# I

ONE Sunday of August 1968, I knocked on the door of a small frame house on Kensington Street in Delano, California. It was just before seven in the morning, and the response to the knock was the tense, suspenseful silence of a household which, in recent months, had installed an unlisted telephone, not as a convenience, but to call the outside world in case of trouble. After a moment the house breathed again, as if I had been identified through the drawn shutters, but no one came to the door, and so I sat down on the stoop and tuned in to a mockingbird. The stoop is shaded by squat trees, which distinguish Kensington Street from the other straight lines of one-story bungalows that comprise residential Delano, but at seven, the air was already hot and still, as it is almost every day of summer in the San Joaquin Valley.

Cesar Chavez's house—or rather, the house inhabited by Cesar Chavez, whose worldly possessions, scraped together, would scarcely be worth the $50 that his farm workers union pays for him in monthly rent—has been threatened so often by his enemies that it would be foolish to set down its street number. But on Kensington Street, a quiet stronghold of the American Way of Life, the house draws attention to itself by its very lack of material aspira-

tion. On such a street the worn brown paint, the forgotten yard (relict plantings by a former tenant die off one by one, and a patch of lawn between stoop and sidewalk had been turned to mud by a leaky hose trailing away into the weeds), the uncompetitive car which, lacking an engine, is not so much parked as abandoned, are far more subversive than the strike signs (DON'T BUY CALIFORNIA GRAPES) that are plastered on the car, or the Kennedy stickers, fading now, that are still stuck to the old posts of the stoop, or the STOP REAGAN sign that decorates the shuttered windows.

Behind those drawn shutters, the house—two bedrooms, bath, kitchen and an L-shaped living room where some of the Chavez children sleep—is neat and cheerful, brought to life by a white cabinet of bright flowers and religious objects, a stuffed bookcase, and over the sofa bed, a painting in Mexican mural style of surging strikers, but from the outside it might seem that this drab place has been abandoned, like an old store rented temporarily for some fleeting campaign and then gutted again of everything but tattered signs. The signs suggest that the dwelling is utilitarian, not domestic, that the Chavez family live here because when they came, in 1962, this house on the middle-class east side was the cheapest then available in Delano, and that their commitment is somewhere else.

Chavez's simple commitment is to win for farm workers the right to organize in their own behalf that is enjoyed by all other large labor groups in the United States; if it survives, his United Farm Workers Organizing Committee will be the first effective farm workers union in American history. Until Chavez appeared, union leaders had considered it impossible to organize seasonal farm labor, which is in large part illiterate and indigent, and for which even

mild protest may mean virtual starvation. The migrant labor force rarely remains in one place long enough to form an effective unit and is mostly composed of minority groups which invite more hostility than support, since the local communities fear an extra municipal burden with no significant increase in the tax base. In consequence, strikes, protests and abortive unions organized ever since 1903 have been broken with monotonous efficiency by the growers, a task made easier since the Depression years by the specific exclusion of farm workers from the protection of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (the Wagner Act), which authorizes and regulates collective bargaining between management and labor, and protects new unionists from reprisal. In a state where cheap labor, since Indian days, has been taken for granted, like the sun, the reprisals have been swift and sometimes fatal, as the history of farm labor movements attests.

The provision of the NLRA which excludes farm workers was excused by the bloody farm strikes of 1934, when the Communist label was firmly attached to "agrarian reformers"; its continued existence three decades later is a reflection of the power of the growers, whose might and right have been dutifully affirmed by church and state. But since 1965, America's last bastion of uninhibited free enterprise has been shaken so hard by national publicity that both church and state are searching for safer positions. And this new hope for the farm workers has been brought not by the Communist agent that his enemies have conjured up, nor even by a demagogue, but by a small, soft-spoken Mexican-American migrant laborer who could never leave the fields long enough to get past the seventh grade.

. . .

In no more time than it would take to pull his pants on and splash water on his face, the back door creaked and Cesar Chavez appeared around the corner of the house. "Good morning." He smiled, raising his eyebrows, as if surprised to see me there. "How are you?" He had not had much sleep—it was already morning when I dropped him off the night before—but in that early light he looked as rested as a child. Though he shook my hand, he did not stop moving; we walked south down Kensington Street and turned west at the corner.

The man who has threatened California has an Indian's bow nose and lank black hair, with sad eyes and an open smile that is shy and friendly; at moments he is beautiful, like a dark seraph. He is five feet six inches tall, and since his twenty-five-day fast the previous winter, has weighed no more than one hundred and fifty pounds. Yet the word "slight" does not properly describe him. There is an effect of being centered in himself so that no energy is wasted, an effect of *density*; at the same time, he walks as lightly as a fox. One feels immediately that this man does not stumble, and that to get where he is going he will walk all day.

In Delano (pronounced "De-*lay*-no"), the north–south streets are named alphabetically, from Albany Street on the far west side to Xenia on the east; the cross streets are called avenues and are numbered. On Eleventh Avenue, between Kensington and Jefferson, a police car moved out of an empty lot and settled heavily on its springs across the sidewalk. There it idled while its occupant enjoyed the view. Small-town policemen are apt to be as fat and sedentary as the status quo they are hired to defend, and this one was no exception; he appeared to be part of his machine, overflowing out of his front window like a growth. Having

feasted his eyes on the public library and the National Bank of Agriculture, he permitted his gaze to come to rest on the only two citizens in sight. His cap, shading his eyes from the early sun, was much too small for him, and in the middle of his mouth, pointed straight at us, was a dead cigar.

At seven on a Sunday morning in Delano, a long-haired stranger wearing sunglasses and sneakers, in the company of a Mexican, would qualify automatically as a troublemaker; consorting with a *known* troublemaker like Chavez, I became a mere undesirable. The cop looked me over long enough to let me know he had his eye on me, then eased his wheels into gear again and humped on his soft springs onto the street. Chavez raised his eyebrows in a characteristic gesture of mock wonderment, but in answer to my unspoken question—for in this tense town it could not be assumed that this confrontation was an accident—he pointed at the back of a crud-colored building fronting on Jefferson Street. "That's our station house," he said, in the manner of a man who is pointing out, with pardonable pride, the main sights of his city.

