

# THE DAY THE CHILDREN VANISHED

by  
Hugh Pentecost

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How could a school bus disappear from a highway  
in broad daylight? And why?

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On a bright, clear winter's afternoon the nine children in the town of Clayton who traveled each day to the regional school in Lakeview disappeared from the face of the earth along with the bus in which they traveled and its driver.

Clayton, a rapidly growing quarry town, is seven miles from Lakeview. Lakeview, considerably larger, recently built a new school. It was agreed between the boards of education of the two towns that nine children living at the east end of Clayton should be sent to the Lakeview School where there was adequate space and teaching staff.

Since there were only nine children, they did not send one of the big, forty-eight-passenger school buses to get them. A nine-passenger station wagon was painted and marked as a school bus, and Jerry Mahoney, a mechanic at the East Clayton Garage, was hired to make the two trips each day with the children.

Jerry Mahoney was well liked and respected. He was a wizard with engines. He was engaged to be married to Elizabeth Deering, who worked in the Clayton Bank. They were both nice people, responsible people.

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The disappearance of the station wagon, the nine children, and Jerry Mahoney took place on a two-mile stretch of road where disappearance was impossible. It was called the "dugway" because it had been dug out of the side of the mountain. The road wound along the side of the lake, and a heavy wire guardrail protected it from the lake for the full two miles. There was not a gap in it anywhere.

The ground on the other side of the road rose abruptly upward into thousands of acres of mountain woodlands. Not even a tractor could have made its way up any part of it except for a few yards of deserted road that led to an abandoned quarry. Even over this old road nothing could have passed without leaving a trail of torn brush and broken saplings.

At the Lakeview end of the dugway was a filling station owned by old Jake Nugent. On the afternoon of the disappearance Jerry Mahoney and his busload of kids stopped at Jake Nugent's. Jerry Mahoney had brought the old man a special delivery letter from the post office, thus saving the RFD driver from making a special trip. Jerry and old Jake exchanged greetings, the old man signed the receipt for his letter, and Jerry drove off into the dugway with his cargo of kids.

At the Clayton end of the dugway was Joe Gorman's diner, and one of the

children in Jerry's bus was Peter Gorman, Joe's son. The diner was Jerry's first stop coming out of the dugway with his cargo of kids.

It was four-thirty in the afternoon when Joe Gorman realized that the bus was nearly three-quarters of an hour late. Worried, he called the school in Lakeview and was told by Miss Bromfield, the principal, that the bus had left on schedule.

"He may have had a flat or something," Miss Bromfield suggested. This was one of seven calls Miss Bromfield was to get in the next half hour, all inquiring about the bus. Nine children; seven families.

Joe Gorman was the first to do anything about it seriously. He called Jake Nugent's filling station to ask about the bus, and old Jake told him it had passed his place on schedule. So something must have happened to Jerry and his busload of kids in the dugway. Joe got out his jeep and headed through the dugway toward Lakeview. He got all the way to Jake Nugent's without seeing the bus or passing anyone coming the other way.

Joe Gorman used Jake's phone to call the Dicklers in Clayton. The Dicklers' two children, Dorothy and Donald, were part of Jerry's load, and they were the next stop after Joe's Diner. The Dicklers were already alarmed because their children hadn't appeared.

Joe didn't offer any theories. He was scared though. He called the trooper barracks in Lakeview and told them about the missing bus. They said they'd send a man out.

Joe headed back for Clayton. This time his heart was a lump in his throat. He drove slowly, staring at every inch of the wire guardrail. There was not a break anywhere, not a broken or bent post. The bus simply couldn't have skidded over the embankment into the lake without smashing through the wire guardrail.

Joe Gorman felt better when he got to his diner at the Clayton end. Five minutes later Trooper Teliski came whizzing through from Lakeview and stopped his car.

"What's happened?" he asked Joe. "I don't know," Joe said. "The bus started through the dugway at the regular time." He told about Jerry's stop at Nugent's. "It never came out this end."

"The lake," Teliski said. Joe shook his head. "I—I thought of that right off. I just came through ahead of you—looking. Not a break in the guardrail anywhere. Not a scratch. Not a bent post. The bus didn't go into the lake. I'll stake my life on that."

"Then what else?" Teliski asked. "It couldn't go up the mountain."

"I know," Joe said. Teliski was silent for a moment, and

then he spoke with a solid attempt at common sense. "It didn't come out this end," he said. "We'll check back on that guardrail, but let's say you're right. It didn't skid into the lake. It couldn't go up the mountain. So where does that leave us?"

