

He had been listening the entire time. "You're gonna take us to the Jewel of Vitro, and I mean now, old man!"

George led the others back out onto the cobblestone street, across and down another to an old abandoned building —one of several owned by Vitro — once used as a warehouse, now scheduled for demolition.

They entered the musty, cobwebbed space, inching forward to adjust their eyes to the relative darkness. The electricity had been turned off years ago and despite soft shafts of light piercing through the dust rising up to a row of windows high above along the roofline, the overall effect was something like uncovering and opening King Tut's tomb for the first time in many eons.

"Okay, where is it?" barked out the stranger as he removed his dark glasses for the first time. "Hold your horses, buster, we're gettin' there!" Then in a worried whisper that nonetheless everyone clearly heard, "...But first we got to make it through the catacombs!"

* * *

The catacombs: a long brick and stone hallway with a colonnade of high brick arched columns, each one eerily aglow by the light from an equal number of grated vents in the curb of the street nearly two stories above.

In the dim light, the members of this hardy band of adventurers could barely make out the brick columns that stretched before them and vanished into the depths of the basement. The sound of the moaning "wind" was the only sound in the place; it seemed as if everyone in the group had stopped breathing for a time. Then the silence was broken by a frightened voice:

"Sir! Would you mind terribly if I went back to the car?" It was the chauffeur, literally shaking in his shiny, black boots. "I really feel I must check on..."

"Forget it!" snapped his employer. "You're stayin' here with the rest of us, see?"

Suddenly George stopped short. "We're here!" And the old man waved the lantern close to the ground, revealing a faint outline in the layers of dust and soot that had collected there over the years.

Brushing and kicking away the dust, the adventurers uncovered the wooden door to a secret underground vault, its rusty pull ring untouched since "young" George last lifted it seventy-two years before. Now it took two men to lift the heavy door. What ever was below lay in total darkness.

"Get down there and find that jewel box!" commanded the stranger, "I can't rest until I have the Jewel of Vitro!"

Vitro's president took off his Armani jacket (handing it carefully to the stranger's chauffeur) and rolled up his sleeves. "I'm the one for this job. It's gotta be me!" And he grabbed the lantern from the old man's hand and began his decent down the

wooden ladder attached to the frame of the opening into the darkness.

* * *

Setting the lantern to one side of the long wooden crate lying on the floor amid the bricks and red dust that had accumulated over seventy years, the president grabbed a crowbar that was conveniently nearby and began to pry off the lid. The nails screeched as they departed from the old dried wood, as if they didn't want to leave their home.

The Vitro head man slowly lifted off the lid, revealing packing material within. Pushing it aside, he

WHO WAS THIS MYSTERIOUS STRANGER? WHERE DID HE COME FROM? WHY DID HE WANT TO FIND A STOOL BASE? AND WHY DIDN'T HE CALL FIRST TO LET US KNOW HE WAS COMING?

saw a gleam of the lantern light reflecting off the metal surface of the die.

Then there it was! In all its glory! The Jewel of Vitro! The jewel of stools!

There was great celebration as the company's president climbed back out of the underground vault, carrying the die. Smiling, he shouted out for all to hear: "The Jewel of Vitro has been found! Now we can fulfill your order, Mister..."

But as he looked around the room he saw the stranger had disappeared. So had the man's chauffeur. Everyone searched the room but no stranger and no driver could be found. Their footprints remained where they had stood.

Could it have been a dream? Some sort of group hallucination? "No!" called out old George. "Look! Here's the guy's catalog!"

Sure enough, on the ground was the very catalog the stranger showed to everyone in the Vitro main office, but now the pages were yellowed and brittle.

Tucked inside the back page of the book was an equally faded newspaper clipping and a note. The clipping was a 1929 article from the St. Louis Globe

Democrat that wrote of a gangland killing at the opening of a speakeasy on the city's near north side. The mobster who was shot in the commotion was heard to whisper with his dying breath, "I never found those stool bases I wanted. I won't rest until I find..."

"You mean we don't get the order now?" cried out the company president as if a dagger had pierced his heart.

"Wait," answered Old George, "there's more! A note!"