A walk across town on Eleventh Avenue, from the vineyards in the east to the cotton fields in the west, will teach one a good deal about Delano, which lies in Kern County, just south of the Tulare County line. Opposite the National Bank of Agriculture is a snack stand, La Cocina—PEPSI, BURGERS, TACOS, BURRITOS—as well as the Angelos Dry Goods shop and the Sierra Theatre, which features Mexican films; from here to Main Street and beyond, Eleventh Avenue is lined with jewelry shops and department stores. Main Street, interrupting the alphabetical sequence between Jefferson and High, is a naked treeless stretch of

signs and commercial enterprises, mostly one-story; today it was empty of all life, like an open city.

Toward High Street, Empire Ford Sales rules both sides of Eleventh, and the far corners of High Street are the properties of OK USED TRUCKS and KERN COUNTY EQUIPMENT: TRUCKS AND TRACTORS. The farm-equipment warehouses and garages continue west across High Street to the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad; the loading platforms of the farm-produce packing sheds and cold-storage houses front the far side of the tracks, with their offices facing west on Glenwood Street. Opposite these buildings are some small cafés and poker parlors frequented by the workers—Monte Carlo Card Room, Divina's Four Deuces, Lindo Michoacan—and beyond Glenwood, the workers' neighborhoods begin. Fremont Street, relatively undeveloped, overlooks U.S. Highway 99, which bores through the town below ground level like an abandoned subway trench. An overpass across the freeway links Fremont with Ellington Street, which is littered with small cafés and markets. The wrong side of the tracks, a community of small houses, mostly Mexican-American, spreads west to Albany Street and the cotton, food and flower factories of the San Joaquin Valley.

Toward Dover Street, a car coming up behind us slowed too suddenly. Chavez, like a feeding deer, gave sign of awareness with a sidelong flick of his brown eyes, but he did not turn or stop talking. When a voice called out in Spanish, asking him if he would like a lift, he smiled and waved, then pointed at the church two streets away. "*¡No, gracias! Yo voy a la misa.*"

Irregularly, Chavez attends this pretty stucco church at the corner of Eleventh Avenue and Clinton Street. The

church sign, OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE, is garish and utilitarian, in the spirit of Delano, and the churchyard is a parking lot enclosed by a chain-link fence. But the place has been planted with cypress, pines and yew, which, in this early light, threw cool fresh shadows on the white stucco. In the flat angularities of their surroundings, the evergreens and red tile roof give the building a graceful Old World air that is pointed up by twin white crosses, outlined against the hot blue of the sky.

Chavez hurried on the concrete path, in the bare sun. He was wearing his invariable costume—plaid shirt, work pants, dark suede shoes—but he was clean and neatly pressed, and though he had said nothing about church, it appeared that he had been bound here all along. "Let's just go in for a little while," he murmured. He was hurrying now as if a little late, though in fact the mass was near its end. From the church door came the soft drone of liturgy, of late footsteps and a baby's cry, the hollow ring of heels on church stone, and cavernous mumbling. A cough resounded.

Slipping through the door, he moved into the shadows on the left, where he crossed himself with water dipped from a font in the rear wall. At the same time he subsided onto his knees behind the rearmost pew. In the church hush, the people had begun to sing "Bendito." All were standing, but Chavez remained there on his knees behind them until the hymn was finished. Alone in the shadows of the pew, the small Indian head bent on his chest and the toes of the small shoes tucked inward, he looked from behind like a boy of another time, at his prayers beside his bed.

When the hymn ended, Chavez rose and followed the people forward to receive the blessing. A Franciscan priest

in green cassock and white surplice loomed above him under the glowing windows. Then he turned left, passing an American flag that stood furled in the far corner, and returned down the outside aisle. Touching the water, he crossed himself again and followed the people out the door into the growing day. To the side of the door, under the evergreens, he waited to talk to friends; meanwhile others in the congregation came forward to greet him.

"*¡Cesar, cómo está?*"

"*¡Estoy bien!*"

"*¡Bueno—día—!*"

"*¡Buenos días!*"

"*¿Cómo está?*" another man said.

"*¡Oh,*" Chavez answered, "*batallando con la vida!*"—"I am still struggling with life." He grinned.

A Filipino in his sixties came up with a fine wordless smile and pumped Chavez's hand in both his own. "That's one of the brothers," Chavez explained when the old man had gone; the term "brother" or "sister" is used to describe a Union member, but it also has the connotation of "soul brother," and is so used by Chavez when addressing strangers.

Father Mark Day, a young Franciscan priest who was assigned to the farm workers in 1967, came up and greeted Chavez heartily. The following Sunday, he said, the Catholic churches of Delano would speak out in favor of the workers' right to form a union; hearing this, Chavez merely nodded. Since 1891, papal encyclicals have affirmed the workers' right to organize—Pope John XXIII had even spoken of their right to strike—but in Chavez's opinion Catholic help has too often taken the form of food baskets for the needy rather than programs that might encourage

independence: a union and a decent wage would enable the worker to escape from demeaning and demoralizing dependence on welfare and charity. Although individuals in the clergy around the country had lent sympathy to the farm workers very early, and many outside church groups, particularly the Migrant Ministry, had long ago come to his support, with personnel as well as money, the clergy, Catholic as well as Protestant, had denounced the grape strike or dodged the issue for fear of offending the growers, most of whom are Catholics of Italian or Yugoslav origin and contribute heavily to the Church. In fact, when Chavez's organization, the National Farm Workers Association, began the strike in 1965, the growers were able to pressure the Church into forbidding NFWA to use the parish hall of Our Lady of Guadalupe. ("I find it frankly quite embarrassing," Father Day has said, "to see liberals and agnostics fighting vehemently for social justice among agricultural workers while Catholic priests sit by and sell them religious trinkets.") Though more and more embarrassed by the example of outside clergy of all faiths, many of whom had marched in the Union picket lines, it was only recently that the Delano clergy abandoned its passive stance and joined in attempts to reconcile the growers to the Union. Now Father Day spoke of the large Zaninovich clan, some of whom came to mass here at Our Lady of Guadalupe. "If they would just get together with their workers," he said, "we wouldn't have any problems."

