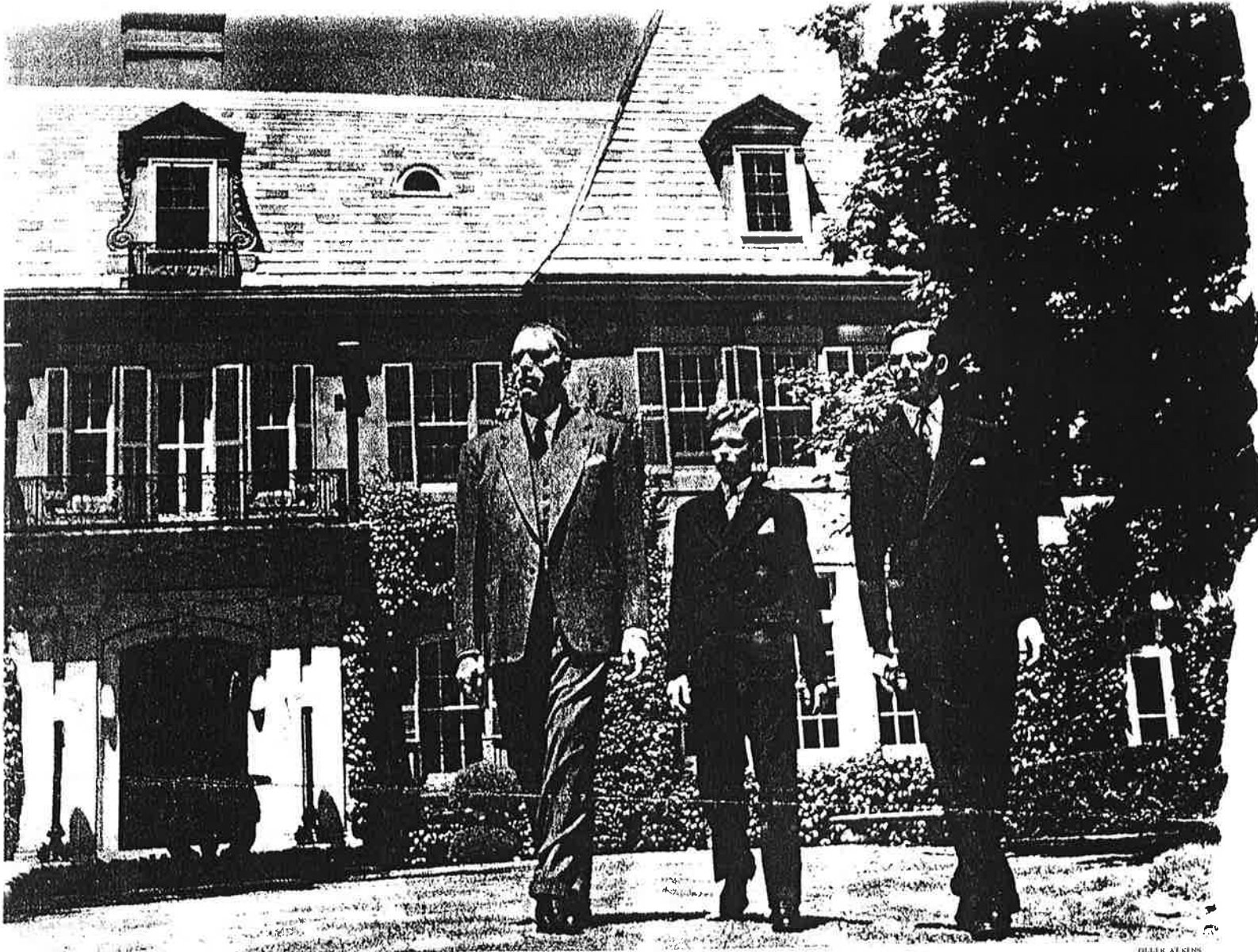




Brown and his two sons before one of Brown's collection of homes—he now has six. This is a cozy thirty-room spot in Newport.

World's Richest Baby Joins the Navy

By MILTON LEHMAN

Labeled a \$10,000,000 baby at birth, John Nicholas Brown ran away from the spotlight all his life. Now he has surrendered—and is drawing his first pay checks as Assistant Secretary for Air.