"Going nuts!" Joe said. "It leaves us with only one answer. The station wagon never went into the dugway."

Joe Gorman nodded. "That's logic," he said. "But why would Jake Nugent lie? And Jerry's an hour and three-quarters late now. If he didn't go in the dugway, where is he? Where *could* he go? Why hasn't he telephoned if everything is okay?"

A car drove up and stopped. A man got out and came running toward them. It was Karl Dickler, father of two of the missing children. "What's happened?" "We can't figure it out," Teliski said. "The bus never went through the dugway."

"But it did!" Karl Dickler said. "I passed it myself in the dugway—on my way to Lakeview. They were about half a mile this way from Jake Nugent's. I saw them! I waved at my own kids!"

The three men stared at each other. "It never came out this end," Joe Gorman said in a choked voice.

Dickler swayed. "The lake!" he whispered.

But the bus was not in the lake. Joe

Gorman's survey proved accurate; no broken wire, no bent post, not even a scratch. . . .

It was nearly dark when troopers, the families of the children, the selectmen, twenty-five or thirty volunteer deputies, and a hundred or more school friends of the missing children began the search.

The lake was definitely out. Not only was the guardrail intact, but the lake was frozen over with about an inch of ice. There wasn't a break in the smooth surface of the ice anywhere along the two miles of shore bordering the dugway.

A hundred phone calls were made to surrounding towns and villages. No one had seen the station wagon, the children, or Jerry Mahoney. The impossible had to be faced. The bus had gone into the dugway, and it hadn't come out. It was just gone! Vanished into thin air!

It wasn't reasonable, but as the evening wore on and not one speck of evidence was found or one reasonable theory advanced, people began to talk about Jerry Mahoney. He was the driver. The bus had been driven somewhere. Jerry was the only adult involved.

However it had been worked—this disappearance—Jerry must have had a hand in it.

It didn't matter that, until an hour ago, Jerry had been respected, trusted,

liked. The children were gone, and Jerry had taken them somewhere. Why? Ransom. A mass kidnapping. So Jerry Mahoney became a villain because there was no one else to suspect.

At nine-thirty Sergeant Mason and Trooper Teliski of the State Police and a dozen people of the community, including Joe Gorman and Karl Dickler, stormed into the living room of Jerry Mahoney's house. An old man with silvery white hair sat in an overstuffed armchair, and Elizabeth Deering, Jerry's fiancée, sat on the floor beside him.

The old man wore a sharply cut gray flannel suit, a bright scarlet vest with brass buttons, and a green necktie that must have been designed for a St. Patrick's Day parade.

There are those who are old enough to remember the days when Mahoney and Faye were listed about fourth on a bill of eight star acts on the Keith-Orpheum vaudeville circuit.<sup>1</sup> Pat Mahoney was an Irish comic with dancing feet, and Nora Faye—Mrs. Mahoney to you—could match him at dancing and had the voice of an angel.

If you were left alone with Pat for more than five minutes, he went back to

1. *Keith-Orpheum vaudeville circuit*: a group of major theaters across the country which booked the big-time acts on the vaudeville tour. Vaudeville was a kind of stage show featuring a series of live acts—dancers, singers, acrobats, magicians, etc.—much like a TV variety show.

the old days—to the people he had idolized, like Smith and Dale, and Williams and Wolfus, and Joe Jackson.

He'd known them all, played on the same bills with them all. "But," he would tell you, and a strange radiance would come into the pale blue eyes, "the greatest of them all was Nora Faye—Mrs. Mahoney to you.

"We'd come out in cowboy suits, all covered with jewels, and jeweled guns and jeweled boots, and we'd do a little soft-shoe routine, and then suddenly all the lights would go out and only the jewels would show—they were made special for that—and we'd go into a fast routine, pulling the guns and twirling and juggling them.

"I can show you the costumes still. They're packed away in a trunk in the attic. Just the way we wore them—me and Nora—the last time we ever played. Atlantic City it was. And she came off after the act with the cheers still ringing in our ears, and down she went on the floor of the dressing room, writhing in pain.

"Then she told me. It had been getting worse for months. She didn't want me to know. The doctor had told her straight out. She'd only a few months she could count on. She'd never said a word to me. And only three weeks after that—she left us. Me and Jerry. We were standing by her bed when she

left—and the last words she spoke were to Jerry. 'Take care of Pat,' she says to him. 'He'll be helpless without someone to take care of him.' And then she smiled at me, and all the years were in that smile."

Now Pat Mahoney's pale blue eyes met the sergeant's stare steadily.

"All right, Pat," Sergeant Mason said. "What's Jerry done with those kids?"