Now holding the note to the lantern's light, the old

man read the words scribbled on the page: "Thank youse all for finding the Jewel of stool bases. Even though I'll never have the joy of sitting on one of your great products, now many more men and dolls can enjoy the beautiful design of this great piece of restaurant furniture, in countless cafes, diners, bars and speakeasies for years to come.

"Now, finally, I can rest in peace. And so can my driver.

"P.S. I left the catalog and note so youse'd know what happened to me. But I took the Duesy. And the jacket."

* * *

From the bowels of the catacombs, through the grated vents high above, to the cobblestone streets and through every corner of every building of the Vitro corporate campus, a blood curdling scream arose and was heard for miles around.

"MY ARMANIIIIIIIIII!"



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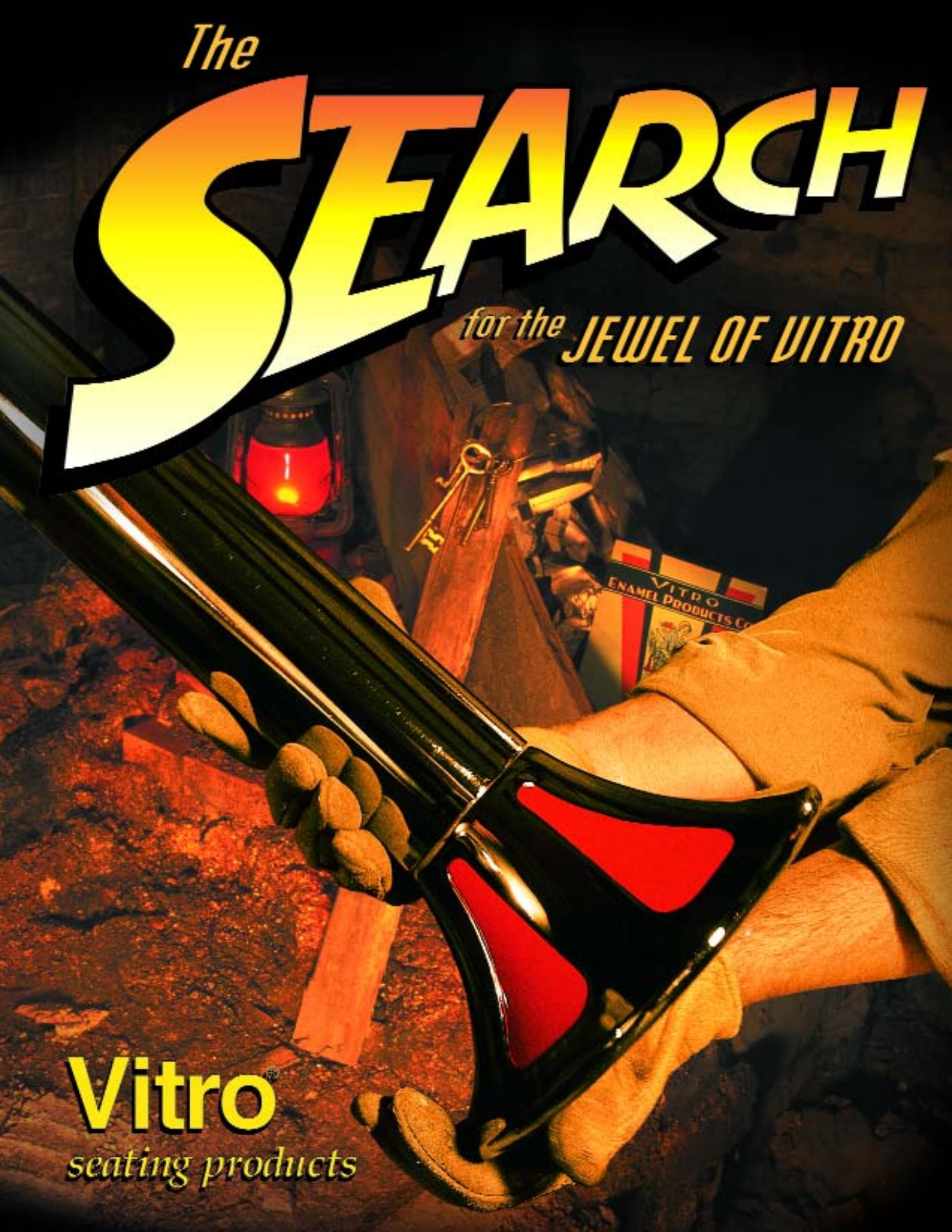
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The