LAST March, when the Atlantic Fleet was churning the Caribbean waters in its springtime maneuvers, a silvery helicopter came out of the sun and headed for the flagship Missouri. Inside, a gentle, enormous man watched tensely as the helicopter swayed toward the lurching battleship, then lifted above the threatening deck and squatted down on a gun turret scarcely twenty feet wide. While sailors steadied the craft, the passenger climbed unsteadily out. He smiled wilyly at his pilot and went below for lunch.

The man who came to lunch was John Nicholas Brown, inspecting the fleet as the Navy's new Assistant Secretary for Air. Mr. Brown was unaccustomed to travel by air, preferring trains, yachts and chauffeur-driven limousines. A modest multi-

millionaire, he had sent word ahead not to fire the customary seventeen-gun salute. For most of his forty-seven years, he has tried to avoid the public gaze which focused on him, before he was able to walk, as the "richest baby in the world."

The strange story of John Brown, of Rhode Island, begins with a giant slot machine hitting the jack pot. Born on February 21, 1900, he was a million-dollar baby by the middle of May; within a few weeks of each other, his father, who had married late in life, and his uncle, who was childless, died. They left him their ancestral fortune of stocks, bonds, office buildings, farms, textile mills and banks. In liquid assets, Baby Brown was worth \$10,000,000; in potential earnings, he was worth millions more.

A few months later he belonged to the Sunday supplements. Between a splashy account of an ax murderer and the confessions of a chorus girl, one supplement dubbed him: THE WORLD'S RICHEST BABY—THE MOST LUXURIOUS CHILD ON EARTH. The story that followed was a classic of newspaper fiction. "In a glorious kingdom," it began, "Baby Brown is monarch. . . . His Play Room is decorated with tapestries and paintings. . . . In his Engine Room are miles upon miles of tracks and yards upon yards of locomotives and cars. . . . His Beach Room is a paradise . . . of choice white sand, great growing palms, and in their branches the loveliest of singing birds."

The supplement writer spared no expense. John Brown's eggs, he declared, were initialed and his

Saturday Evening Post 23 August 1947

milk, worth fifteen dollars a quart, came from a pedigreed Jersey cow on the baby's \$100,000 Newport lawn. Before approaching the golden child, his servants and his guards were obliged to fumigate their clothes and wash their hair in weak solutions of carbolic acid.

In all this fiction there was some truth—for John Brown was the world's richest baby, with one of the last remaining Federalist fortunes of America all in his own name. Even discounting the fanciful cow and the initialed eggs, the miles of tracks and the singing birds, he still was raised in uncommon luxury.

When the nation forgot him, Rhode Island watched him grow up, tall, awkward and sickly. Descended from bardy merchants, he seemed like a tender sprout on a gnarled and ancient oak. Instead of tending to business, he wrote poetry and collected medieval art; he associated with the sons of bishops and parsons; he played the cello, built a huge chapel and wandered through old Egyptian ruins. "He was a great Dane," say folks in Providence, "who behaved like a Pekingese."

Today John Brown is back, blinking, in the spotlight. In his Navy Department office in Washington, the Assistant Secretary towers over visiting admirals, scientists, senators and congressmen. Six feet six when he stands up straight, he is given to slouching, out of consideration for shorter men. Of monumental stature, with massive head and arms, Brown speaks in a gentle, cultivated voice. "I know you'll call me the world's richest baby," he told reporters on his arrival, "but I'm down here for business."

The reporters were charmed. Although he looks like Boris Karloff, one observed, he is modest, sincere and hardworking. Another compared him to the Late George Apley, but added that Brown is a credit to the Navy. Meanwhile, the admirals and commodores, who watched secretaries come and go, say John Nicholas Brown is an able, conscientious administrator with a passion for making good.

Steady Job With a Salary

In his new post, Brown has turned from medieval relics to the future. As Assistant Secretary, he is responsible for the Navy's program in aeronautics and its new venture in basic scientific research. In a brave new world of aircraft carriers, rocket ships and guided missiles, the scholarly Brown must decide, for example, whether to buy British-made engines for American jet-propelled planes or begin the costly manufacture of them here. He must explain the high cost of navies to budget committees and the Navy's role in research to scientists opposing military supervision.