"There's no answer to that question," Pat Mahoney said. "Do I hear you saying, 'I know what you must be feeling, Pat Mahoney, and you, Elizabeth Deering? And is there anything we can do for you in this hour of your terrible anxiety?' I don't hear you saying that, Sergeant."

"I'm sorry, Pat," Mason said. "Those kids are missing. Jerry had to take them somewhere."

"No!" Liz Deering cried. "You all know Jerry better than that!"

They didn't, it seemed, but they could be forgiven. You can't confront people with the unexplainable without frightening them and throwing them off balance.

"Has he talked in any way queerly to you, Pat?" Mason asked. "Has he acted normal of late?"

"Nora's boy is the most normal boy you ever met," Pat Mahoney said. "You

know that, Sergeant. Why, you've known him since he was a child."

Mrs. Jennings screamed out, "He'd protect his son. Naturally he'd protect his son. But he's stolen our children!"

"When did you last see Jerry, Pat?" Mason asked.

"Breakfast," Pat said.

"Did he have a need for money?"

Mason asked.

"Money? He was a man respected—until now—wasn't he? He was a man with a fine girl in love with him, wasn't he? What need would he have for money?"

"Make him answer sensibly!" Mrs. Jennings pleaded in a despairing voice.

Joe Gorman stepped forward. "Pat, maybe Jerry got sick all of a sudden.

Maybe you saw signs of something and wouldn't want to tell of it. But our kids were on that bus!"

Pat Mahoney's eyes, as he listened to Joe Gorman, filled with pain. "My kid is on that bus, too, Joe," he said.

They all stared at him, some with hatred. And then, in the distance, they heard the wail of a siren. The troopers' car was coming from Lakeview.

"Maybe it's news!" someone shouted.

"News!"

And they all went stumbling out of the house to meet the approaching car—all but Elizabeth Deering, who stayed behind with the old man.

"I don't understand it," she said, her voice shaken. "They think he's harmed their children, Pat! Why? Why would they think he'd do such a thing? Why?"

Old Pat's eyes had a faraway look in them. "Did I ever tell you about The Great Thurston?" he asked. "Greatest magic act I ever saw."

"Pat!" Elizabeth said, her eyes widening in horror.

"First time I ever caught his act was in Sioux City," Pat said. "He came out in a flowing cape and a silk hat, and he . . ."

He's losing his reason, Elizabeth Deering told herself. Let the news be good! Let them be found safe!

Outside the siren drew close.

The police car with its wailing siren carried news, but it was not the sort the people of Clayton were hoping to hear.

Within a few hours of the tragedy the entire area was alerted. The moment daylight came, a fleet of army helicopters began to cover the area for hundreds of miles. A five-state alarm was put out for the missing station wagon and its passengers, and the Attorney General's best man, Clyde Haviland, was directing and coordinating the search.

Sitting at a desk in the town hall, Clyde Haviland reported to the town's three selectmen, Sergeant Mason, and a couple of other troopers. Haviland, carefully polishing his shell-rimmed

glasses, was a quiet, reassuring sort of man.

"So far," he said with a faint smile, "the report on Jerry Mahoney is quite extraordinary."

"In what way?" Sergeant Mason asked.

"Model citizen," Haviland said. "No one has a bad word for him. No bad temper. Never held grudges. Saves his money. His savings account in the Clayton Bank would surprise some of you. *On the face of it, he is the last person in the world to suspect.*"

"There has to be a first time for everything," Karl Dickler said. He was a selectman as well as one of the bereaved parents.

"It's going down toward zero tonight," a trooper said. "If those kids are out anywhere——"

"They're a long way from here by now, if you ask me," Sergeant Mason said.

Haviland looked at him, his eyes unblinking behind the lenses of his glasses. "Except that they never came out of the dugway."

"Nobody saw them," Mason said. "But they're not in there, so they had to come out."

"They didn't come out," Joe Gorman said. "I was watching for them from the window of my diner at this end."

Karl Dickler put his hand up to his cheek. There was a nerve there that had

started to twitch, regularly as the tick of a clock. "I like Jerry. I'd give the same kind of report on him you've been getting, Mr. Haviland. But you can't pass up the facts. I'd have said he'd defend those kids with his life. But did he? And the old man—his father. There's something queer about him. Mr. Haviland, my kids are out there, somewhere!"

"Every highway within two hundred miles of here is being patrolled, Mr. Dickler," Haviland said. "If they'd driven straight away from here in daylight, they'd have been seen a hundred times after they left Clayton. There isn't one report of anyone having seen the station wagon with the school-bus markings."