Chavez looked doubtful, but he nodded politely. "Yes," he said after a moment, "this church is really coming to life." With Chavez, it is sometimes hard to tell when he is joking and when he is serious, because he is so often both at the same time.

More people greeted him, "*¿Va bien?*" "*¡Está bien!*" Most of the people are jocular with Chavez, who has a warm, humorous smile that makes them laugh, but after the joking, a few stood apart and stared at him with honest joy.

A worker in a soiled white shirt with a fighting cock in bright colors on the pocket stood waiting for a hearing. Though Chavez is available to his people day and night, it is on Sunday that they usually come to see him, and his Sundays are all devoted to this purpose. "*. . . buscando trabajo,*" I heard the worker say when he had Chavez's ear: he was looking for work. He had just come in from Mexico, and the visa, or "green card," that he carried in his pocket is the symbol of the most serious obstacle that Chavez's strike effort must face: the century-old effort of California farmers to depress wages and undercut resistance by pitting one group of poor people against another.

By the 1860's the local Indians used as near-slaves in Spanish California had been decimated; they were largely replaced, after the Gold Rush, by Chinese labor made available by the completion of the Southern Pacific railroad. But the thrifty Chinese were resented and persecuted by the crowds of jobless whites for whom the Gold Rush had not panned out, and also by small farmers, who could not compete with the cheap labor force, and when their immigration was ended by the Exclusion Act of 1882, the big farmers hired other immigrants, notably Japanese. The Japanese undercut all other labor, but soon they too were bitterly resented for attempting to defend their interests. Even worse, they were better farmers than the Americans, and they bought and cultivated poor ground that nobody else had bothered with; this impertinence was dealt with by the Alien Land Law of 1913, which permitted simple con-

fiscation of their land. (The land was subsequently restored, then confiscated again after Pearl Harbor.)

The next wave of farm laborers in California contained Hindus (Sikhs), Armenians and Europeans; they slowly replaced the Japanese, who by 1917 were referred to as the "yellow peril," and after the war, for patriotic reasons, were kicked out of their jobs to make room for red-blooded Americans. Meanwhile, the European and Armenian immigrants, less beset than the Asiatics by the race hatred that has advanced the economy of California from the start, were gaining a strong foothold; many were the parents of the Valley farmers of today.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Mexican peasants had crossed the border more or less at will. After the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the starving refugees presented the growers with a new source of cheap labor which, because it was there illegally, had the additional advantage of being defenseless. Cheap Mexican labor was pitted against cheap Filipino labor; the Filipinos were brought in numbers in the twenties. Many of the Mexicans were deported after 1931, when the Okies, Arkies and up-country Texans swarmed into California from the dust bowls; the Depression had caused a labor surplus beyond the wildest dreams of the employers, and an effort was made to keep the border closed.

Still, Mexicans were predominant in the farm labor force from 1914 until 1934. In these years, because of their illegal status, they tended to be more tractable than other groups; the famous farm strikes of the thirties occurred more often among Anglos and Filipinos. Despite their quiet nature, the Filipinos refused to scab on other workers or underbid them. "The Filipino is a real fighter," Carey McWilliams

wrote in *Factories in the Fields,* "and his strikes have been dangerous." Few Filipino women had immigrated, and the ratio of men to women was 14 to 1; predictably, the growers dismissed the Filipinos as "homosexuals." McWilliams quotes the *Pacific Rural Press* for May 9, 1936, which called the Filipino "the most worthless, unscrupulous, shiftless, diseased semi-barbarian that has ever come to our shores." After the Philippine independence act of 1934, further importation of the spirited Filipinos came to an end, and their numbers have been dwindling ever since.

By 1942 the Chinese were long since in the cities, the Japanese-Americans had been shut up in concentration camps, the Europeans had graduated from the labor force and become farmers, and the Anglos had mostly drifted into the booming war economy of factories and shipyards; the minority groups that remained were not numerous enough to harvest the enormous produce that the war demanded.

The farm labor emergency was met by a series of agreements with the Mexican government known collectively as the *bracero* program, under the terms of which large numbers of day laborers, or *braceros,* were brought into California and the Southwest at harvest time and trucked out again when the harvest was over. The *bracero* program was so popular with the growers that it was extended when the war was over. In Washington the lobbyists for the growers argued successfully that Americans would not do the hard stoop labor required in harvesting cotton, sugar beets, and other crops; hence the need for the extension of the *bracero* program. Everyone conveniently forgot that the white fruit tramps of the thirties had done plenty of stoop labor and that domestic workers of all colors would

be available to the farms if working conditions were improved. But the Mexicans, whose poverty was desperate, worked hard long days for pay as low as 60 cents an hour, and were used to undermine all efforts by domestic workers to hold out for better treatment; by 1959 an estimated four hundred thousand foreign workers (including small numbers of Canadians in the potato fields of Maine, and British West Indians in the Florida citrus groves) were obtaining work in an America where millions were unemployed.

Already the churches and citizens' groups were protesting the lot of the farm workers, and the domestic migrant laborers especially, and at the end of 1964 Public Law 78, the last and most notorious of the *bracero* programs, was allowed to lapse. (This was the year in which a long-accumulating sense of national guilt had permitted the passage of significant poverty and civil rights legislation, and it would be pleasant to assume that P.L. 78 was a casualty of the new humanism, but congressional concern about the outflow of gold was probably more important.)

The death of P.L. 78 was the birth of serious hope for a farm union, but by 1965, when the grape strike began, the growers had found another means to obtain the same cheap labor. Under Public Law 414 (the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, also called the McCarran-Walter Act), large numbers of foreigners were permitted to enter the United States as "permanent resident aliens" on a special green visa card. "Green-carders" could become citizens after five years' residence (and hold social security, pay taxes, and be drafted while they waited), but since the Mexican may earn fifteen times as much for a day's work in the United States ($30 versus 25 pesos, or about $2), most have declined this opportunity in favor of "commuting,"

i.e., they cluster around the border towns and take their high harvest wages—an estimated $15 million worth in 1967—back to Mexico.

