

Appointment with Destiny



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THE MOOD in the Bureau of Investigation (as the FBI was known in 1924) was tense. The day before, May 9, the new Attorney General, Harlan Fiske Stone, had accepted the resignation of William J. Burns, the Bureau's director. Maybe I, as assistant director, was next.

I had invested almost seven years in public service: as an attorney in the Department of Justice, as a special assistant to the Attorney General and, since 1921, in the Bureau of Investigation. Perhaps I had chosen unwisely. Must I now, at 29, admit that I had made a mistake? Should I, too, resign?

No, I decided, that would be a mistake. I had honestly tried to do my best. My conscience was clear; I had nothing to hide.

Certainly, in the Bureau itself, there was corruption. Political favoritism was rife. Our investigations constantly were being hampered by employees like the notorious Gaston B. Means, whom I had ordered to stay out of my office. My views on the subject of favoritism and corruption were well known. I had spoken them openly and often. This, I had made clear, was no way to run the government's business.

But neither was resigning the way to help correct the situation, I now told myself. To give up was only to allow these conditions to grow worse. So I took a deep breath and resolved to stay on and fight.

All well and good to make bold resolutions, I reminded myself, but there was another question that I might have much less to say about: would the new Attorney General, Mr. Stone, ask me to resign? Or worse yet, would he fire me outright?

I was soon to find out. In the early afternoon,

amid the deepening tension which burdened the entire Bureau, word came that Mr. Stone wanted to see me.

Never will I forget that seemingly endless walk from my office to his. When I entered, the Attorney General was seated behind his desk. He was a big man, over six feet tall. He had been a football player in college and, from what I had heard, he could still be plenty rough when he felt like it.

"Sit down," he said gruffly, and nodded toward a chair at the side of his desk. I sat.

I Struggled to Keep Calm

Then came the longest silence I have ever experienced in my life. The Attorney General looked at me intently, but he didn't utter a word. Only once did he drop his gaze, and then it was to focus briefly on a particular sheet of paper. I felt that his eyes had become virtual searchlights, bent on penetrating my innermost being. I am sure I shifted uneasily in my seat, although I was doing everything in my power to remain calm. I had seen this remarkable man a number of times before, but this time it was very different.

Still not a word, just that piercing look. Eventually he changed position a bit, leaned forward, and peered at me over his glasses. Then he spoke.

To my surprise, all he seemed to have in mind was a certain case we were looking into. In a quiet tone, he asked for details. Then, just as quietly, he passed on to an administrative matter. What were the latest developments?

With that out of the way, he leaned back in his chair, knitted his hands together behind his head, and began to talk. He discussed his hopes and plans for the Department of Justice—how he wanted to reform it from top to bottom, weed out incompetence and political favoritism, and instill a new spirit of loyalty and enthusiasm.

Hearing him talk that way stirred me to the roots of my being. But I couldn't help wondering: *what is he leading up to?* After all, he knew I agreed with every word he said. Maybe he was taking the kind way out; his next words might be: "Well, now, since you are part of the past, I want you to help us start over by handing in your resignation."

He stopped, put his elbows on the desk, adjusted his glasses, and leaned toward me with an air which in other circumstances might have been confidential. Here it comes, I thought.

"Young man," he said, "I want you to be acting director of the Bureau of Investigation."

Only the grip of self-discipline kept me from starting right out of my chair in disbelief. This was the very last thing I had expected to hear.

Be acting director? I knew now that he was not holding me personally responsible for the mistakes and corruption in the Bureau. I felt the exhilarating emotion of a man whose innocence has been vindicated. Here was an opportunity—an opportunity to fight for the principles which I held dear.

A Young Man's Conditions

"Mr. Stone," I said, "I'll take the job—on certain conditions."

As I spoke, I felt a shudder of anxiety. Who was I, a mere youngster, to set conditions before the Attorney General of the United States? Yet the words came out, almost instinctively, because they represented heartfelt convictions I had wrestled with during many tortured hours.

If I were to remain in the Bureau, my job must not be just another job. I had been there long enough to know what changes must be made. If I did not have a free hand to clean things up and keep them clean, the Bureau would remain