"We've told ourselves all these things for hours!" Dickler said. "What are we going to *do*, Haviland?"

"Unless we're all wrong," Haviland said, "we're going to hear from the kidnapers soon. That's why I urge you to go home and wait. And pray . . ."

Elizabeth Deering was sick with anxiety. Jerry, missing with the children; Jerry, worse than that, suspected by his friends. But on top of that was old Pat Mahoney.

He hadn't made the slightest sense since the angry crowd had left his house. He had talked on endlessly about the old days in vaudeville. He seemed obsessed with the memory of the first time he had

seen The Great Thurston in Sioux City. He remembered card tricks and sawing the lady in half. He seemed to remember everything he had seen the great magician do.

Elizabeth tried, but she could not bring Pat back to the present. The tragedy seemed to have tipped him right out of the world of reason. She was partly relieved when she heard firm steps on the front porch.

Sergeant Mason was less aggressive than he had been on his first visit. He introduced Haviland. "Mr. Haviland is a special investigator from the Attorney General's office, Pat."

Then Mason nodded to Liz, who went out into the kitchen. He followed her to tell her there was no news. Haviland sat down on the couch next to Pat.

"You must be very worried about your son," Haviland said.

For a moment the mask of pleasant incompetence seemed to be stripped from Pat's face. "Wouldn't you be?" he asked harshly. Then, almost instantly, the mask was fitted back into place, and old Pat gave his cackling laugh. "You got theories, Mr. Haviland? How're you going to handle this case?"

"I think," Haviland said conversationally, "the children and your son have been kidnaped."

"You figured out how the bus disappeared?" Pat asked.

"No," Haviland said.

"It wouldn't really matter," Pat said. "It's what's going to happen now that matters."

"You mean the demand for money?"

"If that's what's going to happen," Pat said. His cackling laugh grated on Haviland's nerves. The old joker knew something!

"You have a different theory?" Haviland asked, keeping his exasperation out of his voice.

"You ever see The Great Thurston on the Keith-Orpheum vaudeville circuit?" Pat asked.

"I'm afraid not," Haviland said.

"Greatest magic act I ever saw," Pat said. "Better than Houdini. Better than anyone. I first saw him in Sioux City——"

"About the case here," Haviland interrupted. "You have a theory?"

"I got no theory," Pat said. "But I know what's going to happen."

Haviland leaned forward. "What's going to happen?"

"One of two things," Pat said.

"Everybody in this town is going to be looking for that station wagon in the lake, where they know it isn't, and in the woods, where they know it isn't. That's one thing that may happen. The other thing is, they buy this theory of yours, Mr. Haviland—and it's a good theory, mind you—and they all stay home and wait to hear something. There's one

same result from both things, isn't there?"

"Same result?"

"Sure. Nobody in Clayton goes to work. The quarries don't operate. The small businesses will shut down. People will be looking, and people will be waiting. . . ."

"So?"

"Not much point in it, is there?" Pat said, grinning.

Haviland rose. He'd had about enough. Mason and Elizabeth were coming back from the kitchen with coffee. "There isn't much point to anything you're saying, Mr. Mahoney."

Pat's eyes twinkled. "You said you never saw The Great Thurston, didn't you?"

"I never saw him," Haviland said.

"Well, we'll see. If they're supposed to stay home and wait, they'll stay home and wait. If they're supposed to be out searching, they'll be out searching. Ah, coffee! Smells real good. Pull up a chair, Sergeant. By the way, Mr. Haviland, I'll make you a bet," Pat said.

"I'm not a betting man," Haviland said.

"Oh, just a manner-of-speaking bet," Pat said. "I'll make you a bet that tomorrow morning they'll be out searching. I'll make you a bet that even if you order them to stay home and wait, they'll be out searching."

"Look here, if you know something. . . ."

A dreamy look came into Pat's eyes. "Nora was so taken with The Great Thurston that time in Sioux City that I went around to see him afterwards. He wouldn't tell me anything—that is, not about any of his tricks. But he told me the whole principle of his business."

"Sugar?" Elizabeth asked Haviland. Poor old man, she thought.

"The principle is," Pat said, "to make your audience think only what you want them to think and see only what you want them to see." Pat's eyes brightened. "Which reminds me, there's something I'd like to have you see, Mr. Haviland."

Haviland gulped his coffee. Somehow he felt hypnotized by the old man. Pat was at the foot of the stairs, beckoning. Haviland followed.

Elizabeth looked at Mason, and there were tears in her eyes. "It's thrown him completely off base," she said. "You know what he's going to show Mr. Haviland?" Sergeant Mason shook his head.