Today almost half the membership of Chavez's union hold green cards; they are welcome so long as they do not work as scabs. The law specifies that no green-carders may work in a field where a labor dispute has been certified, or where a minimum wage (now $1.40 an hour) has not been offered first to domestic workers, but enforcement of this law has been desultory, to say the least. Many Mexicans, with the active encouragement of the growers and the passive encouragement of the Border Patrol of the U.S. Immigration Service, have joined the numerous "wetbacks" (that is, the illegal immigrants) as strikebreakers. As long as they are excluded from legislation that guarantees collective bargaining, the farm workers have no formal means to force employers to negotiate. When their strike against the grape growers was subverted by imported scabs and antipicketing injunctions, they were driven to what the growers call an "illegal and immoral" boycott. Originally this boycott was directed against one company, the Joseph Giumarra Vineyards, Inc., but Giumarra began selling its products under the labels of other companies, and in January 1968 the present consumer's boycott against all growers of California table grapes was begun.

In the autumn of 1968, according to the Fresno *Bee* of November 3, an estimated twenty to thirty thousand wetbacks were working in the Valley; though their presence is illegal, there is no penalty for hiring them, and since they are both economical and defenseless, the growers replace their domestic force with *alambristas* (fence jumpers) at every opportunity. "When the *alambrista* comes into a job,"

one of them is quoted as saying, "the regular workers are out, just like that." The Immigration Service picked up five hundred and ten wetbacks in the Delano area in August alone—about one fortieth of the lowest estimated number.

Loosely enforced, P.L. 414 is no improvement over P.L. 78, and it poses a moral problem as well as an economic one: Mexican-Americans, most of whom have parents or grandparents south of the border, have deep sympathy with Mexican poverty and do not wish to get Mexicans into trouble by reporting them to *la Migra,* as the Border Patrol is known. Besides, many green-carders are innocent, having been hired without being told, as P.L. 414 requires, that their employer was the object of a strike; some of these people, poor though they are, have walked off the job in a strange country when they learned the truth, but most are in debt for transport and lodging before they ever reach the fields, and their need—and that of their families at home—is too great to permit so brave a gesture.

The man with the fighting cock on his shirt was a Union green-carder who did not wish to cross the picket lines. But at that time there were more Union workers than Union jobs—only three growers in the Delano area had signed contracts with the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee—and Chavez encouraged the man to take a job wherever he could find it. He did not have to encourage the green-carder to help the Union on the job by organizing work slowdowns; the man was already complaining that social security payments had been deducted from his last pay checks, even though no one had asked for his social security number.

Workers who cannot read, like this man, feel that they are chronic victims of petty pay-check chiseling on the part

of both labor contractors and growers, not only on illusory social security but on unpaid overtime and promised bonuses. (In the first six months of 1967, the Department of Labor discovered that nearly two hundred thousand American laborers were being cheated by their employers, mostly on unpaid overtime and evasion of the minimum wage; this figure is probably only a fraction of the actual number of victims.) Chavez feels that the labor contractor, who sells his own people in job lots to the growers, is the worst evil in an evil system that is very close to peonage; the contractor would be eliminated if the growers agreed to get their labor through a union hiring hall.

"Those people make a lot of money that way," Chavez said. "A *lot*." At this moment, he looked ugly. "In the Union, the workers get an honest day's pay, because both sides understand the arrangement and accept it. Without a union, the people are always cheated, and they are so innocent." In silence, we walked on up Eleventh Avenue to Albany and turned south along the cotton fields. It was eight o'clock now, and the morning was hot. The flat farmland stretched away unbroken into dull mists of agricultural dust, nitrates and insecticides, still unsettled from the day before, that hid the round brown mountains of the Coast Range.

Chavez said that many of the green-carders—and especially those who would return to Mexico—felt they could beat the Union wage scale by working furiously on a piecerate basis; others did not join the Union out of ignorance —they had never heard of a union—or fear of reprisal. "It's the whole system of fear, you know. The ones we've converted—well, out at Schenley we have a contract, and P. L. Vargas, on his ranch committee—there was a guy named

Danny. Danny was so anti-Union that he went to the management at Schenley and said, 'Give me a gun; I'll go out and kill some of those strikers.' He just hated us, and he didn't know why. Today he's a real good Unionist; he has a lot of guts and does a lot of work, but he still doesn't know why. He was working inside when we came with the picket line, and he wouldn't walk out, and I guess he felt guilty so he went too far the other way. And also, he told me later, 'I didn't know what a union was, I never heard of a union; I had no idea what it was or how it worked. I came from a small village down in Mexico!' You see? It's the old story. He was making more money than he had ever seen in Mexico, and the Union was a threat.

"Anyway, we won there, and got a union shop, and all the guys who went out on strike got their jobs back. And, man, they wanted to clean house, they wanted to get Danny, and I said no. 'Well, he doesn't want to join the Union! And the contract says if he doesn't join the Union, he can't work there!' So I challenged them. I said, 'One man threatens you? And you've got a contract? Do you know what the real challenge is? Not to get him out, but to get him *in*. If you were good organizers you'd get him, but you're not—you're lazy!' So they went after Danny, and the pressure began to build against him. He was mad as hell, he held out for three months, and he was encouraged by the Anglos, the white guys—they had the best jobs, mechanics and all, and they didn't want to join the Union either. But finally Danny saw the light, and they did too. That contract took about six months to negotiate, so by the time we got around to setting up a negotiating committee, Danny had not only been converted but had been elected to the committee. So when the committee walked in there,

P. L. was one of them and Danny was another, and the employers stared at him: 'What are you doing here, Danny?' " Chavez laughed. "And now he's a real St. Paul; he'll never turn against the Union because he knows both sides. People who don't know, and come on so enthusiastic and all at first, they may be turncoats one day, but not the ones like Danny. That's why the converted ones are our best men.

"You know how we make enemies? A guy gets out of high school, and his parents have been farm workers, so he gets a job, say, as a clerk at the Bank of America. This way, you know, he gets into the climate, into the atmosphere"—Chavez shook his head in bafflement—"and I'll be damned if in two years they haven't done a terrific job on him, not by telling him, but just by . . . by *immersion,* and before you know it the guy is actually saying there's no discrimination! 'Hell, there's no poverty!' See? He knows his place. Or he gets a job at a retail store and then feels threatened because our people are making more than he does. 'Look,' he says, 'I went to high school for four years, so how come these farm workers are making more than I do?' That *really* hurts. Either way he is threatened by the Union."

