

THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE

Volume II, Number 2

December, 2008

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

NORTH OF THE BORDER NOIR

We are delighted in this new issue of The Back Alley Webzine to offer six new stories from Canadian authors. This is the first time The Back Alley has utilized a theme for an issue. As it happened, we received a number of outstanding submissions over the course of about a month from authors living in the land of back bacon and Moosehead beer, so we decided to pull them all together into one huge issue.

Some of the names listed here may be familiar to you from other electronic and print magazines. Others are brand new. In every case, however, we think these stories offer some of the finest hardboiled and noir prose we've seen in quite some time. We're pleased as punch (as in, the brain-rattling punch of a brass-knuckles-wearing bruiser!) to bring you this special issue for the Holidays.

I'm a big fan of Canada. For most of the soon-to-be late, unlamented Bush43 Administration, I regularly begged my lovely bride Elaine to move to Nova Scotia. I could easily imagine being a U.S. expat, much as my longtime friend and supporter Kevin Burton Smith over at The Thrilling Detective is a Canadian expat. For better or for worse, I've been unable to convince Elaine to make the move, so I'm satisfying my itch by bringing you some terrific northern latitude stories.

Hopefully, some of you made it to Bouchercon in Baltimore this past October, and if you did I hope you also were able to take in the panel discussion on Thursday morning featuring Bryon Quermous (a Back Alley alum - *Ruins of Detroit*, November 2007), Kerry Schooley (a stalwart over at the Rara-Avis list), and others involved in publishing hardboiled and noir literature in the New Media. I was supposed to be on this panel, but I had to back out when I discovered that my college teaching schedule wouldn't allow me to get to Baltimore in time. I hear that the panel was engaging, dynamic, thought-provoking, and a bunch of other adjectives I don't have time to dredge up right now. The basic thrust was that Internet-based zines may constitute the new pulps.

At one time, cheap, perfect-bound magazines printed on the lowest-quality newsprint were the launching points for the greatest names in crime lit. Nowadays, the only real mystery pulps left are Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine and Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine and, while they do pride themselves on uncovering new talent from time to time, they are mostly filled with the works of established, big-name short-story authors.

Since the development of internet-based ezines and webzines, authors wishing to make a name for themselves have turned to the New Media. The growth of web-based mystery venues resulted in a sweep of the awards in this year's Short Mystery Fiction Society's Derringer Awards.

Two of the awards went to The Back Alley Webzine (pause for a brief self-congratulatory pat on the back), one to The Thrilling Detective Website, and the fourth went to Back Alley alum (*Georgie*, July 2008) Patricia Abbott's short *My Hero*, which appeared in the online pulp Muzzle Flash.

My daughter, who attends college at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, contacted Elaine and me several days ago, and said that she needed to 'interview' us regarding the most important macro- and micro-events of our lives. So many things crossed our minds when we talked this over. The Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Space Race, the Vietnam War and its relationship to the hippie movement, the multiple earthshaking assassinations in the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, disco, just about nothing in the 1980s (which we both agreed was more or less a 'lost decade'), the Millennium, 9/11, and the near-meltdown of the republic over the last eight years all came to mind. However, after considerable discussion, we decided that the most incredible, most culture-changing event of the last half century has been the evolution of the silicon chip. Nothing else has impacted so many facets of human endeavor. Without the silicon chip, we wouldn't have cellular telephones, home computers, Crackberries, PDAs, pet identification systems, GPS devices or, for that matter, the Internet itself.

So, let's all hoist a Labatt's Blue to the ubiquitous, life-changing silicon chip. Without it, you couldn't enjoy this latest issue of the award-winning Back Alley Webzine!

Rick Helms - Editor

LINEUP FOR VOLUME II, ISSUE 2 OF THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE



ART MONTAGUE, who hails from Ottawa, Ontario, published hardboiled/noir fiction in now-retired **PLOTS WITH GUNS** ("A Lesson for Benny") and **HARDLUCK STORIES** ("In Glock We Trust" and "Welcome to Wal-Mart"). He was included in Michael Bracken's **HARDBROILED** anthology with his story "Gourmet Takeout" and won second place in the 2003 Fire to Fly contest at **FUTURES MYSTERIOUS ANTHOLOGY MAGAZINE** for "Momma's Boarding House." He also has a mean crime caper ebook entitled "The Family Planck: Lawless in L.A." up for sale at www.virtualtales.com



MATTHEW FRIES has been published in various publications including, *Contemporary Press's* 2007 crime fiction anthology, **Danger City II**. His unpublished novel length manuscript **Betrayal** received honourable mention in the 2007 Arthur Ellis Awards for Canadian Crime Fiction. He lives in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada and works at the University of Waterloo in the Department of Mathematics, where geeks still run free...for now...



STEVE OLLEY hails from Zurich, Ontario. After spending a lot of his earlier life traveling in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Steve Olley finally settled close to the shores of Lake Huron, where he lives with his daughter, Elizabeth, and their trusty dog Chelsea. Steve has had his work published in *The Toronto Star*, **Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine**, **Coffee Cramp**, and his private detective, Jack Best, appears regularly in **Mysterical-E**.



NICK ANDREYCHUK is a Derringer Award-winning author who resides near Vancouver, BC. His stories can be found in **Crime and Suspense**, **Crimestalker Casebook**, **FEDORA I & III**, **HARDBROILED**, **Mouth Full of Bullets**, **TECHNO-NOIR**, and **WHO DIED IN HERE?**, among many other publications. Nick's work can also be found in **BULLET POINTS**, an upcoming anthology of short-short crime fiction that he co-edited.



CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE is a Montreal writer and editor. His fiction has appeared in **Year's Best SF 12**, **Year's Best Fantasy 6**, several volumes of **The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica**, and others. He has edited eight anthologies, including **Witpunk** (with Marty Halpern, 2003), **Island Dreams: Montreal Writers of the Fantastic** (2003), **Lust for Life: Tales of Sex & Love** (with Elise Moser, 2006), and **Tesseract Twelve** (2008). His work has been translated into French, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Spanish.



JASON S. RIDLER has been a cemetery groundskeeper, a punk rock guitarist, and a bookstore clerk. His fiction and essays have been published in **Clarkesworld**, **Dark Recesses**, **Tales of Moreuvia**, **ChiZine**, **Nossa Morte**, and **The Internet Review of Science Fiction**. He is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop, and a Ph.D candidate at the Royal Military College of Canada. He lives in Kingston, Ontario.



FRANK NORRIS holds a very special place in the history of noir fiction. Despite his relative lack of renown today, around the turn of the twentieth century he was setting the world on fire with his naturalistic, dark stories of doomed people.

His greatest contribution, however, came with the first volume of his projected three-volume epic tracing the role of wheat in society, *The Octopus*. Sadly, his trilogy was left unfinished when he died of complications from appendix surgery in 1901.

Continuing in this issue, we present Part Four of *McTeague*, and attempt in each issue to include some history or critical analysis of the incredible literary work of Frank Norris.

DEAD TIME

by

Art Montague

Back when the world was young (circa 2002-04) Ottawa, Ontario, author Art Montague published hardboiled/noir fiction in now-retired PLOTS WITH GUNS ("A Lesson for Benny") and HARDLUCK STORIES ("In Glock We Trust" and "Welcome to Wal-Mart"). He was featured in Michael Bracken's HARDBROILED anthology with "Gourmet Takeout" and won second place in the 2003 Fire to Fly contest at FUTURES MYSTERIOUS ANTHOLOGY MAGAZINE for "Momma's Boarding House."

Boyle had waited eleven years to kill Rafferty. Every day of it had been hard time because not one day of it should have happened in the first place. That grated on Boyle almost as much as the fact that Rafferty had ratted him, just so's he could get close to Boyle's old lady, Peg.

For a man in the life, being busted is an occupational hazard. If he's good, and Boyle was good, the evidence would always be questionable – a little spin to this, a different slant to that; witnesses with wander lust, ergo, no-shows, or Alzheimer's if they did show; or jury members with self-interests more attuned to their next car payment than to "justice, sweet justice." Put together, the right defense package and a man could walk. Boyle had always walked.

Still, a legitimate bust was just that – legitimate. No fault the accused; no fault, the police; no animosity. Both sides more or less respected that, though sometimes grudgingly. For one thing, the ethic kept people alive to steal or to collar another day. But to be ratted out was something else. That wasn't cops and robbers; that was robbers and robbers. Different rules applied, and they didn't tend to invite a shrug that said, "Damn, you got me on this one," or, going deeper into the concept of gut justice, keep people alive.

Boyle was released on December 15th on a gray Vancouver morning with snow in the air. He took a taxi from the front gate into the downtown, a trip just long enough to half-smoke a cigar he'd been saving for this occasion. The cigar was stale, dry, and as foul-smelling as fresh turds thrown on slowly smoldering coals. The cabbie had the good sense not to call his attention to the NO SMOKING sign on the back of the front seat.

Off the top, Boyle stopped in a used clothing store and bought himself a decent winter coat and pair of gloves. The State seemed to think ex-cons didn't need warmth. Comfortable now, Boyle walked a couple of blocks and checked into the Astoria Hotel, a rat hole that rented rooms by the week or by the hour, towels charged extra. Boyle paid for two weeks.

His next stop was the Farmers Trust & Loan branch on Pender Street and the safety deposit box containing his comfort money. Eleven years ago, his lawyer had cleaned him out of every nickel he thought Boyle had. House, furniture, cars, cash. Then he'd had the nerve to recommend Boyle cop a plea because he didn't have enough bucks left to mount a winning defense. Boyle had had a choice: blow his case cash on a maybe acquittal or do the time and have a cushion when he got out. Given his lawyer's performance to that point, he decided on the latter.

Boyle had been around enough lawyers and courtrooms to know he'd been screwed, but he felt no malice toward the lawyer. Lawyers do what lawyers do. They can't help themselves. Something like pedophiles.

Rafferty was a separate issue. Finding him wouldn't take much effort. Boyle knew he was still out on the Street trying to squeeze it dry. In other words, he was still a bagman for Colin Watts' protection and loan sharking operations. Boyle could wait a few days, at least long enough to re-acclimate himself to the Street. He gave it five days. Mostly he kept to himself, thinking about Rafferty, Peg, prison, none of it nice.

He knew the prison memories would fade as he aged. He knew he'd never be quite in step with the world again, as if the eleven years were dead – they hadn't happened, or they'd passed without his being involved. His mind didn't feel aged: still twenty-eight, agile, top of his game as long as it stayed in his head and didn't sluice down into his crotch again. He'd done some serious hard time, including a year and a half in the hole while Admin tried to sort out the business of Rafferty's cousin. A year and a half he'd spent in long johns, sleeping on a half-inch foam pad on a concrete slab and pissing in a hole in the floor, counting roaches on the ceiling to put himself to sleep. Maybe that memory wouldn't fade so fast. The Astoria had roaches too.