A Democrat in politics, Brown comes to his Navy post by presidential appointment. In last November's election, tiny Rhode Island sent an all-Democratic delegation to Washington. Soon after, the tall and solemn Brown was brought to the capital by Rhode Island's Senators Theodore Francis Green and J. Howard McGrath. Accepting his post with missionary zeal, Brown joins other wealthy men serving in high Government offices at low salaries. It is the first salaried job of his career. As Assistant Secretary, he earns \$9800 annually, which isn't enough to pay for upkeep on a yacht.

Brown no longer shudders at the thought of leaving behind the world's richest baby. Today he considers himself just another wealthy man, of other modest millions compared with the Astors, Morgans and Rockefellers, who came into their great fortunes in later life. "I'm really not much different from other people," he likes to say.

For all his modesty, life for John Brown is not the same as it is for most people. Even in Rhode Island, the family of rich ancestral families, the Browns are very typical. As head of his family, the new patriarch maintains two Colonial houses in Providence for his Counting House Corporation and live in; a thirty-room French chateau in Newport where his mother lives; a twenty-five-room retreat of plate glass and aluminum on Long Island, New York; and a rambling ranch in the sand hills of Nebraska. With his call to on, Brown

(Continued on Page 40)



Family group, in the relatively simple surroundings of a power cruiser. Skipper Brown, his son Nicholas, 14, his daughter Angela, 9, and Mrs. Brown, with the younger son, John Carter, 12, at the rail.



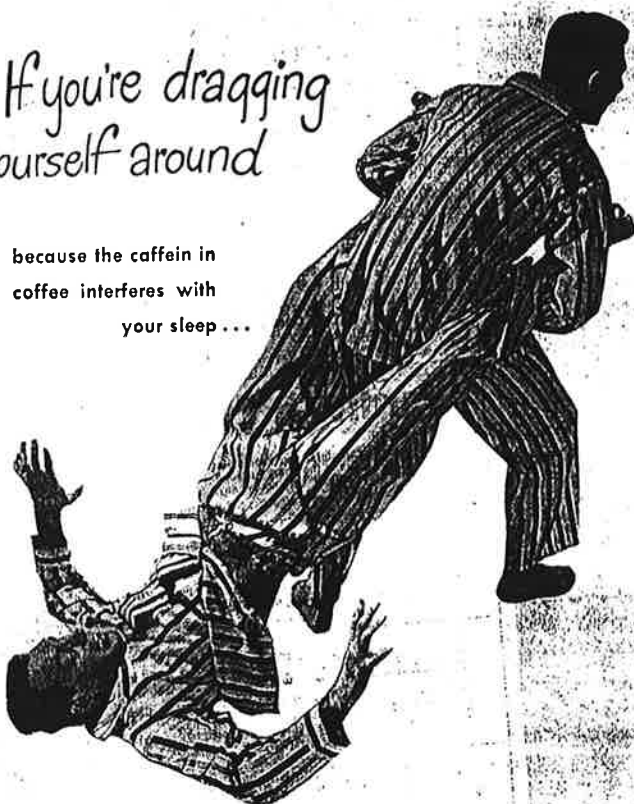
Now this towering multimillionaire is Assistant Secretary for Air, and working earnestly at it.



It's the first time Brown ever worked for money, and his pay wouldn't keep him in cello strings.

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WORLD'S RICHEST BABY JOINS THE NAVY

(Continued from Page 23)

added a large colonial house in Georgetown, the fashionable public-servant colony of the District of Columbia.

Probably no other public servant has as many private servants as John Brown or needs them more. On moving days, he says, he feels like a Biblical patriarch, "with his ox and his ass, his manservant and his maidservant." His recent move to Washington was a major maneuver. Days in advance, his wife chose and alerted the servants: a valet, cook, chauffeur, second cook, kitchen maid, chamber maid, ladies' maid and governess. An inveterate collector of paintings, furniture and bric-a-brac, Brown thinks a home is barren without a few possessions. For Washington, he selected paintings by Cézanne and El Greco; drawings by Daumier, Ingres, Da Vinci, Van Dyck and Gainsborough; a Stradivarius cello, fiddles, viola and music stands; books; his favorite double bed and other furniture; a cabin cruiser, three cars, a dog and his daughter's canary.