"A cowboy suit!" Elizabeth said. "He's going to show him a cowboy suit."

And she was right. Haviland found himself in the attic, his head bowed to keep from bumping into the sloping beams. Old Pat had opened a wardrobe trunk and revealed two cowboy suits—Nora's and his. Chaps, shirts,

vests, boots, Stetsons, and gun belts—all studded with stage jewelry.

“ . . . and when the lights went out,”

Pat was saying, “all you could see was these gewgaws, sparking. And we’d take out the guns. . . .” And suddenly Pat had the two jeweled six-shooters in his hands, twirling and spinning them.

The spell was broken for Haviland.

The old guy was cuckoo. “I enjoyed seeing them, Mr. Mahoney,” he said.

“But now, I’m afraid I’ve got to get back. . . .”

As soon as dawn broke, Haviland went out to the scene of the disappearance. He covered every inch of the two-mile stretch of the dugway. You couldn’t get away from the facts. There was no way for it to have happened—but it had happened.

About eight-thirty he was back in Clayton in Joe’s Diner, stamping his feet to warm them and waiting eagerly for eggs and toast. All the parents had been checked. There’d been no phone calls, no notes slipped under doors, nothing in the early-morning mail.

Haviland never got his breakfast. Trooper Teliski came charging into the diner just as Joe Gorman was taking the eggs off the grill. “We’ve found ‘em,” he said. “Or at least we know where they are. Helicopters spotted ‘em. I just finished passing the word in town.”

Joe Gorman dropped the plate of

eggs on the floor behind the counter. Haviland spun around on his counter stool.

“The old flooded quarry off the dugway,” Teliski said. “No sign of the bus. It didn’t drive up there. But the kids’ schoolbooks, a couple of coats—lying on the edge of the quarry. And in the water—more of the same. A red beret belonging to one of the kids——”

“Peter!” Joe Gorman cried out.

Haviland headed for the door. The main street of Clayton was frightening to see. People ran out of houses, screaming at one another, heading crazily toward the dugway. There was no order—only blind panic.

Haviland stood on the curb outside the diner, ice in his veins. He looked down the street to where old Pat Mahoney lived, just in time to see someone pick up a stone and throw it through the front window of Pat’s house.

Haviland had never witnessed anything like the scene at the quarry.

The old road, which ran about two hundred yards from the dugway to the quarry, had been trampled down as if by a herd of buffalo.

Within three-quarters of an hour of the news reaching town, it seemed as if everyone from Clayton and half the population of Lakeview had arrived at the quarry’s edge. Men and women crowded forward, screaming, trying to

examine the articles of clothing and books. Maybe not all the children were in this icy grave. It was only the hope of desperation. No one really believed it.

Haviland collected as many facts about the quarry as he could from Sergeant Mason.

"Marble's always been Clayton's business," Sergeant Mason said. "Half the big buildings in New York have got their marble out of Clayton quarries. This was one of the first quarries opened up by the Clayton Marble Company nearly sixty years ago. When they started up new ones, this one was abandoned."

Haviland glanced over at the fire engine which had started to pump water from the quarry. "Not much use in that," he said.

"The springs are feeding it faster than they can pump it out," Mason said. "There's no use telling them. They've got to feel they're doing something." His mouth set in a grim line. "Why would Jerry Mahoney do a thing like this?"

*Why?"*

"There are some things that don't fit," Haviland said. "Where is the station wagon?"

"He must have driven up here and done what he did to the kids," Mason said. "Then waited till after dark to make a getaway."

"But you searched this part of the woods before dark last night," Haviland said.

"We missed it somehow, that's all," Mason said stubbornly.

"A nine-passenger station wagon is pretty hard to miss," Haviland said.

"So we missed it," Mason said. "I don't know how, but we missed it." He shook his head. "I suppose the only thing that'll work here is grappling hooks. They're sending a crane over from one of the active quarries. Take an hour or more to get it here. Nobody'll leave here till the hooks have scraped the bottom of that place and they've brought up the kids."

Unless, Haviland thought to himself, the lynching spirit gets into them. He was thinking of an old man in a red vest and a green necktie. He was thinking of a broken windowpane—and of the way he'd seen mobs act before.

Someone gripped the sleeve of Haviland's coat, and he looked down into the horror-stricken face of Elizabeth Deering.

"It's true then," she whispered.

"It's true they found some things belonging to the kids," he said. "That's all that's true at the moment, Miss Deering." He was a little astonished by his own words. He realized that, instinctively, he was not believing everything that he saw in front of him. "This whole area was searched last night before dark," he said. "No one found any schoolbooks or coats or berets then. No one saw the station wagon."