On the left as we walked south on Albany were the small houses of large families, mostly Mexican. Though these houses are simple, their neatness reflects a dignity that was not possible in the labor camps, which have always been the ugliest symbol of the migrant workers' plight. "Besides being so bad, they divide the families," Chavez said. "We don't want people living out there, we want them in their own houses. As long as they're living in the camps, they're under the thumb of the employer." He nodded toward the small houses. "In Delano the need for housing is being met,

even for the migrants. I mean, if we won the whole thing tomorrow, signed contracts with all the growers, we'd have to use some of the camps for a little while, but right now the people in the camps are strikebreakers." I kicked a stone, and he watched it skid into the field. "We're going to get rid of those camps," he said, as if making himself a promise.

A car passed us, bursting with cries, and rattled to a halt a short way beyond. Two workers were driving a third to the Forty Acres, the site of the proposed new Union headquarters, and to my surprise—we had been headed for the Union offices at the corner of Albany and Asti streets—Chavez suggested that we ride out there. The car turned west at Garces Highway and rolled two miles through the cotton and alfalfa to a barren area of mud, shacks and unfinished construction on the north side of the road. Here the car left us and went back to town, and the third man, a solitary Anglo tramp, a renegade from the thirties who helps the farm workers whenever he comes to town, shouted cheerily at Chavez and marched off to water some scattered saplings that shriveled slowly in the August heat.

"We've planted a lot of trees. Elms, mostly, and Modesto ash—only the cheapest kinds." Chavez stood with his back to the road, hands in hip pockets, gazing with pleasure at the desolation. The Forty Acres lies between the state road and the city dump. Useless for farming in its present condition, the property was obtained in 1966 from a widow who could not afford to pay the taxes on it. "Don't get me started on my plans," he said. To Chavez, who envisions the first migrant workers center, the place is already beautiful; he comes here regularly to walk around and let his plans take shape. "There's alkali in this land," he said. "We're

trying to get something growing here, to cut down the dust."

At the Forty Acres, near the highway, an adobe building which will house gas pumps, auto repair shop and a co-operative store had recently been completed, though it was not yet in use: the shop was heaped high with food stores for the strikers, donated by individuals and agencies all over the United States. Just across from it is the windowless small room in which Chavez lived during the twenty-five-day fast that he undertook in February and March 1968. Behind this building was a temporary aggregation of shacks and trailers which included the workers clinic and the Union newspaper, *El Malcriado* (the "rebellious child," the "nonconformist," the "protester"—there is no simple translation), which issues both English and Spanish editions every fortnight. Originally *El Malcriado* was a propaganda organ, shrill and simplistic: it saw Lyndon Johnson as a "Texas grower" careless of the lives of the Vietnamese "farm workers." Today it is slanted but not irresponsible, and it is well-edited.

One green trailer at the Forty Acres, bearing the legend MOBILE HEALTH CENTER, was the contribution of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union; its medical staff, like that of *El Malcriado* and most of the rest of the UFWOC operation, is made up entirely of volunteers. So is the intermittent labor being done on the headquarters building, a gray shell in the northwest corner of the property. The work was supervised by Chavez's brother Richard, who had been sent off a few days before to help out with the boycott in New York. "The strike is the important thing," Chavez said, moving toward this building. "We

work on the Forty Acres when we get a little money, or some volunteers." The day before, six carpenters from a local in Bakersfield had given their Saturday to putting up gray fiberboard interior walls, and Chavez, entering the building, was delighted with the progress. "Look at that!" he kept saying. "Those guys really went to town!" The plumbing had been done by a teacher at Berkeley, and two weeks before, forty-seven electricians from Los Angeles, donating materials as well as labor, had wired the whole building in six hours. "I've never seen forty-seven electricians," I admitted, trying not to laugh, and Chavez grinned. "You should have seen it," he assured me. "I could hardly get into the building. Everywhere I went, I was in somebody's way, so I just went out through the window."

The building will combine Union offices and a service center, where workers can obtain advice on legal problems, immigration, driver's licenses, tax returns, and other matters. We inspected the credit union, legal offices, the hiring hall-and-auditorium, the dining hall, kitchen and rest rooms.

In the northeast corner were small cubicles for the Union officers. "Everybody was out here claiming his office." Chavez smiled, shaking his head. "We've outgrown this building even before we move into it, and I guess they thought that somebody was going to get left out." He grunted. "They were right." We had come to the cubicle in the corner. "This is mine, I guess," he said, "but now they don't want me here." I asked why. He was silent for a little while, looking restlessly about him. "I don't know." He shrugged and took a breath, as if on the point of saying something painful. "They're very worried about security or something.

I don't know." Stupidly, I failed to drop the subject. "I guess the corner is more exposed," I said. "They want you somewhere inside."

Chavez walked away from me. "This is the conference room," he called, from around a corner. "This will save a lot of time. People are constantly coming in, you know . . . " His voice trailed off, resumed again. "The way things are going, we don't have enough office space for the newspaper or the ranch committees . . . Oh! Look at that!" He was turning a complete circle. "Those guys *really* went to town! It's entirely changed!" He finished his circle, beaming. "The first center for farm workers in history!" (A year later Richard Chavez took me out to see the progress at the Forty Acres, which was negligible. "We're so damn busy," Richard said, "and there's always something that needs the money more.")

Outside again, we walked around the grounds, in the hot emptiness of Sunday. "Over there"—he pointed—"will be another building, a little training center there, kind of a . . . a study center for nonviolence, mostly for people in the Union, the organizers and ranch committees. Nonviolent tactics, you know—to be nonviolent in a monastery is one thing, but being nonviolent in a struggle for justice is another. And we'll stress honesty. Some of these guys will be getting a lot of power as the Union develops, and some will be very good and some won't know how to handle it. If someone in the hiring hall is willing to take a bribe to put one guy ahead of another on a job, he may also be willing to steal a hundred dollars from the Union, or accept a hundred dollars for an act of violence. There's all kinds of chances for corruption, and things can go to hell fast—

we've seen that in other unions. So the best way to teach them is by example."