In Washington, an evening with the Browns is less carefree than in the old days at Providence, where fifty guests came to buffet suppers and listened to string quartets. Now concerned with the future of the Navy, Brown uses his Georgetown house to entertain admirals, congressmen, Cabinet members and foreign diplomats.

Back in Rhode Island, Brown is best known as a philanthropist; whose benefactions were generous, if somewhat curious. In Newport, when he came of age, he built and dedicated a \$1,000,000 Gothic chapel at St. George's School, probably the most lavish shrine ever

conceived for 150 schoolboys. He gave \$15,000 to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago to send an expert to decipher inscriptions on ancient Egyptian coffins. He restored the Old City Hall in Newport and the Old State House in Providence. He founded the Medieval Academy of America and endowed St. Dunstan's School for choir boys, declaring that the singing in his church, St. Stephen's Episcopal, needed improvement. "A man of wealth," says Mr. Brown, "is obliged to use it well."

The wealth of the Browns, increased today to an estimated \$50,000,000, is one of the oldest fortunes in the country. Unlike other fortunes, created overnight by spectacular investments, sudden oil gushers and wartime booms, the Browns built theirs slowly, generation on generation. The first of the Browns was Chad, who came to Providence in 1638, exiled from Massachusetts with Roger Williams. Chad was a man of religion and became first pastor of the Baptist Church. But he was also shrewd in commerce and founded a thriving general store.

For six generations the descendants of Chad mixed weekday thrift with Sabbath worship. There was James, who formed a monopoly in whale-oil candles and listed his debtors in church on Sundays. There were the four brothers, Nicholas, Joseph, John and Moses, who built ships for the triangular trade of rum, molasses and slaves, and helped found Brown University, which bears the family's name. There was Nicholas, the son of Nicholas, who turned the Brown fortune to textiles and real estate.

With John Carter Brown, the seventh generation, the business-urge was gone. While a hired executor clipped the coupons, John Carter traveled and read and collected early-American



Things Were Different Then

A POST-WAR ANECDOTE

IT was raining that morning and the outfit was scheduled for a ten-mile hike with full field equipment. So one private, after a very brief, one-sided debate with his conscience, decided to go on sick call, and have a small eruption on his arm doctored. By a dependable coincidence, many of the other boys in the unit felt a similar urge. The benches in the dispensary were crowded. The single doctor on duty was harried. After about twenty soldiers had approached him with such vague statements as: "I don't know just what's

wrong with me, sir. I just don't feel so good," the doctor also was irritated.

When the private finally reached him and bared his arm, the doctor blew up.

"What do you think you're pulling here?" he demanded. "If you were in civilian life, would you come to me with that little scratch on your arm?"

The private shook his head. "No, sir," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "In civilian life, I'd send for you."

—KENNETH J. MCCAUSLAND.

books. His sons, John Nicholas and Harold Brown, were travelers. When they died in 1900, they left the fortune to their son and nephew, John Nicholas Brown, the last surviving heir and "the richest baby in the world."

It wasn't much fun being the world's richest baby. Lonely and much supervised, John Brown rotated between Newport and Providence. The Brown estate of Harbour Court, in Newport, is walled in like a feudal castle, looking down on the village and Narragansett Bay from its high sea wall; and the Providence home is also fenced in. Only on special occasions did young John leave the family estates. When he was four years old, he made his first public appearance, dressed in an ermine cape and cap, to dedicate the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, in honor of his grandfather. Six years later, he emerged again, sailing for England with his mother to see the coronation of King George V.

His mother, Mrs. John Nicholas Brown, a tall, determined woman of Victorian tastes, raised the boy with the help of his aunts and his governess and the elderly James De Wolf Perry, Bishop of Rhode Island, who came to Harbour Court for tea. While his mother wanted her son to become an Episcopalian minister, his governess, a short, bustling cockney named Kay Connor, was determined that young John should be the model of a modern English gentleman. And it was Nannie Connor who led him about with a blue ribbon tied to her wrist and his. Years later, when John Brown and his bride sailed on their honeymoon, Nannie wanted to go along, and it wasn't easy to turn her down. The devoted Nannie stayed on in Newport until her death in 1933, leaving Brown, as a final symbolic bequest, her prized collection of silver spoons.