Thinking about Peg bordered on painful but he couldn't let go of it. Maybe he never would. She had been special, the one person Boyle had ever in his life let inside his mind and feelings. Back when he met her, she was working on the Street, same as him. Boyle had been a strong-arm for Watts with a penchant for truck hijackings in his off hours. His Street rep for both was solid.

Peg was a top of the line booster. She custom shoplifted to order – size, color, label; name it. Jewelry, flatware, fine china; she could have filled a bridal order – in fact, did when Colin Watts married Carmella, Rafael Gomez's daughter. Like Boyle with Peg, that had been true love. Colin had no more interest in Rafael's dope business than Rafael had in Colin's loan sharking.

To the world, Peg was so normal she was invisible. For Boyle she lit a room simply by standing in the doorway. She liked owning nice things and for awhile Boyle had the money to buy them. She liked to show off her nice things too and Boyle had the money to take her out and about to places where she could do just that. If he could pin his eventual problems on one factor, it was that he was so smitten he wanted to cocoon with her, just her, alone together. No more clubs, card rooms, and moonlit

harbor cruises. Just Peg, and maybe the more comfortable with that Boyle became, the more smothered she felt.

Peg never argued or complained, and Boyle had never lost his temper in his life. But Peg was sneaky – look at her profession – and Boyle was patient. Maybe, he thought, she needed to adjust, get used to being in love like he was. Both still worked at their professions – Boyle more because Peg was expensive – and, what with the time spent spending, she had less time for stealing. They had eight months together before the collapse. Eight months, eleven years, and a few days. Rafferty.

Boyle had never been much of a talker; Rafferty never shut up. Possibly Peg was attracted by the guy's glib rap, maybe by getting out and around again on the arm of a guy who knew how to get a front row table in a crowded club, or just maybe because she knew Boyle's bank account was close to tapped.

At the time Boyle never had a suspicion. But walking the yard for awhile listening to guys just coming in off the Street, noticing that the Sundays become fewer and further between and would eventually end; that can wear on a man. So can cold nights alone in a cell. Peg eventually became so blurred an image he found other fantasies to jack off to. Rafferty had been cutting his grass; Rafferty had her still – Boyle made it a point to keep informed.

* * * * *

Rafferty had to know Boyle would be coming for him when he got out. Boyle had sent him a message when he took out Rafferty's cousin in the prison shower room, opened him up with a Gillette Blue Blade and watched his life blood dribble down the drain until his guts finally clogged it. He made sure Rafferty knew where the razor blade had come from and why – a phone call from another inmate – before the bulls figured out that taping calls was good security. That was only two years into Boyle's bit, a time when the powers that be were scared shitless of a liberal shift from custody to corrections, from punishment to rehab, a time when writs were flying out of prison into the courts like a plague of locusts.

For guys like Rafferty who hardly think past today, nine years elapsed is never-never time. He probably didn't remember his cousin's name, or care. Back then though, knowing the phone call had gone out gave Boyle some peace. It was a chance to let Rafferty know he knew the score, and to let him know the game wasn't over.

For the first couple of days on the outside, Boyle felt like he still had a foot inside the walls. He had to leave a light on to sleep. At six-thirty he'd be out of bed. By seven he'd made the bed, policed the room, shit and shaved, and was ready for breakfast.

The greasy spoon next door to the Astoria was okay for that. Boyle ate a lot, every meal, maybe subconsciously trying to make up for eleven

years of crappy food with only slightly less crappy food. He even hit the Golden Arches a few times.

At seven-thirty he's be back in his room, running himself mercilessly through an exercise program that would have left Rambo gasping for breath. Then he'd hit the streets for the day, hardly ever passing a restaurant because of his compulsion to eat, eat, and eat. By ten at night he'd be in bed.

By the fourth day Boyle had broken the routine, except for the exercise regimen and his constant caution, the watching and hearing of everything around him. Instead, he slept in, walked around downtown in the afternoons. Evenings, he sat until late in bars along the Street, drinking cheap brandy and draft beer. He wasn't looking for the old crowd, and those who weren't dead or in the joint had forgotten him anyway. Rafferty though, maybe *he* remembered. Before bed Boyle now turned out the lights. He was once again sleeping like a human being. More must surely follow.

The bars, of course, provided more than booze. For seventy-five dollars he picked up a Saturday Night Special, a dinky .32, nothing much, but enough to do the job if it was close up and personal. Boyle intended Rafferty to be just that.

Boyle found a woman in a bar too, a lot cheaper than the gun.

"Just get out?" she asked from three stools away.

Boyle looked at her, unblinking.

"A lot of guys like to come here right after," she said. "I know the signs."

"Do they buy the beer?" he asked.

It was time. He should get laid. Axiomatic for a man after eleven years inside, probably should have done it the first night. She'd do. She was anxious, thirsty. Otherwise, she would have simply waited for someone to hit on her, and in this bar that would have been inevitable. Maybe she just liked to have the choice. More likely, maybe she liked to think she still had a choice.

"We could pick up some off-sale beer here at the bar or the liquor stores are still open," she suggested. "I have a place, a helluva lot quieter than this one." Funny, Boyle hadn't noticed any noise.

"That might work," he said. "I'll hit the can and we'll get out of here."

The condom machine had everything but normal. He settled for a couple of simulated alligator skins and one with a dangling tickler. It'd been awhile so maybe he should take all the help he could get. A lot had changed in eleven years.

