooms.

As Standish left the hall Nan brushed by him. "How now?" she asked, twinkling.

"I'm trying to work my eyeballs back in place," he said, making a face.

"How did Herman like the speech?"

"That gremlin asked me to pass him the Stewart's Formula."

"Fleming S.," she whispered, "is your *bete noire.*"

"No!"

"Yes. You'll be hearing from him."

"Listen, Nan—"

"Sorry," she interrupted, "but I've a class. I'll dig you later."

"Dig's the right verb," he groaned. "I feel like a well-embalmed corpse six feet under."

"Have fun," she smiled, tripping away.

"So long."

He went down the corridor and was about to enter the classroom to which he had been assigned when he heard his name called. He turned. Professor Meredith came toward him escorting Fleming Schoonover. "Mr. Standish," he said, "I want you to meet Mr. Schoonover."

"Hello, Mr. Schoonover."

"I'm delighted to know you." They shook hands. "Welcome to West Mackenzie," Schoonover went on dropping his artificial speech. "You are from the University of Maryland?"

"Yes, sir."

Meredith excused himself and left them.

"Good," said Schoonover. "Well, Mr. Standish, you

ought to have a great season on the gridiron." His eyes, also grey and somewhat bulging, played on the coach's face like searchlights. "Yes, a great season."

"I hope so. But remember it's my first year."

"Ah, but what material you have inherited. A veritable wealth of material. Eight lettermen, to be exact. A great nucleus. Young Chick Allerdyce came up fast last year. He should be one of your best linemen, I would say. And then there's my son, Robert. He was a bit light to play varsity ball last season, but he's gained weight since then. If I do say so he gives promise of being a beautiful plunging fullback. Perfectly beautiful. And he does love the game."

"Fine," said Standish. "It makes a difference." He recalled Meredith's reference to two members of the School Board who had been lobbying for berths for their sons on the first team.

"It does," Schoonover beamed. "It certainly does. Well, you'll find me out there in the rooting section every game. Yes, sir, every game. Now I must be on my way to the office. Coal tie-ups, you know. It's grand to make your acquaintance. Call on me if you need any extra equipment. Anything at all."

"I'll remember that."

"Good-by then."

"Good-by."

Standish smothered a feeling of revulsion as he turned away. His experiences with men in the Army had taught him a good deal about human nature. As an officer, he had learned to distinguish between a genuine and a false

product. Insincerity more than any other characteristic in men sickened him. And he was certain he had discovered in Fleming Schoonover the embodiment of that failing.