With Nannie dogging his traces, the golden-haired boy had few friends. One was Bill Vanderbilt, the ruddy-cheeked heir of the adjoining Newport estate, who helped John sail his toy boats in his own private pond. When Bill tired of this sport, his chauffeur would drive him to town to play with the children of gardeners and housemen, leaving John behind. Vanderbilt later became Republican governor of the state. But of all John's companions, the most faithful was "Akerbodie," an imaginary friend who never left his side. Unlike John, who was large but frail, "Akerbodie" was daring and athletic. Eventually, John's mother heard of "Akerbodie" and, greatly moved, named her cabin cruiser for him.

For most young millionaires, college days are bright and glittering, a break from parental ties to house parties, coeds and moonlight rides. Facing this crisis, a young heir's parents are often cautious and worried. When John Brown went to Harvard, after graduating from St. George's School, in Newport, his mother rented a house in Boston to be near him. But there was no cause for alarm. Eighteen years old and lanky as Ichabod Crane, the young scion buried himself in medieval studies and haunted the library. "If a gold digger wanted to get him," a fellow student says today, "she'd have had to dig him out of the stacks."

At Harvard, Brown dressed simply and behaved like a poor, hard-working scholar. In his freshman year he served briefly as apprentice seaman in the Harvard Naval Unit while the first World War was grinding to a close. Although he never put out to sea, he did sleep in a Navy cot that collapsed under his weight, and wore bell-bottom

trousers that barely covered his shins. Once he went AWOL from drill to visit the battlefields of Lexington and Concord.

The newspapers left him alone until his senior year, when a Boston reporter called to see how "the world's richest baby" was making out. John sent him away, pleading that publicity had always set him apart from other boys. But on his graduation he was solidly back in print. Brown had just come of age and inherited another \$20,000,000. When the university awarded him a John Harvard Traveling Fellowship to investigate medieval art in the Mediterranean, it also announced that his traveling allowance would be turned over "to a poor, deserving student."

Back from Europe in 1923, Brown looked into the Counting House Corporation, the seat of his family fortune. In charge of the Counting House, at 50 South Main Street, Providence, was Frank W. Matteson, trustee and executor for the Brown estate. A ponderous, florid gentleman who smoked long black cigars and wore a derby hat cocked over his ear, Matteson told young John to make himself at home, and gave him an office in the rear of the building. In a spirit of pure research, Brown sent inquiries to Matteson and the junior executives, but the answers weren't very satisfactory. "Don't bother your head about all this, John," Matteson told him, slapping him on the back. "Relax and have a good time." John, who didn't like business anyway, went back to his office and read Dante's Divine Comedy.

Now of age, Brown was ready to sow his own special variety of oats—at least \$30,000,000 worth, and more to come. In Newport, the summer colony remembered how Vincent Astor, at twenty-one, had rushed off to Broadway to court an actress. Brown, however, was disappointing. In his first exuberance, he founded and endowed the Mediaeval Academy of America and then spent \$1,000,000 on the Gothic Chapel for St. George's School, with Brown's head, carved in stone, peering down from a spire on the playing fields. Newport took heart when a young lady in Kansas City told the newspapers she was quitting her job to marry John Nicholas Brown. But Brown promptly declared he had never heard of her and announced he was returning to Harvard for his master's degree in fine arts.

Then, with his master's degree, the young millionaire took off again for Europe to inspect Byzantine ruins and to follow the Spanish pilgrims' road to Santiago de Compostela. "It was a wonderful year, a year of fantasy," says John Brown today. In the midst of his tour through Santa Sophia came the crash of 1929.

Called back in a hurry from Europe and the Middle Ages, Brown found Matteson a nervous wreck and his estate drained of its liquid assets. With his vast eyebrows lowered for business, Brown turned his back on Dante and Xenophon. He called in economists and lawyers, rental agents and textile experts, and sat up late nights poring through reports and dictating memoranda. Soon after, Matteson suffered a stroke and died.