His glance asked that I take what he was about to say as nothing boastful. Chavez is a plain-spoken man who does not waste his own time or his listener's with false humility, yet he is uncomfortable when the necessity arises to speak about himself, and may even emit a gentle groan. "I mean, you can write a million pamphlets on honesty, you can write books on it, and manuals, and it doesn't work—it only works by example. I have to give up a lot of things, because I can't ask people to sacrifice if I won't sacrifice myself." He was glad to change the subject. "We have some great guys in this Union, some really great guys. We've put together farm workers and volunteers, people who just wanted to do something for the cause. We have so many volunteers that we save only the best; they come and go, but the good ones never go. You don't say 'Stay!' They stay of their own accord!

"In a way we're all volunteers; even the ones—the lawyers and everybody—whose salaries are paid by outside people; they're not making money. You start paying the strikers for what they should do for themselves, then everything is done for money, and you'll never be able to build anything. It's not just a question of spending money, and anyway, we haven't got it. But the farm workers stand to benefit directly from the Union; it's their union, and we've been able to get that across to them—really, you know, it's working beautifully. Most of us work for five dollars a week. Outside people, the Teamsters and everybody, thought we were crazy, but it's the only way we can stay in business. It's a long, long haul, and there isn't any money, and if we

start paying wages, then it means that only a *few* can be hired, and a few can't do as much as many.

"It has to be done this way. I've been in this fight too long, almost twenty years, learning and learning, one defeat after another, always frustration. And then of course, raising a family—you have to get your family to suffer along with you, otherwise you can't do it. But finally we're beginning to see daylight, and that's a great reward. And then, you see, these farm workers will never be the same. If they destroyed our union today, these people would never go back to where they were. They'd get up and fight. That's the *real* change."

Under the eaves of the garage, in the shade of the north wall, a blue wooden bench stood against the adobe. We sat there for an hour or more, cut off by the cool clay walls from the howl of the highway. To the west was a marginal dark farm—all dying farms look dark—with a lone black-and-white cow in the barnyard, and a sign, itself in need of repair, that advertised the repair of auto radiators. Across the property to the north, dead cars glittered on the crown of the city dump; heaped high like a bright monument to progress, the cars form the only rise in the depressed landscape of Delano.

The adobe walls and red tile roofs of the Forty Acres were Chavez's own wish, to be repeated in the other buildings as they take shape: the idea comes from the old Franciscan missions, and from an adobe farmhouse of his childhood. "The people wanted something more modern—you know, kind of flashy—to show that they had a terrific union going here, but I wanted something that would not go out of fashion, something that would last." Eventually the entire Forty Acres will be surrounded by a high adobe wall,

which will mercifully shut out its grim surroundings. The flat hard sky will be broken by trees, and he dreams of a fountain in a sunken garden, and a central plaza where no cars will be permitted.

Chavez drew his hopes in the old dust with a dead stick. Inside the walls, paths will lead everywhere, and "places for the workers to rest. There will be little hollows in the walls—you know, niches—where people can put little statues if they want, or birds and things. We'll have frescoes. Siqueiros is interested in doing that, I think. This place is for the people, it has to grow naturally out of their needs." He smiled. "It will be kind of a religious place, very restful, quiet. It's going to be nice here." He gazed about him. "I love doing this—just letting it grow by itself. Trees. We'll have a little woods." Arizona cypress had already been planted along the property lines, but in the August heat many of Chavez's seedling trees had yellowed and died.

Car tires whined to a halt on the highway and crunched onto the flats of the Forty Acres. Chavez became silent; he sat stone-still against the wall, gazing straight out toward the glistening dump. When the car came past the corner of the building into his line of sight, he smiled. The driver was Ann Israel of the Spectemur Agendo Foundation of New York, who had introduced us originally. We all waved. "I heard you were out here," she called. "Do you want a lift back into town?"

Chavez shook his head. "That's all right, thanks," he said. "We can walk." For a moment Mrs. Israel looked as astonished as I felt—not so much that the walk back was a long one on the hot August highway but that Chavez felt relaxed enough to take the time away. But the day before,

in Bakersfield, he had won a crucial skirmish with the growers; though he gives an almost invariable impression of great calm, he was more relaxed this morning than I had ever seen him. After a week's immersion in injunctions, boycotts, restraining orders, suits and strikes, he seemed glad to talk about trees and red-tiled missions, and to remain seated peacefully in the shade of his adobe wall, on a blue wooden bench.

Mrs. Israel perceived this instantly and made no effort to persuade him to accept a ride. Chavez smiled fondly after her as she waved and drove away. A pretty girl in her thirties, Mrs. Israel is both tough-minded and kind, and she has been a good friend to the farm workers, finding support for them in other foundations besides her own. In June she had got me to edit an outline of insecticide abuses for possible use in a farm workers' ad, thus transforming my vague endorsement of the California grape strike into active participation. At that time she also told me that she was going to Delano in midsummer, to see at first hand what her foundation was considering supporting; if I cared to come along, she said, she would introduce me to Cesar Chavez.

Because he is such an unpublic man, Chavez is one of the few public figures that I would go ten steps out of my way to meet. Besides, I feel that the farm workers' plight is related to all of America's most serious afflictions: racism, poverty, environmental pollution, and urban crowding and decay—all of these compounded by the waste of war.