"What's the use of talking that way?" Sergeant Mason said. His eyes were narrowed. "I don't want to believe what I see either, Mr. Haviland. But I've got to."

Haviland stared at the hundreds of people grouped around the quarry's edge. "Let's get out of here," he said to Liz Deering with sudden energy.

Clayton was a dead town. Stores were closed. Joe's Diner was closed. Only the two girls in the telephone office, across the street from the bank, were at their posts.

Old Mr. Granger, a teller in the bank, and one of the stenographers were the only ones of the bank staff who had stayed on the job. Old Mr. Granger was preparing the payroll for the Clayton Marble Company. He didn't know whether the truck from the company's offices with the two guards would show up for the money or not.

Nothing else was working on schedule today. Even the hotel down the street had closed. Two salesmen had driven into town, heard the news, and gone off down the dugway toward the scene of the tragedy. A few very old people tottered in and out the front doors of houses, looking anxiously down Main Street toward the dugway. Even the clinic was closed. The town's doctors and nurses had all gone to the scene of the disaster.

Down the street, a piece of newspaper had been taped over the hole in Pat Mahoney's front window. Pat Mahoney sat in the big armchair in his living room. He sat staring at an open scrapbook spread across his knees. A big black headline from a show-business paper was pasted across the top.

#### MAHONEY AND FAYE BOFFO? BUFFALO

Under it were pictures of Pat and Nora in their jeweled cowboy suits, their six-shooters drawn, pointing straight at the camera. There was a description of the act, the dance in the dark with only the jewels showing and the six-shooters spouting flame. "Most original number of its kind seen in years," a Buffalo critic had written.

Pat closed the scrapbook and put it down on the floor beside him. He got up from his chair and moved toward the stairway. He climbed to the second floor and turned to the attic door. He opened it, switched on the lights, and climbed up to the area under the eaves. There he opened the wardrobe trunk he'd shown to Haviland. He took out the cowboy outfit—the chaps, the boots, the vest and shirt and Stetson hat, and the gun belt with the two jeweled six-shooters. Slowly

2. *boffo*, show-business slang meaning that the audience was very impressed by a performance.

he carried them down to his bedroom on the second floor. There Pat Mahoney proceeded to get into costume.

He stood, at last, in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. The high-heeled boots made him a couple of inches taller than usual. The Stetson was set on his head at a rakish angle. The jeweled chaps and vest glittered in the sunlight from the window. Suddenly old Pat jumped into a flat-footed stance, and the guns were out of the holsters, spinning dizzily and then pointing straight at the mirror.

"Get 'em up, you lily-livered rats!" old Pat shouted.

Then, slowly, he turned away to stare at a silver picture frame on his dresser. Nora, as a very young girl, looked out at him with her gentle smile.

"It'll be all right, honey," Pat said. "You'll see. Don't you worry about your boy. Don't you ever worry about him while I'm around."

It was a terrible day for Clayton, but Gertrude Naylor, the chief operator in the telephone office, said afterward that perhaps the worst moment for her was when she spotted old Pat Mahoney walking down the main street—right in the middle of the street—dressed in that crazy cowboy outfit.

"I'd seen it a hundred times before in the movies," Gertrude Naylor said afterward. "A cowboy, walking

down the street of a deserted town, waiting for his enemy to appear—waiting for the moment to draw his guns. Old Pat's hands floated just above those crazy guns in his holster, and he kept rubbing the tips of his fingers against his thumb. I showed him to Millie, and we started to laugh, and then, somehow, it seemed about the most awful thing of all. Jerry Mahoney had murdered those kids, and here was his old man, gone nutty as a fruitcake."

Old Mr. Granger, in the bank, had much the same reaction when the aged, bejeweled gun-toter walked up to the teller's window.

"Good morning, Mr. Granger," Pat said cheerfully.

Mr. Granger moistened his pale lips.

"Good morning, Pat."

"You're not too busy this morning, I see," Pat said.

"N-no," Mr. Granger said.

"Since you're not so busy," Pat said, "I'd like to have a look at the detailed statement of my account for the last three months." As he spoke, he turned and leaned against the counter, staring out through the bank window at the street.

"You get a statement each month, Pat," Mr. Granger said.

"Just the same, I'd like to see the detailed statement for the last three months," Pat said.

"I had to humor him, I thought," Mr.