Brown began with the Lonsdale Company, whose nine Rhode Island textile mills were losing \$1,000,000 a year. Run by an agency of kmfolk, the company was old, its merchandise out of date, its business methods unchanged for generations. As majority stockholder, Brown relieved his rela-



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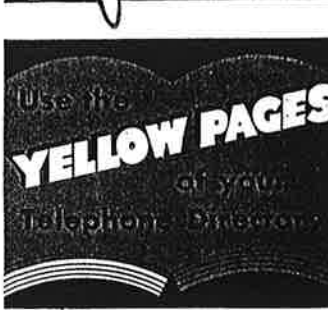
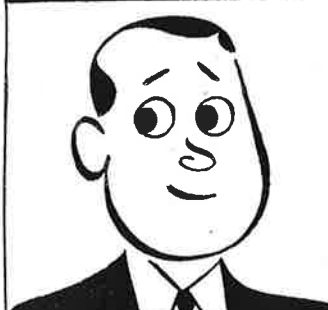
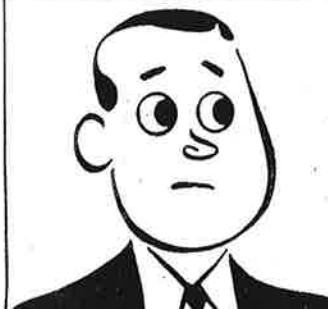
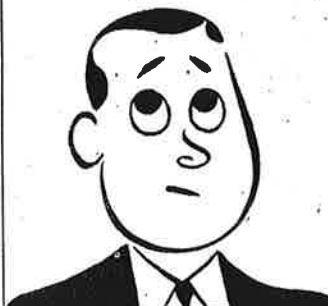
Yesir! In no time, wonderful new Benex has your whiskers so soggy they're setups for the blade! Then... once around your face and look at your skin! Choir-boy smoothness! May-morning freshness! Oh, what a wonderful-feeling face! Bub, get Benex today!

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tives, put in his own director, modernized the plants and later, when they were showing a profit, sold them to the Tectron Corporation.

From New York to Duluth, the Brown real estate was sagging at the beams. The warehouses and office buildings, print shops and apartment houses were losing tenants; the rent was scarcely enough for taxes. "The problem," Brown says solemnly today, "was grave and complex." He solved it by propping up a department store in this town, turning a warehouse in that into a refrigerator plant. Office buildings were remodeled or sold.

In the Midwest farm belt, the Brown Land Company was falling apart from poor crops and worse management. Playing his Stradivarius cello in his train compartment, John Brown headed west. He sold land in Kansas and Illinois, restocked and rebuilt in Nebraska and Iowa, sent experts to teach his tenants crop rotation and soil conservation. Near Whitman, Nebraska, he bought 32,000 acres of ranch land and stocked it with Hereford cattle.

Then, like his ancestors before him, the new John Brown turned his mind to the future and his capital to up-and-coming enterprises—to precision tools and universal gears, to plastics and radar. When the depression was over, the Brown fortune was still intact, and the boom years that followed would have delighted old Nicholas Brown himself.

A year after the crash, John Brown chose a wife. She was Anne Seddon Kinsolving, the daughter of the Rev. Arthur B. Kinsolving, the niece of two bishops and a descendant of General Robert E. Lee. And, although Brown had tried to avoid reporters for thirty years, she was also a society reporter for the Baltimore News. Miss Kinsolving, he learned, had once ridden in a locomotive in overalls and she knew most of the policemen in Baltimore. Unlike the society belles of Newport, who barely came up to his chin and considered him strange and depressing, she was tall enough to look him in the eye and could talk back on art and music in as many foreign tongues as John Brown knew himself.

The news of his marriage swept the society pages and boomed in the supplements. CINDERELLA MARRIES MILLION DOLLAR BABY, said the American Weekly. THE TRUE LOVE STORY OF THE MILLION DOLLAR BACHELOR AND HIS BRIDE, chorused Cupid's Diary. For the first time, John Brown didn't seem to mind. He even told reporters how it happened. He was the luckiest man on earth, he said. After three dates together, Anne went to the hospital for an appendectomy. "When she came out of the ether," said Mr. Brown, "I asked her."