As it turned out, she had a room at the Astoria two doors down from his. The morning after, she shared some room-temperature wonton soup from a cardboard container and some stale pineapple-ham pizza. Close as

it was to Christmas, her breakfast gift didn't include her heroin, not even the washings. So much for Happy Holidays.

On the sixth day Boyle started tracking Rafferty. His collection route was about what Boyle remembered. Funny how the Street never changed. Forget the high rises that had popped up here and there; forget the gentrified warehouses. In their shadows were the same grimy store fronts and grasping desperate people. Eleven years were as nothing on the Street, a millisecond or an eternity, take your pick. Boyle picked eternity. Hard time could do that to a man. One thing new – Rafferty now drove a white Lexus. Boyle recalled he'd always liked expensive cars, custom suits, and other men's women.

When he saw Peg again, Boyle almost decided to wait until after Christmas, by then only two days away. He wasted an afternoon following her while she shopped for Christmas gifts. She had changed, which momentarily surprised him. His mental image was eleven years out of date. Over the course of the afternoon, he realized his timing didn't matter. Peg was thinner than he remembered. Hardness around her mouth and imperiousness in her eyes had stripped her of former elegance. A cold woman, but she was spending Rafferty's money well. Boyle had no feeling for her. Definitely, she would never be a victim. To be that, a person has to think "victim." Predators don't think that way.

For the same reason, neither would Rafferty. Boyle watched him making his collections. Business was good – bars, storefronts, basement sweat shops; taking, taking, always taking. He wasn't happy with just money – he took goods too. The son of a bitch didn't even pay for his groceries. Boyle watched him brazenly help himself to a huge Christmas turkey at a local butcher's, right after the butcher had handed him an envelope with what was likely the week's protection premium in it. The damn turkey was probably free range and never frozen. Compared to Rafferty, Boyle was a warm fuzzy.

If Boyle had second thoughts, which he didn't, the fact that Rafferty had a lady on the side would have put them to bed. Bad enough he'd taken Peg, now he was stepping out on her. He'd gone from slim to voluptuous, mature to near-squeaker, worldly chuckle to high-pitched inane giggle. This really pissed Boyle for Peg's sake, though he would have jumped the dolly's bones as quick as if he had a hard-on in a whorehouse. Apples and oranges.

Boyle could see down the road to Peg being dumped and that hurt, not for Peg but for himself because she'd been his soul mate – forget reciprocity – and to hurt her was to hurt him, disrespect him at the least. Yet, neither rage nor hatred found a home in Boyle, only confirmation and resolve.

'Twas the night before Christmas, and Rafferty wasn't playing Saint Nick. To him it seemed the time for business as usual, including one nasty bit of strong-arming in a florist's shop. He cleaned out the till, left the florist bleeding on the floor, and then, in a final bit of arrogance, helped himself to a spruce Christmas wreath so big he had trouble fitting it into his already loaded car.

The florist's head had bounced hard off a display case, and Boyle in the Christmas spirit stepped into the shop to ease the guy through his pain. He broke the florist's neck, reasoning that if he didn't get Rafferty himself, the evidence would: the custom wreath and no receipt; Rafferty's fingerprints all over the place; a witness who fled after buying a poinsettia with a traceable receipt slip, and the sight of Rafferty's mayhem. No right-minded cop would look far if Rafferty met a difficulty of his own.

He caught Rafferty half an hour later when he walked out of a bar. Last minute shoppers were off the street by then. Except for the bartender, who locked up as soon as Rafferty hit the sidewalk, Boyle was the only other person around. He let Rafferty unlock his Lexus before he grabbed him. He spun him around and took a step back, easily holding him against the car with one hand while bringing the gun up in the other.

Rafferty definitely recognized him, and his eyes widened in fear before he even saw the gun. He knew what was coming; a small thing perhaps, but one Boyle needed. Rafferty never said a word.

Boyle said, "Merry Christmas, asshole," then shot him in the mouth and eye.

Effortlessly, Boyle flung Rafferty's body into the middle of the deserted street. Eleven years, give or take, of lifting in a prison weights room can make a man very strong.

Boyle picked up the Lexus keys from the pavement, coolly got in and drove off. He dumped the car just off the Street in an alley littered wall to wall with empty Lysol and cooking wine bottles. He left it unlocked, gun under the seat. Boyle's thinking was that even winos should have a good Christmas, and the load of goodies in the Lexus might help that along.

Then he walked back to the Astoria, wondering if the woman down the hall was doing anything for the holiday.

"Damn," he thought.

He'd forgotten her name.

His post-holiday future, he knew, was well assured. Colin Watts now had an opening for a bagman. Hell, the job was part of the deal Boyle had cut with Watts. Bad enough Rafferty had ratted on Boyle, he'd also been skimming from his collections.

Watts appreciated honesty and fair dealing nearly as much as Boyle – they'd get along fine ... except for one thing. Boyle knew Watts probably could have helped him out of the mess eleven years ago and didn't lift a finger. A thought for another day, Boyle decided.

END

DEATH OF A MAILMAN

by

Matthew Fries

Matthew Fries has been published in various publications including, Contemporary Press's 2007 crime fiction anthology, Danger City II. His unpublished novel length manuscript Betrayal received honourable mention in the 2007 Arthur Ellis Awards for Canadian Crime Fiction. He lives in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada and works at the University of Waterloo in the Department of Mathematics, where geeks still run free...for now...