In a damaged human habitat, all problems merge. For example, noise, crowding and smog poisoning are notorious causes of human irritability; that crowded ghettos explode first in the worst smog areas of America is no coincidence at all. And although no connection has been established be-

tween overcrowding and the atmosphere of assassination, rat experiments leave little doubt that a connection could exist: even when ample food and shelter are provided, rats (which exhibit behavioral patterns disconcertingly similar to those of man) respond to crowding in strange and morbid ways, including neuter behavior, increased incidence of homosexuality, gang rape, killing, and consumption by the mothers of their young. But because the symptoms of a damaged habitat are social, a very serious problem of ecology (it seems fatuous to say "the most serious problem the world has ever known," not because it is untrue but because it is so obvious) will be dealt with by politicians, the compromisers and consensus men who do not lead but merely exploit the status quo. The apparatus of the status quo—the System is a partisan term but must do here for want of a better—not to speak of System ethics, is not going to be good enough when food, oxygen and water become scarce. Although it seems likely, in purely material needs, that the optimisms of the new technologies will be borne out, most men in 1985 will have to live by bread alone, and not very good bread, either. Famine is already as close as Kentucky and the Mississippi Delta, and apart from that, there is hard evidence of environmental stress—noise, traffic, waiting lines, sick cities, crime, lost countrysides, psychosis. Meanwhile, the waste of resources continues, and the contamination of the biosphere by bomb and blight.

Before this century is done, there will be an evolution in our values and the values of human society, not because man has become more civilized but because, on a blighted earth, he will have no choice. This evolution—actually a revolution whose violence will depend on the violence with which it is met—must aim at an order of things that treats

man and his habitat with respect; the new order, grounded in human ecology, will have humanity as its purpose and the economy as its tool, thus reversing the present order of the System. Such hope as there is of orderly change depends on men like Cesar Chavez, who, of all leaders now in sight, best represents the rising generations. He is an idealist unhampered by ideology, an activist with a near-mystic vision, a militant with a dedication to nonviolence, and he stands free of the political machinery that the election year 1968 made not only disreputable but irrelevant.

In the heavy Sunday silence of the Valley we rose from the bench, stretched, grinned and went back out into the sun. Ten o'clock had come and gone, and the blue sky had paled to a blue-white. We walked toward town in silence. In the corner of Forty Acres, just off the highway, was a heavy wooden cross with ten-foot arms, made of old telephone poles, which had been consecrated at the time of the February fast; after Senator Kennedy's assassination it had been covered with a shroud. In late June, following two attempts to burn it, local vigilantes sawed it down. The charred remnants were left there in the mesquite desert dust so that no one on either side would forget the event. Chavez glanced at the despoiled cross but made no comment.

Our shoes scuffed along the highway shoulder, over the slag of broken stone, tar bits, glass and flattened beer cans —Hamm's, Olympia, Coors. In the still heat, tar stink and exhaust fumes hung heavy in the air. Exhaust filters were first required by law in California, where air pollution is so pervasive that the whole state seems threatened by a

dull gray-yellow pall; it is appropriate that Chavez's fight for a new ethic should have begun in California, which free enterprise has reduced from the most majestic of the states to the most despoiled.

Of all California's blighted regions, the one that man has altered most is this great Central Valley, which extends north and south for almost four hundred miles. The Sacramento Valley, in the northern half, was once a sea of grass parted by rivers; the San Joaquin Valley, in the south, was a region of shallow lakes and tule marshes. Both parts of what is commonly known as the Valley supported innumerable animals and birds, among which the waterfowl, antelope and tule elk were only the most dominant; there were also wolves, grizzlies, cougar, deer and beaver. To the Spanish, centered in the great mission holdings along the south-central coast, the grasslands of the interior were scarcely known, and their destruction was accomplished almost entirely by the wave of Americans that followed hard upon the Gold Rush. Game slaughter became an industry, and the carnivores were poisoned; by 1875 the myriad elk and antelope were almost gone. Meanwhile, unrestricted grazing by huge livestock herds destroyed the perennial grasses. Oat grass, June grass and wild rye gave way to tarweed, cheat grass and thistle, which in turn were crowded by rank annual weeds escaped from imported food crops of the settlers. In landscape after landscape, the poppies, lupines, larkspurs and mariposa lilies were no more.

From the start, California land monopolies were so enormous that the big "farms" were not farms at all, but industrial plantations. (To this day, the Kern County Land

Company owns 350,000 acres in Kern County alone.) In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the huge corporate ranches were challenged for the dying range by huge corporate farms; the first big factory crop was wheat, the second sugar beets. One by one the tule marshes were burned over and drained; by the end of the century, the lakes and creeks, like the wild creatures, had subsided without a trace. As the whole Valley dried, the water table that once had lain just below the surface sank away; in places, the competitive search for water made it necessary to resort to oil-drilling equipment, tapping Ice Age aquifers hundreds of feet down. To replace the once plentiful water, the rivers were dammed and rechanneled in the Bureau of Reclamation's Central Valley Project, begun in the thirties: Shasta Dam destroyed the Sacramento, and Friant Dam choked off the San Joaquin. Today there are no wild rivers in the Valley, and very few in all of California; the streams of the Coast Range and the Sierra Nevada have been turned to irrigation, seeping across the Valley floor in concrete ditches.

Hard-edged and monotonous as parking lots, the green fields are without life. The road we walked across the Valley floor was straight and rigid as a gun barrel, without rise or curve. Passing cars buffeted with hot wind the cornflowers that had gained a foothold between the asphalt and the dull man-poisoned crop, and pressed toads as dry as leaves gave evidence in death that a few wild things still clung to life in this realm of organophosphates and chlorinated hydrocarbons.

As the sun rose the sky turned white; the white merged with the atmospheric dust. The dry heat is tolerable, yet

the soul shrivels; this world without horizons is surreal. Out here on the flat Valley floor there is nothing left of nature; even the mountains have retreated, east and west. On all sides looms the wilderness of wires and weird towers of man's progress, including a skeletal installation of the Voice of America, speeding glad news of democracy and freedom to brown peoples all over the world.

Chavez crossed the highway to greet his doctor, Jerome Lackner of San Jose, who contributes many Sundays to the farm workers; Dr. Lackner was being chauffeured by Marcia Sanchez, one of a number of Anglo volunteers who has married a farm worker and stayed on in Delano. The next car blared a loud greeting on its horn, and a child's voice—"Hi, Mr. Chavez!"—was whirled upward and away in the eddy of hot dusty wind in the car's wake. Soon another Sunday car, already bulging, offered a lift, and when Chavez refused it, its occupants shouted in surprise. The car swayed on. A woman's warm laughter drifted back to us—". . . *su penitencia*?"— and Chavez grinned shyly. "*Sí, sí,*" he murmured. "*Mi penitencia.*" We walked on.