Back from a honeymoon touring the museums of Europe, the Browns settled between Providence and Newport, and began raising a family. In the mid-'30's, John announced he was weary of antique houses, and commissioned a Viennese architect, Richard Neutra, to design for him a modern dwelling on Fishers Island, New York. There is nothing like it anywhere. Brown called it Windshield, because it perches on the island's crest and is entirely surrounded by glass. Bach and Brahms are piped into its twenty-four rooms, including the servants' quarters. Klieg lights play down on the dining-room table and other kliegs in the music room light the music stands of visiting quartets. But for all its photoelectric cells and built-in furniture, the pride

and joy of Windshield is the master's bathroom, with its molded twin bathtubs. Before dressing for dinner, Brown and his wife like to sit in the tubs, side by side, talking over the day's events.

In September, 1938, the Browns moved in, with their sons, John Carter and Nicholas, and their daughter, Angela. Ten days later a hurricane swept the Atlantic seaboard and, of all the homes on Fishers Island, Windshield alone was wrecked. The Browns' neighbors, living in conventional Cape Cod cottages down the hill, said they knew something like this would happen. Ripping off the roof, the great wind splintered the glass panels, garished the furniture with fiber insulation and then sprayed the wreckage with salt water. With commendable spirit, Brown said he was changing the name of the house to Won't Shield, and ordered it rebuilt immediately.

By the end of the '30's, John Brown was Rhode Island's leading trustee. He joined a vast number of boards, commissions and societies—his schedule would have exhausted the Late George Apley. In January he visits the Butler Hospital for the Insane, founded by his great-grandfather, and in July he attends the Society of the Cincinnati, founded by George Washington. Once a month he meets with the board of the Providence Public Library, the Providence Institution for Savings and Brown University, named for his great-grandfather. Between times he serves as delegate to the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, trustee to the Boston Symphony Orchestra, sponsor of the Tanglewood Music Festival and a member of the Rhode Island Historical Society, the American Institute of Architects, the Mediaeval Academy, the Byzantine Institute and the American School for Classical Studies.

Like his ancestors, John Nicholas Brown was appointed, not elected, to serve the public. And though he has never run for public office, he has not run away from it either. A conservative Democrat, the Navy's new Assistant Secretary is closer to Truman's "middle of the road" than to Roosevelt's "slightly left of center," although he supported Roosevelt three times out of four.

At first a reluctant politician, Brown was tutored for public life by Cornelius Moore, a portly, white-haired Democrat of Newport; by his uncle, former United States Senator Peter G. Gerry;

by his wife and his mother, who had stumped the streets of Newport for Alfred E. Smith. In 1934, Brown was appointed to his first public post, the State Planning Board, by Theodore Francis Green, then governor and a friend of his mother. In 1939, Gov. William H. Vanderbilt, his childhood friend, named him to the State Civil Service Commission, and in 1940 he was appointed to Newport's Representative Council.

When war broke out, John Brown, who was already moderate in drinking and smoking, swore off both for the duration. Applying to the mayor of Newport for a war job, he was made chairman of civilian defense. He alerted the townspeople for possible bombings and set the example by shipping his art treasures to Nebraska for safekeeping. In the wearing weeks that followed, he directed Newport's air-raid alerts and conducted a trial evacuation of children to near-by Cranston, contributing \$285 for their identifying dogtags.

Then, restless to serve, Brown applied to the Army and, in 1945, he was appointed Chief of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section of the Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas. For this post he was given the assimilated rank of colonel, with the mission of restoring the art treasures of Europe looted by the Nazis to their rightful owners.

No soldier ever embarked for Europe with a greater sense of liberation. Behind John Brown were forty-two boards, committees, commissions and societies; four houses with 100 rooms and thirty servants; vast wardrobes of clothes; and a fleet of yachts and sailing craft and limousines. Leaving Rhode Island, he carried a simple suitcase and duffel bag, which he packed himself, forgetting to put in pajamas in his hurry to go.

Today in Washington, Assistant Secretary Brown of the Navy is an earnest public servant, with an honesty that often disarms harder politicians. At home he is a devoted father, and his sons, now attending the Groton School, are raised with more freedom than he was. In a serious mood, they sometimes talk of the Brown fortune and its responsibility. But in a gayer mood, they all go sailing, or play string trios, or watch their father, revealing his stature and musical talent, do a solo with his Stradivarius cello tucked under his chin.

THE END