Savannah watched as Race Six at Deer Ridge wound down towards post time. The six horse looked good to her, but it was the odds on favourite. She didn't have much money to gamble with. Two dollars a race was enough for her. Take the long shots. The exactas. Trifectas. Never box. Maybe one would come in and she would take home a hundred bucks.

With two minutes to post time she stood and walked to the betting window. She checked her program once more. She wouldn't make a dime on a 'To Win' bet on horse six. She checked the odds board again. Milling about the betting window. Letting people step in front of her. Horse one wasn't taking any money. It was listed in her program as 5-1, but picked as a long shot to win. The odds on the filly had risen to 24. Savannah read the horse's name. "Postie's Miracle". A class jump. But the horse had been in the money on her last two trips. She ran well at Deer Ridge.

Savannah checked the board again. She liked the name. *Posties Miracle*.

Where the hell was Charlie, anyway? she wondered.

Standing at the wicket, Savannah said to the tall Chinese man taking the bets. "Two dollar trifecta..." she held up two fingers. "One, six, five." She handed him the two bucks and took her ticket.

The man smiled at her. "Shank you..." he said, bowing slightly.

Savannah went back to her seat. Around her, a bunch of Chinese men watched the televisions intently. Anticipating as the odds rose and fell. A group in the corner was fixated on the Hong Kong tracks. One of them jumped up and down. Ticket clutched tightly in his hand. They all spoke Mandarin or Cantonese. Savannah didn't know which. She just knew it wasn't English, and she liked it that way. It felt good to not understand a word anyone said. After spending all day at her job as a receptionist, answering phones, directing asshole lawyers to boardrooms and meetings, she felt like all she wanted to do was shut up, frown, and fart in her underwear. Not speak to a soul. Except Charlie.

The OTB in Chinatown had been a good first date spot for her and Charlie. And after two months of dating steadily, the Chinatown OTB was still their favourite spot to hang out.

Most of the clowns that she had dated before she met Charlie took her out to fancy dinners to try and impress her. That or cocktail parties where everyone wore suits and made discreet trips to the pisser to shove coke up their nose. That wasn't Charlie's scene. Thank God. Charlie was a nice guy. An honest guy. Decent. And a hard worker. She knew that about him the second they first stepped into the OTB.

* * * * *

"Where you taking me?" she had asked, slightly nervous that they were entering the more decrepit dark side streets of Chinatown.

"Never mind," Charlie had said. "Come on. Nothings going to happen to you. It's just down these stairs."

Savannah followed. Excited, but still hesitant. Sure it seemed like fun, as long as there wasn't going to be something horrible on the other side of those doors. Something like a pit fighting ring, or a porno theatre, or a gang of people making a snuff movie, in which she would star!

"*Hold on here!*" Savannah said. "Where the hell are you taking me?"

Charlie opened the door, holding it for her to peek in. She cautiously poked her head in. She stepped back and read the sign above her. OTB. Off Track Betting. Of course. How could she have been so dumb. She walked in and down the stairs. Charlie followed. The place had the aura of a small town fair, or circus. A little sleazier, but there was definitely an ether of fun and excitement in the air. She saw all the televisions and Chinese men drinking beers and smoking and shouting at the televisions, she had said: "Now this is a cool place."

Charlie smiled.

Savannah thought right then: *I'll never forget that smile.'*

* * * * *

Savannah checked her watch. Charlie was late. Wasn't unusual, but he was more than an hour late. She thought about leaving. She wondered if he got held up late at work. You never knew with some of the mail routes they gave him. Late. But surely not this late. Unless a few bags of mail got lost. She wondered if it maybe had something to do with that prick of a supervisor Charlie had told her about. That Marshall. That was his name. Charlie was always bitching about him. Telling her that Marshall was fucking him around. Making him stay late to deliver a bag of mail that one of the drivers had lost. It had happened that one Friday a month or so back. When Charlie promised that he would come over after work. She had waited. And waited. Until he finally showed up and told

her that one of the guys had been hit by a car and Charlie had to deliver his route.

“You were out this late?”

“Yeah.”

“In the dark?”

“It sucked. Couldn’t find any of the mailboxes. Some crazy bitch started screaming at me to get her her welfare cheque. Some cocksucker screamed at me for cutting across his fucking lawn. I’ve had enough.”

“You hungry?”

“No. I just want to sit down.”

He was acting weird that night though. She thought he might have been lying, but he wasn’t drunk. Didn’t smell like perfume. A little restless maybe. He wouldn’t sit still. Couldn’t sleep. Kept going back for glasses of water. Just a hard night at work, he had said.

Maybe that had happened again.

Charlie wouldn’t stand her up though. He was a decent guy.

‘*Well, that’s it,*’ Savannah thought. I’m getting us some cell phones.

* * * * *

“He saw me!”

“Don’t you say that, Charlie.” Doug pointed his finger at Charlie. Wagging it in Charlie’s face. “That man did not see you!”

Charlie pushed the finger away. “Beat it!” Charlie belched. “Just cause you say it don’t make it so.” Charlie rubbed his hand over his face. “I’m going to jail. That’s where I’m going...”

Doug reached up and removed the black ski mask from his own head. Pockmarked, thin mustached, short, and ugly as he'd ever been, Doug maneuvered Charlie back into the shadow of the post office wall. With the palm of his right hand he held Charlie there against the brick.

“Listen, Charlie,” Doug told him. “I won’t let anything happen to you. On my life. I swears it. Now take the gun and go wave it around.” Doug pulled a little Saturday Night Special that he had stuffed in the back of his pants. “That’ll keep him quiet enough for now.”