SEARCH

for the JEWEL OF VITRO



Vitro[®]
seating products

**AMYSTERIOUSSTRANGER, ANOLDNIGHTWATCHMAN, AMUSTYVAULTINTHEBOWELS OFADESERTEDWAREHOUSE—THESEWERETHEELEMENTS
INTHEMOSTFASCINATINGADVENTUREINTHEANNALS OF RESTAURANTFURNITURE MANUFACTURING, WE CALL...**

The **SEARCH** for the **JEWEL OF VITRO**

It was a cold, fog-shrouded morning on the sleepy St. Louis riverfront where Vitro Seating Products has made chairs, stools and tables for the restaurant industry for over seventy years.

As production workers and assemblers arrived for work, walking past trucks being loaded with furniture for the nation's cafés and diners, a long black car slowly emerged from the fog rolling up the cobblestone street.

It was a perfect reproduction of a vintage 1928 black Duesenberg J. limousine.

Or was it a reproduction?

The Duesy stopped at the Vitro main entrance, and its driver, a tall mustachioed man costumed in a

black chauffeur's suit and cap and wearing a monocle, sprung crisply to the pavement and around the car to open the door for his mysterious passenger.

As the stranger confidently walked into Vitro headquarters, office employees slowly rose to peer over their cubicles. The mysterious man strode with a determined gait to the front desk. With his great charm, he leaned toward the young receptionist — wide eyed as she was — and asked, "Who's the boss here?"

"The customer's the boss at Vitro," answered the young woman behind the desk.

"That's good!" He looked around the room, smiling, and to no one in particular he added, "I like this place! I think we can do business."

The mysterious stranger remained standing once inside the president's oak-lined office. Reaching inside his coat, he drew something from his jacket's inside breast pocket: an old Vitro catalog from the late Twenties. "That's it," said the visitor planting his thick forefinger dead in the center of an open page in the book. The Jewel of Vitro — That's what I'm lookin' for!"

"Yes, this is our design," Vitro's president began, "and I'll admit it is beautiful, but I wouldn't know where to begin to look for the die that formed it, if it even still exists..."

"I have to have it," insisted the stranger. "And I don't like to take no for an answer."

The owner withdrew from his office, more in an effort to stall for a little time to figure out what he was going to do. There would certainly be no such stool bases of good condition to be found anywhere in the world. They could make the bases if they had the die, but surely even the die for this 'jewel of the seating industry' was long gone.

"No it ain't," a voice called out from outside the group. All looked up to see old George Diggs, the company's night watchman who hadn't clocked out yet, curious as everyone else about all the commotion at the company's headquarters.

George had worked for Vitro almost from the very beginning. In those days he was 'Young' George, the stock boy, running orders to the factory and bills of lading to the shipping dock.

George had also been responsible for a number of odd jobs, one being the destruction of the outdated dies and models used in the making of table and stool bases. When instructed, he would load the dies still boxed in their wooden crates onto a dolly or cart, walk them down the 'last mile' to the company's blast furnace, and throw the whole thing, die and crate together, into the fiery inferno. The jewel of Vitro was one of those dies "young" George was instructed to destroy. Because of the market crash of the time the owners feared the unusual design would become too costly to produce and the design might fall into the hands of competitors.

"So it really is gone," remarked one of the younger office workers. "End of story!"

"Not so fast, missy," rebuked the old man. "I said I was told to destroy the jewel; I didn't say I did!"

"You see, I carted it down the 'last mile' to the furnace, all right, but I had to stop and open the crate for one last look. That was my mistake. When I saw that die, glowing in the red light of the fire, I couldn't do it. I couldn't throw it in, I tell you! It was just too beautiful! Heaven help me, I put the jewel back in its tomb and took it somewhere no one would ever find it. I buried it. And that's where the jewel has rested, undisturbed, for nigh these seventy years."

"That's enough!" A voiced boomed out from behind the group: it was the mysterious stranger.

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