From the crossroads at Albany and Garces, a mile ahead, a big black car came toward us; still at a distance, it eased to a halt along the roadside. Three men got out, and leaning against the car, watched our approach. As we came abreast, two of them crossed the highway to await us while the third turned the big car around and brought it up behind.

Chavez, greeting the two men, made no attempt to introduce me; I took this as a sign that I was not to join the conversation and dropped behind. In shining shoes and

bright white shirts of Sunday dress, the men flanked Chavez as he walked along; they towered over him. Over the car engine, idling behind me, I could hear no voices, and Chavez, looking straight ahead, did not seem to be speaking. There were only the two water-slicked bent heads, and the starched white arms waving excitedly against the whitening sky.

At the corner of Albany the men left us. They were "submarines"—Union men who cross the picket lines at a struck vineyard and work from within by organizing slowdowns and walkouts. Submarine operations, often spontaneous, are not openly encouraged by the Union, but they are not discouraged, either. Chavez does not seem comfortable with subversive tactics, even those traditional in the labor movement; he talks tough at times, but his inspiration comes from elsewhere, and such methods are at variance with his own codes. "Certain things are all right—sloppy picking and packing, slowdowns. Or marking the boxes wrong, which fouls up the record keeping and gets people upset because they're not paid the right amount. But it doesn't stop there, that's the bad part of it. The transition to violence is rarely sudden. One man slashes a tire, then two or three do it. One thing leads to another, and another and another. Then you have real destruction and real violence."

Some of Chavez's lieutenants, respecting his personal ambivalence, omit telling him about tactics that he could only permit at the risk of insincerity in his public statements. But of course he knows that the incidents don't happen by themselves, and so, in his own conscience, he must walk a narrow line. Apparently he walks it without qualms. It is useless to speculate whether Chavez is a gentle

mystic or a tough labor leader single-minded to the point of ruthlessness; he is both.

We neared the town. From the outlying fields on the west end, Delano has little character: the one-story workers' houses are often painted green, and the few trees are low, so that the town seems a mere hardening, a gall, in the soft sea of dusty foliage. The dominant structures in Delano are the billboards, which are mounted high above the buildings, like huge lifeless kites.

A farm truck came by, and the face of a blond boy stared back at us. I wondered if the occupants had recognized Chavez. "Some of the growers still get pretty nasty," Chavez remarked after a moment, "but the worst are some of these young Anglo kids. They come by and give you the finger, and you wave back at them. You don't wave back to make fun of them, you just wave back."

As he spoke Chavez stopped to pat a mangy dog, which flinched away from him; he retraced his steps a little ways to squat and talk to it. He liked dogs very much, he said, but had never owned one; he petted the dog for a long time.

" '*Hay más tiempo que vida*'—that's one of our *dichos*. 'There is more time than life.' We don't worry about time, because time and history are on our side."

Children and a woman called to him from the shady yard near the corner, and he called back, "Hi! *¡Poquito!* Hello! *¿Cómo está?*" Still walking, he asked the woman whether her husband was still working *en la uva* ("in the grape"). Cheerily she said yes. The woman's house was adjacent to the old Union office, now the hiring hall at the corner of Asti Street which supplies workers to Union ranches in the Delano area. The present Union offices, in the Pink Build-

ing, are next door. This is the southwest corner of Delano, and across the street, to the south and west, small patches of vineyard stretch away. The hiring hall, originally a grocery, is in poor repair due to old age and cheap construction, as well as several hit-and-run assaults by local residents. "One truck backed right into it," Chavez said, bending to show me the large crack in the wall. "Practically knocked down the whole thing. See?" He straightened. "They broke all these windows. One time they threw a soaked gasoline rag through the window—that just about did it. But someone saw them throw the fire rag and called the fire department, and they put it on the radio, and my brother Richard was listening and took off and got over here quick; he had it out before the fire department got here." Chavez shook his head. "One second more and the whole thing would have gone." He laughed suddenly. "Man, they used to come here and shoot *fire* arrows into the roof with bows and arrows! We had to keep a ladder and a hose on hand for a long time."

In the late afternoon, outside the motel where I was staying, I ran into the blond boy I had seen that morning staring at Chavez from the pickup truck. He turned out to be a nephew of a local grower, and was working in the vineyards for the summer before going to college. He had stared at Chavez because one of the foremen in the truck had said that those Mexicans on Albany Street were probably some of Chavez's men, and now he was surprised to learn that he had actually seen Chavez himself: as I had already discovered, most of the growers had never laid eyes on this dangerous figure and probably would not recognize him if they did.

The nephew was handsome, pleasant and polite; he called me "sir." He said that although his generation felt less violently than their fathers, and that some sort of farm workers union seemed inevitable, the Delano growers would let their grapes rot in the fields before signing a union contract with Chavez. I asked if this was because Chavez was a Mexican. No, he said, it was because Chavez was out for himself and had no real support; even that three-day fast last winter had been nothing but a publicity stunt. When I questioned this, he did not defend his views but merely shrugged; like a seedless California fruit, bred for appearances, this boy lacked flavor.

He asked, "Do you like California?" Rightly bored by his own question, he gazed at the glaring blue-and-orange panels of the motel façade. "I think Delano is supposed to be the flower capital of the world," he said.

At dark I went to the Guadalajara restaurant, overlooking U.S. 99, where I had good beer and tortillas, and listened to such jukebox songs as "Penas a la corazón" and "Tributo a Roberto F. Kennedy." Seeking directions to this place, which is a farm workers restaurant, I earned the suspicion of the motel manager. "Guadalajara? That's a Mexican restaurant, ain't it?" In this small town of 12,000, he did not know where it was. Standing there behind his fake-plywood Formica desk, in the hard light and hum of air conditioning, he stared after me. "Good luck," he said in a sniping voice as I went through the glass door, which swung to on the conditioned air with a soft exhaling.

In the San Joaquin Valley summer night, far out beyond the neon lights, crickets jittered and a dog barked in the wash of silence between passing cars. Alone in his office,

the manager still stood there, hands on his barren desk, with as much vindictiveness in his face as a man can afford who believes that the customer is always right. Under the motel sign, the light read VACANCY.