Charlie took the gun. Palmed it, and shoved the handle back into Doug’s stomach. “Why did I listen to you?” Charlie asked.

Doug Anger took the gun. Stuffed it again into his pants.

Doug Anger, this little troll of a mailman with has fat lips and tonsured head and all his ridiculous ideas.

“Why, in God’s name, did I ever listen to you?” Charlie stared at Doug’s mushy face. Doug stared back.

“Bullshit,” Doug said. “Lemme see your knuckles. You a man or what? *Why did I ever listen to you?* he says.... You know damn good and well how you got involved. That man that calls himself our boss. That black bastard. That mother fucker, Marshall, is a crook. Is what he is, all right. And he deserved that beating we just handed him. And ten times worse if you asks me. Now hold up your fist.”

“I’m going to jail for sure,” Charlie said as he held up his fist. He heard Marshall moan from the parking lot around the corner.

A masked face suddenly appeared to his right, poking around the edge of the building. Both Charlie and Doug turned.

The masked man spoke: “Doug! What we gonna do now?” It was Alfonse. One of their crew.

Doug ignored him. Focused on Charlie. “Charlie Shackles, lemme see your knuckles,” Doug said. It was an order.

Charlie made a fist and held it up. Let it fall to his side. Reluctantly held it up again. His hand hurt. But it was a good hurt. Charlie had to admit it. Felt fine. Swollen. The knuckles scuffed and bleeding. A man’s fist. A dangerous man’s fist. Some darker blood further up on his thin wrist. Blood flecked hairs of his arm. He liked the looks of it. Darker blood that wasn’t his own. His wrist hurt too.

“Doug! What we gonna do now?” Alfonse sounded desperate.

“Help.” A meek cry from the parking lot.

The three of them were instantly quiet.

"Help me." Weak as a cry from a starving baby. Their post office manager, Marshall.

The plan to just ‘*rough him up,*’ teach Marshall a ‘*lesson about treating people like human beings,*’ had gotten a little out of hand.

“Go shut him up!” Doug told Alfonse. “That’s the least you can do for now.”

“Go and piss up a rope.” Alfonse responded.

"Do what I says, porkchop," Doug ordered.

Alfonse shook his head. “See you Monday, Charlie?”

Charlie didn’t know what to say. He wondered if he’d ever see a free Monday again. A long stint in jail seemed to be in his future.

Fucked.

Yeah, he was.

Alfonse cut out. Back to the parking lot behind the post office. Station C.

Charlie heard Mashall groan. Must have got another boot to the ribs to shut him up.

Doug turned back to Charlie. "Whatta ya gonna do tonight?"

"What am I gonna do? ... Jesus, man. Go home and wait for the cops to come for me? I guess..." Charlie said.

Doug shook his head. "I told you that I'll take care of this."

"What are you gonna do, Doug? How you gonna fix this?" Charlie wanted to know. "You gonna go home and pretend that we ain't in no trouble?" Charlie ripped the mickey of Canadian Club whiskey from the breast pocket of Doug's jean jacket. Unscrewed the cap and took a slug. The rest of the bottle. A few shots had they been measured.

"Don't worry," Doug said.

Charlie tossed the empty bottle of bravery into the bushes. "Easy for you to say. He never seen you." Words soaked in boozy fumes.

"I got a plan," Doug told him. "A real good plan. Now what are you gonna do tonight?"

Charlie hung his head.

"Whatever it is. Make sure it's something normal. I got a plan. A good one. I swears it, Charlie. Make sure people see you."

Charlie sighed. There was nothing he could do. He needed a beer to keep the glow on. A little piece. He just wanted out of there. He was in the right neighbourhood. He wanted that piece pretty badly. Suddenly it was all he could think about. "I'm gonna meet Savanna in China Town," Charlie Shackles said. "I guess. At the OTB. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna go to Lionel's retirement party. Whyn't you meet us later? Bring your old lady. I'd like to meet her."

"And how's that a plan?" Charlie asked. Suddenly madder than hell. "Five masked posties jump their supervisor in a parking lot. He somehow gets a hold of my mask fore he goes down and tears it off my head. Then you guys proceed to kick the living shit out of him. Even after the cocksucker saw me! Even after he looked me right in the eye! You beat the fuck out of him. I'll probably get charged with attempted murder. And you're gonna save me from jail by going to a retirement party. How the fuck does that work, Doug? That's fucked. Is what it is."

"Just beat it. You got nothing to worry about."

"Fuckit," Charlie said. "Maybe jail's the best place for me." He started walking away.

"It's taken care of. I'll call you later," Doug Anger said.

Charlie bit his bottom lip and sucked in a breath of bitter truth through his teeth. He was fucked. Yeah he was. His heart sunk to the pit of his stomach.

* * * * *

'With any luck, they'll kill the son of a bitch,' Charlie thought. *'Least I'll be in the clear then.'*

He walked away as quickly as he could. His long skinny legs steady on the sidewalk. He started crossing the road. Looked up for cars. Dashed across as a old army and lime green Gremlin sputtered behind him. *'Fucking ugliest car ever made,'* Charlie thought as he stepped up the curb and was on the eastern sidewalk of Mennow Street.

Charlie remembered the look on that black bastard, Marshall's, face when he stepped up and threw the first shot. Marshall's wide scared eyes and the gulp of fear caught in his throat. Then the rest of the boys swarmed in just as Marshall reached up and yanked Charlie's mask from his head.

Suddenly Charlie felt like a real big man. Maybe even a bad man. A bad man who might go to prison. A big dick bad man who could slap the shit out of you. He almost laughed.