Granger said later. "So I went back in the vault to get his records out of the files. Well, I was just inside the vault door when he spoke again, in the most natural way. 'If I were you, Mr. Granger,' he said, 'I'd close that vault door, and I'd stay inside, and I'd set off all the alarms I could lay my hands on. You're about to be held up, Mr. Granger.'

"Well, I thought it was part of his craziness," Mr. Granger said later. "I thought he meant *he* was going to stick up the bank. I was scared because I figured he was crazy. So I *did* close the vault door. And I *did* set off the alarm, only it didn't work. I didn't know then that all the electric wires into the bank had been cut.

Gertrude and Millie, the telephone operators, had a box seat for the rest of it. They saw the car draw up in front of the bank, and they saw the four men get out. Two of them were carrying small suitcases, and two of them were carrying guns.

Then suddenly the bank doors burst open, and an ancient cowboy appeared, hands poised over his guns. The four men were so astonished at the sight of him they seemed to freeze.

"Stick 'em up, you lily-livered rats!" old Pat shouted. The guns were out of the holsters, twirling. Suddenly they belched flame, straight at the bandits.

The four men dived for safety, like men plunging off the deck of a sinking



ship. One of them ran around the corner of the bank building. Two of them got to the safe side of the car. The fourth, trying to scramble back into the car, was caught in the line of fire.

"I shot over your heads that first time!" Pat shouted. "Move another inch, and I'll blow you all to kingdom come!" The guns twirled again and then aimed steadily at the fourth bandit. "All right, come forward and throw your guns down," Pat ordered.

The man in the direct line of fire obeyed at once. His gun bounced on the pavement a few feet from Pat, and he raised his arms slowly. Pat inched his way toward the discarded gun.

The other men didn't move. And then Gertrude and Millie saw the one who had gotten around the corner of the bank slowly raise his gun and take deliberate aim at Pat. She and Millie both screamed, and it made old Pat jerk his head around. In that instant there was a roar of gunfire.

Old Pat went down, clutching at his shoulder. But so did the bandit who'd shot him, and so did one of the men behind the car. Then Gertrude and Millie saw the tall figure of Mr. Haviland come around the corner of the hotel next door, a smoking gun in his hand. He must have spoken very quietly because Gertrude and Millie couldn't hear him, but whatever he said made the other bandits give up. Then they saw Liz

Deering running across the street to where old Pat lay, blood dripping through the fingers that clutched his shoulder. . . .

Trooper Teliski's car went racing through the dugway at breakneck speed, siren shrieking. As he came to the turn in to the old quarry, his tires screamed and he skidded in and up the rugged path, car bounding over stones, ripping through brush. Suddenly just ahead of him loomed the crane from the new quarry inching up the road on a caterpillar tractor. Trooper Teliski sprang out of his car and ran past the crane, shouting at the tractor driver as he ran. "Never mind with that!" Teliski shouted. Stumbling and gasping for breath, he raced out into the clearing where hundreds of people waited in grief-stricken silence.

"Everybody!" Teliski shouted. "Everybody! Listen!" He was half laughing, half strangling for breath. "Your kids aren't there! They're safe. They're all safe—the kids, Jerry Mahoney, everyone! They aren't here. They'll be home before you will!"

Twenty minutes later Clayton was a madhouse. People running; people driving. And in the middle of the town, right opposite the bank, was a station wagon with a yellow school-bus sign on its roof, and children were spilling out of it, waving and shouting at their parents.

And a handsome young man with bright blue eyes was locked in a tight embrace with Elizabeth Deering. . . .

"You can't see him yet," Haviland said to Jerry Mahoney. "The doctor's with him. In a few minutes."

"I still don't get it," Jerry said.

"People thought *I* had harmed those kids?"

"You don't know what it's been like here," Liz Deering said, clinging tightly to his arm.

Jerry Mahoney turned and saw the newspaper taped over the broken front window, and his face hardened. "Try and tell me, plain and simple, about Pop," he said.

Haviland shook his head like a man still dazed. "Your pop is an amazing man, Mr. Mahoney," he said. "His mind works in its own peculiar way. The disappearance of the bus affected him differently from some others. He saw it as a magic trick, and he thought of it as a magic trick—or, rather, as *part* of a magic trick. He told me, and I wouldn't listen. He said that it is a magician's job to get you to think what he wants you to think and to see what he wants you to see. The disappearance of the children, the ghostly faking of their death in the quarry—it meant one thing to your pop, Mr. Mahoney. Someone wanted all the people of Clayton to be out of town. Why?

"There was only one good reason that remarkable pop of yours could think of. The quarry payroll. Nearly a hundred thousand dollars in cash, and not a soul in town to protect it. Everyone would be looking for the children, and all the bandits had to do was walk in the bank and take the money. No police, no nothing to interfere with them."

