

**How Inmate Forty-Five
Earned His Stripes**
by Alison Atwater

There's no one more sorry,
There's no one alive,
With regrets more than I,
In-mate Forty-Five.

I'll take a few minutes
And tell you the story
About my big, dreadful
Tumble from glory.

Years ago I was blissful
And happy and free
In my brand new career at
Smith, Jones, and McGee.

I handled big cases
And deals and transactions.
I worked really hard and
Ignored all distractions.

Things went pretty well,
I was doing just fine,
'Til a real sticky deal
Came on down the line.

I had to be clever,
I had to be smart.
I had to use cases and
Great terms of art.

The deal was unwieldy
And I was still new,
But I wanted to prove that
I knew what to do.

I puzzled and pondered
Until it was clear:
If I played on the level
No deal would be near.

But the trouble would vanish
With one little fudge.
All this deal needed was
Just such a nudge.

It wasn't quite right,
Oh, yes, I sure knew it.
I couldn't quite make up my mind
That I'd do it.

I pondered the plan
Through many long showers,
And talked to my buddies
One night after hours.

"Just do it," they said.
"Man, you're really a square.
Don't you know without cheating
You won't get nowhere?"

"Just look at those bigwigs,
Just see how they are.
Don't you know a few tricks is
What got them that far?"

"If you're always too honest
And always too fair,
There's no doubt that *you* never
Will make it there."

Looking around,
I could see it was true—
It was fictions that helped
Those big-wigs get deals through.

To have a good life,
One with boats, planes, and
yachts,
I knew what they'd done:
They'd lied and lied lots!

Well, *I'd* never do that,
I never could do it.
I had a high standard
And I would stick to it.

What I had planned
Wasn't really that bad.
'Twas the only sure way that
The deal could be had.

With a flick of my wrist
I made the small change,
Then went out to practice
My swing on the range.

I'd barely begun
My drive skills to hone
When an urgent call came on my
Snazzy cell phone.

"We've got a real problem,"
The desperate voice said.
"If we don't do something,
This deal will be dead."

I hurried right back
And thought the whole way,
"There's so much at stake!
Oh, what shall we say?"

I thought of one thing,
One small, little fib.
It would go over well;
It was really quite glib.

It wasn't a lie,
No, it just wasn't, really.
To abandon the deal over this
Would be silly.

Besides, there are
So many in on this game,
To hesitate now would destroy
My good name.

So I told my glib fib
Though my tummy was queasy.
Then I realized, "Oh, hey!
That was really quite easy!"

The deal went right through.
Everybody was happy.
How could I have ever been
So very sappy?

I got a big check
From my couple small tweaks,
So I went to Bermuda
For one or two weeks.

“How to safeguard,” I wondered,
“My own fair-square share?
I’ll open an off-shore account
While I’m there.”

Back home I grew skilled,
Crafting means for the ends.
I hid a few thousand
Offshore for my friends.

Nothing too big,
Just a favor or two,
In exchange for some help
Pushing deals smoothly through.

One fudge led to two,
And then three and then four,
Until fudges just weren’t
A big deal anymore.

All my fudges were small,
Yes, my lies were quite little,
And I knew no one checked
Every jot or each tittle.

I would read in the paper,
While eating my scone,
Of bigwigs in jail,
Careers sunk like a stone.

“That won’t be me,”
I would muse with my chai,
“There’s a line I won’t cross.
I won’t even try.”

“I’m an upstanding type
And I stick to my mores.
I never will be up a creek
Without oars.”

So up, up I went,
To the top of the pile,
Dreaming and scheming my deals
All the while.

Success came quite slowly,
No, not overnight,
I put in long hours
And gave all my might.

I worked very hard,
Yes, I earned what I got,
And if I did lie,
Well, it wasn’t a lot.

If I fudged a few numbers
In one or two seasons,
I had a good cause;
I had some good reasons.

If once in awhile
I extorted a favor,
I tell you that’s something
I never did savor.

But I wasn’t a crook,
No, I wasn’t a snake.
I was not like some
Hypocrite on the take.

The things that I did
Were just par for the course;
They were what any pragmatist
Sure would endorse.

Or so I did think
‘Til that sad, fateful day
When they came and they took
All my papers away.

They crunched every number,
They read every word.
They took depositions
‘Til all had been heard.

The things that I’d done,
They evoked quite a frown,
And the newspaper showed
My career going down.

“But everyone does it,”
I tried hard to tell them.
But on that excuse I just couldn’t
Quite sell them.

“But I did nothing big,”
I tried to explain.
“Just little things, see?
It’s really quite plain.”

They showed me the
Mountains, the piles, the reams,
The years of hard work that had
Helped build my dreams.

And that’s when I learned,
When the real truth came through,
That big things are made of
The small things you do.

I never would be
In this scandalous fix
If the first bad idea
I’d just dared to nix.

It would have been hard,
And I might have lost face,
But that would be nothing
Compared to *this* place.

I started with values,
But where did they go?
How the error escaped me
I never will know.

I thought it was worth it
To get where I was,
But right has one reason,
And that’s “Just because.”

So hand me that bucket,
That mop and that pail.
I must finish cleaning
The floor of this jail.

I hope you will learn
From my airing of gripes,
And I’ll never see *you* in these
Black and white stripes!