

## CHAPTER 1

# THE POWER OF CONSCIENCE: A TALE OF TWO BRICKS

The rough brick he was holding felt cold with frost, but the ten-year-old boy gripped it tightly with both hands as he crept cautiously along the dark dirt road.

The chilly air was to be expected this late on a Halloween night. He peered tensely into the darkness. As best he could tell, the road on which he was standing, Hollow Road, was deserted along its curving downward slope toward Second Street. He stood shivering for a moment in the darkness, aware of the heaviness of the brick in his hands.

He looked downward over the edge of the hill into the hollow. Barely discernible in the night shadows was the tar-papered roof of a house. The house had two floors and a basement. It was built against the hillside that supported the road on which he stood. The basement entrance was far below him in Mitchell Hollow, but the top floor of the house was at street level halfway up the hill. The boy was positioned even further up the road, higher than the roof of the house.

There were no lights visible inside the house. Apparently Charles B. Swogger and his family were asleep. Now he lifted the brick near his right ear, with his right elbow bent beneath it as a waiter might carry a tray. He placed his left hand on top of the brick to steady it.

Barely able to control his excitement, he glanced in all directions once more to be certain he was unobserved, then stepped to the brink of the embankment. His heart pounding, he twisted his shoulders to the right. With all of the might that his ten-year-old body could muster, he uncoiled and threw the brick out into the night sky toward the roof of the house below.

It was too dark for him to see the impact. But he heard it. What a crash it made when it hit the house!

He whirled around in the dirt, his pulse racing wildly. His shoes struggled for traction as he scampered madly up the hill toward High Street, anxious to put distance between himself and the havoc he had surely created. Within minutes he was safely inside his house, still flushed with excitement. He went straight to bed and lay awake for a

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long time under the warm blankets, reliving the thrill over and over until he fell asleep.

It was seventy-one years ago.

He has been reliving it ever since.

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The eighty-one-year-old fingers slowly pecked at the typewriter keys. Outside the window, the Florida sun blazed in the September sky. He painstakingly typed the next word.

C-O-N-S-C-I-E-N-C-E.

He paused for a moment and looked at the newspaper clipping lying next to the typewriter. Dated July 25, 1999, it had arrived in the mail nearly two months ago, and when he read it, he had seen the name. The name that rekindled those memories.

Especially that one memory that wouldn't go away.

He hadn't thought of that name for many years. Now here it was in a newspaper story about "Water Babies," of all things. He pulled the article toward him, held it up close, and read that paragraph again. The author was describing Jake Swogger's use of a safety boat as he instructed his swimming students. The boat was piloted by Jake's grandson, Don.

"Don Swogger is the son of the late Charles B. Swogger," the writer explained. "When I talked with Don at his home in Hiller . . ."

He stopped reading. There was the name. Charles B. Swogger. In an instant, he was back in 1928, a ten-year-old boy out for a night of Halloween fun. And what a night it was. Unforgettable.

He sat still for a moment, then sighed.

His phone call several days before hadn't gone as well as he had hoped it would. It had been a simple task to learn the telephone number of Donald Swogger in Brownsville, Pennsylvania. The call had put him through to a friendly and forgiving man who was only a few years younger than he was.

But when he had made his offer, it had been turned down. Despite his insistence, Don had told him that there was no need.

So he would write this letter and carry out his plan anyway.

"As I stated in the recent phone call," he slowly typed, "in 1928 I was about ten. As a Halloween prank, I tossed a brick onto your roof that was below street level on Hollow Road. 70 Halloweens have passed since my immature 'trick or treat.' I now want to clear my conscience and this is my way of doing it. Please accept my sincere apology and I will try to forget the incident."

He stopped and read what he had typed. He picked up a pen and with a shaky hand, he corrected several typographical errors he had made.

Satisfied, he signed the letter, folded it, and reached for the money order. He checked the name and amount once more, even though he already knew that it was correct. The U. S. Postal Service money order for the amount of \$100 was written out to Don Swogger, First Street, Hiller, Pa.

He slipped it inside the folded letter and inserted them into an envelope. It went out with the next day's mail.

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“Do you recall the incident at all?” I asked Don Swogger.

“No,” Don laughed incredulously, “I don't even remember it! I was only four years old. No one older than me who was in that house is still alive.

“I told him on the phone that he didn't need to send me that money. I don't want it, don't need it. I told him that although I don't remember the incident, I am quite willing to forgive him if it will make him feel better. It was a long time ago. It's over.”

I looked at the first two lines of the letter. It read, “As I spoke to you on the phone some time ago, I am now writing with an enclosure. This apology is for MY CONSCIENCE, NOT YOURS.”

I handed the letter back to Don. “So what are you going to do with the money?” I asked.

“Well, I don't want to keep it. So I talked with Norma Ryan down at the Flatiron building, figuring I'd give it to the museum on his behalf. So she called the fellow to tell him, but he told her that his name is not to be used as a donor. You can't use his name either.”

“I'll respect his wishes,” I assured him. “But what do you and Norma plan to do?”

Don smiled. Then he told me of their decision, a plan that was ripe with delicious irony.

Take a trip to the Flatiron building in downtown Brownsville someday. It is worth the visit. Its amazing restoration by BARC (Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation) has been financed in part by donations from current and former residents of the community. Behind the historic building is a new brick patio area where visitors may sit and watch the Monongahela roll by.

Don has decided to donate the \$100 to the Flatiron Building Heritage Center. When a donor contributes a qualifying amount of

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money as Don has done, BARC publicly recognizes the donation by adding something new to that patio area . . . . a special personally engraved brick.

For Don Swogger and an eighty-one-year-old gentleman who is tidying up his life, that brick holds a special meaning. It is a testament to the awesome power of conscience. And it tells us that it is never too late to seek forgiveness.

There is a man in Florida today whose heart is a little lighter. The brick he tossed so thoughtlessly seventy-one years ago has finally come to rest.