"But why didn't Pop tell you his idea?" Jerry asked.

"You still don't know what it was like here, Mr. Mahoney," Haviland said. "People thought you had done something to those kids; they imagined your pop knew something about it. So he kept still and got dressed in those cowboy clothes and went, calm as you please, to the bank to meet the bandits he knew must be coming. And they came."

"But why the cowboy suit?" Liz Deering asked.

"A strange and wonderful mind," Haviland said. "He thought the sight of him would be screwy enough to throw the bandits a little off balance. He thought if he started blasting away with his guns, they might panic. They almost did."

"What I don't understand," Liz said, "is how, when he fired straight at them, he never hit anybody!"

"Those were stage guns," Jerry said.

"They only fire blanks."

Haviland nodded. "He thought he could get them to drop their own guns, and then he'd have a real weapon. It almost worked. But the one man who'd ducked around the corner of the building got in a shot at him. Fortunately, I arrived at exactly the same minute, and I had them all from behind."

"Thank heavens," Jerry said. "I gather you got them to tell you where the bus was?"

Haviland nodded. "I'm still not clear how it worked, Jerry."

"It was as simple as pie à la mode," Jerry said. "I was about a half mile into the dugway on the home trip with the kids. We'd just passed Karl Dickler headed the other way when a big trailer truck loomed up ahead of me on the road. It was stopped, and a couple of guys were standing around the tail end of it.

"Broken down, I thought. I pulled up. All of a sudden guns were pointed at me and the kids. The men didn't talk much. They just said to do as I was told. They opened the back of the big truck and rolled out a ramp. Then I was ordered to drive the station wagon right up into the body of the truck. I might have tried to make a break for it except for the kids. I drove up into the truck, they closed up the rear end, and that was that. They drove off with us—right through the dugway and down the main

street of town—right by everybody in town. But nobody saw us!"

Haviland shook his head. "An old trick and I never thought of it!"

"Then ten minutes later," Jerry went on, "they pulled into that big deserted barn on the Haskell place. We've been shut up there ever since."

The doctor appeared in the doorway. "You can see him for a minute now, Jerry," he said. "I had to give him a pretty strong sedative. Dug the bullet out of his shoulder, and it hurt a bit. He's pretty sleepy—but he'll do better if he sees you, I think. Don't stay too long though."

Jerry bounded up the stairs and into the bedroom where Pat Mahoney lay, his face very pale, his eyes half-closed. Jerry knelt by the bed.

"Pop," he whispered. "You crazy old galoot!"

Pat opened his eyes. "You okay, Jerry?"

"Okay, Pop."

"And the kids?"

"Fine. Not a hair of their heads touched." Jerry reached out and covered Pat's hand with his. "Now look here, Two-Gun Mahoney. . . ."

Pat grinned at him. "It was a boffo, Jerry. A real boffo."

"It sure was," Jerry said. He started to speak, but he saw that Pat was looking past him at the silver picture frame on the dresser.

"I told you it'd be all right, honey," Pat whispered. "I told you not to worry about your boy while I was around to take care of him." Then he grinned at

Jerry, and his eyes closed and he was asleep.  
Jerry tiptoed out of the room to find his own girl.

### Comment

1. Why do nine Clayton children go to the school in Lakeview?
2. Describe the dugway and its surroundings. Why is a disappearance in the dugway "impossible"?
3. *a.* When do people begin to suspect Jerry Mahoney of kidnaping the children in the school bus?  
*b.* Why do they react this way? Does this seem a likely reaction in these circumstances?
4. *a.* Describe some of the experiences of Pat Mahoney and his wife Nora Faye during their careers in show business.  
*b.* What were Nora's last words to her husband and son?
5. After the disappearance of the bus, Pat Mahoney speaks repeatedly of The Great Thurston.  
*a.* How do Elizabeth Deering and Clyde Haviland interpret his comments?  
*b.* What is Pat's real reason for talking about the magician?
6. Explain in your own words  
*a.* the criminals' plan for robbing the bank;  
*b.* Pat Mahoney's plan for stopping the robbery.
7. Pat Mahoney says that a magician's purpose is "to make the audience think only what you want them to think and see only what you want them to see." How does this statement relate to the kidnaping of Jerry Mahoney and the busload of children?
8. In the United States, kidnaping is considered one of the worst of all crimes, and in nearly every country of the world it is punishable by a long prison sentence or by death. In your opinion, does this crime deserve such punishment? Why?