Didn't last long though. Cause the all consuming fear of a jobless, hopeless future locked away in a prison cell for assault and battery suddenly sent an earthquake of shivers all through the fault line of whatever common sense Charlie Shackles had left in his body. He shook with it. He was so nervous he felt like his insides were being whipped up into cream. And he only remained propped up by that last few gulps of Canadian Club he had tossed down his throat moments before. He suddenly wished he was dead. Wished for it.

Charlie thought, *'Doug will take care of Marshall.'* He said he would.

It was the only hope Charlie had.

God, how Charlie wished he could trust Doug. He wondered if he should maybe go back and make sure everything was going smoothly. Maybe he could explain to Marshall why he and the boys felt that they had to do what they did. That they felt powerless and jumped him just to show him what it was like. To take the power away from the prick. Powerless people did that. It was a revolution. Wasn't it? And revolutions were always violent. Violence was what people understood best. He could explain this to Marshall. Maybe then Marshall would see things their way and stop treating the posties like shit. Would the cops buy that though? Revolution? Fuck, he doubted it. Maybe? The cops probably had asshole bosses too.

His palms began to sweat. He needed that piece. Obliterate his mind for a couple seconds.

Charlie suddenly felt like someone was running up behind him. He turned quickly.

There was no one.

He took a look at Station C. As he walked he could see the security lights on the harmless looking mail station. Suddenly it just didn't look the same. There was something so savage and unfamiliar. So cruel. Charlie felt like he had never seen that building in his entire life. Although, of course, he knew that he had. Had spent practically every weekday for the past seven years there. Felt like *deja vu*. Only the opposite. A shitty feeling. He didn't like it.

Charlie wanted that piece pretty badly. Worse than before if that was possible. Just because he was closer to it now. The Mexican hung out just up the street. At Lucky Pizza. The Mexican always had good shit. The feeling that he actually needed it began to chew at Charlie's brainstem. Soon it would be a full bore dogfight. Wasn't too often that Charlie jonesed this badly for a piece. Sure, he usually wanted it. To party. Or for a treat. But he didn't often feel like he actually needed it. Maybe he had finally crossed that line. He was ashamed of himself. This might be it. He felt that at that very second in his life he would have given up nearly anything for a hit. Just didn't care. Given up Savannah even. What a fox she was. Charlie said to himself. *'This is the last time. After this I'm done with the shit forever. Whatever happens...this is it. For Savannah.'*

He turned west onto Queen Street.

Dark. Cold night. Queen Street. The neon signs of the various shops gleamed in the Autumn wetness of the asphalt. From PORNO to PIZZA the signs reflected and shimmered and made like a well lit disco dance floor for the rubs and skids and riff raff.

Groups of people eyeballed Charlie as he went down the street. He felt them staring right through him. From behind the corners and hidden in the stoops of doorways. Like jungle creatures they watched him.

Charlie beelined for the Lucky Pizza Shop. The bell on the door rang as he opened it. Tran was behind the counter. He didn't even look up at Charlie. No one came to Lucky pizza for pizza. There were six reasons for that. And all six of them were fingers on Tran's right hand. Nobody liked to see a six finger man kneading pizza dough.

The Mexican was over by the pinball machine making time with a new *senorita*. His hair was coiled in a tight perm. He wore the same red leather jacket that Michael Jackson wore in the Thriller video. The Mexican turned Charlie's way. Charlie noted the tattoo of a blue scorpion climbing into the right corner of his mouth.

'What have I done to my life?' Charlie wondered.

But it was too late. The deal was on. There was no stopping it now. Even if Charlie truly wanted to. Charlie nodded at the Mexican and went straight back out the door. He walked down Queen street and turned left at the corner of Alexander, to a tiny Parkette. "Bill Kuntz Park" it was named according to the little brown wood sign nearby the sidewalk. Charlie waited. His heart beating. Anxious. Sweaty. Charlie reached in his wallet. Pulled out two twenties. Folded them neatly into a

tiny square. Put it in his palm and stuffed his hand in his front pocket. Behind him, grouped together on the climbers, a group of addicts sat quietly in the dark. They eyed him curiously. Charlie could hear the sizzle of their pipes. The air was lurid with the smell of burning crack. The glow of their pipes lit the air like fireflies.

The Mexican didn't take long. He drove up in his Iroc. His seniorita was in the passenger seat. Charlie walked up to the window.

"What up, puta?"

"Forty," Charlie said.

The Mexican stuck his hand out the window. Charlie could make out the little black plastic bag. A piece ripped off a garbage bag. There was no questions. No view of the product. Certainly no sample. You took what you got. Charlie shook the Mexican's hand and when he got his own hand back the twenties were gone and he held his wish in his palm. He wasn't shaking anymore. He was happy. Happy and anxious to get the show on the road. The tough part was over. The Mexican drove away.

The little piece of garbage bag was twisted tightly around two fat chunks of rock. Charlie could feel them. A shocking good count, Charlie thought, although he hadn't opened it yet. Good enough. Maybe his luck was changing.

Charlie went to the climbers. Walked around back. Standing in the sand. The faces he made out there were dark and shadowy. Hollow. Like some starved apostolic wayfarers huddled together at the dusk of the apocalypse. The streetcar passed at the corner. It stopped. Letting people on and off. Charlie thought he probably should have been on that car. To meet Savannah. He checked his watch. He'd be quick and catch the next one.

The air smelled like wet leather. Charlie searched the faces. He found one he recognized. An older guy with a dark baseball hat and a black suit coat. Kind of looked like Marshall. Oddly enough. Charlie didn't know his name but had smoked with him before. Charlie mouthed the words, "Can I borrow your pipe?"

The guy exhaled casually as if it were cigarette smoke he held in his lungs, held out his palm and handed Charlie his stem of glass. He didn't speak. Charlie untwisted the little piece of garbage bag. Carefully splayed it open in his palm, using the fingers of his right hand to peel back the plastic. Inside two chunks of yellowish waxy looking crack. With his index finger he rolled each rock on its side, determining which one was larger. The one on the right. He kneeled in the sand with the bag on his knee. He set the pipe down beside it. So careful not to move in case the drugs would spill. He took up the larger rock and split it in half with the fingernails of his thumb and index finger. He put the one chunk and the crumbs back in the bag and carefully twisted it back up. Into his pocket. He stood. Put the piece he had ripped off in the end of the pipe. Cuddled it up to a bit of charred steel wool. Took a lighter out of his pocket and lit it. Setting the flame to dance easily at the end of the pipe,

melting the crack, then a little more heat to get the smoke going, sucking it into his lungs. His eyes widened as he heard it sizzle. The joy of all the world flooded him for as long as he could hold his breath. His ears surged with the blood. Thumped. He finally exhaled. Knees buckling slightly with the orgasmic pleasure of it. He smiled at the guy in the baseball hat. The guy smiled back. Nothing was wrong. After about five minutes, Charlie pulled out his bag and did it all over again, passing the leftover smoke to his left, to the guy who had loaned him the pipe.

About fifteen minutes later he felt uneasy. Sketched out and totally paranoid in the dark. He looked around at the huddled apostles. Waited to see if they would pass their pipes his way, giving up a bit of their precious smoke. Waited to see if they would speak to him. Relieve him of this familiar sense of doom, of loneliness. They did nothing. He checked his watch. Looked at the faces around him. There was nothing there. He left the sand of the playground and went back to stand on the sidewalk. It was getting late. He was supposed to meet Savannah at eight. It was already nine. Another streetcar passed. There wouldn't be another one for twenty minutes. He was going to run for it, but he wasn't quite ready to give up on his high yet.

Charlie checked his watch. He wanted to go back to find the Mexican. He just didn't feel *right* anymore. Like he had taken a blow to the back of the head. He was miserable and alone.

Charlie looked up the street. About twenty feet away a giant man wearing a black cape and a Stetson ten gallon hat.

"What the fuck?" Charlie said.

The man was sweating badly. Breathing so heavily his shoulders rose and fell in quick threatening motions like a bull preparing to charge.

"What the fuck's his problem?" Charlie said.

He checked over at Queen street. There was no one behind him. He felt a lump in his throat. The man was staring straight at him.

* * * * *

Doug Anger motioned at the three men in masks. He then checked the streetlights. The one above him flickered and dimmed. He wondered why that always happened to him when he was standing beneath a streetlight. The street was empty. Except for a couple heading the other way. They were almost out of sight. The corners of his ski mask at the mouth were wet with beer. The beer can cold his hand. He thought that it was a good thing they brought the cooler full of ice and beer. He had told the boys that the liquor wouldn't last all night.

Doug wobbled backwards a bit.

He positioned the pistol at the back of his pants. Pointed at Alphonse and jerked his thumb towards the apartment building.

Alphonse shifted his mask so that he could see through the eye slots. Nodded at Doug and jogged towards the apartment building door and opened it.

Doug took a slug from his can of beer. Passed it over to Big Barrie who poured the rest down his throat. Doug checked Alphonse. Big Barrie tossed away the can.

Alphonse was motioning to them that the coast was clear. He was gathering them in with his right hand like a third base coach. A little more frantic. Hysterical even. Alphonse held the apartment door open with his other hand.

Doug nodded at Big Barrie. Barrie slung open the car door. He bent and grabbed hold of Marshall's kicking feet. One on each side of his big gut. He started easing Marshall from the Taurus.

Meat was in the backseat with Marshall. Had Marshall in a headlock. Clamping the canvas mailsack tightly over Marshall's head. His big biceps tight around Marshall's throat.

Doug nodded at the muscular man they called, Meat.

Meat let go of Marshall's neck.

Marshall's feet were on the pavement. Big Barrie wrenched him up out of the back seat. Marshall was breathing heavily. Panting. Like he had just run marathon.

Meat took a beer from the cooler and drank half of it. He used the other half to wash the blood from his hairy forearm.

Doug motioned, *let's go*.

So far they had been very careful to be silent. Doug had insisted on this. He told the boys that if Marshall couldn't pick them out in a lineup if he didn't see who jumped him. He could never pin it on anybody. Just speculate. Then without a full blown confession from the guilty parties, the cops wouldn't have shit on nobody. Doug had watched enough television to know that. But then that stupid bastard, Charlie, had had his mask ripped off. Compromising them all. Doug knew that if he let Marshall go Marshall would sick the cops on Charlie, and Charlie would in turn give them all up. They'd all be burned. Doug wondered why he had included Charlie Shackles in his plans at all. Such a whiney little creep. Always trying to duck out on overtime. Always calling in sick when the weather turned shitty. A little pussy really.

Christine, the rookie who was doing the dog route while Earl had his bunions removed, had told Doug that Charlie was on drugs.

Doug knew he had fucked up including Charlie Shackles in his plans. A damn drug addict. Now Doug had to do something about it. He kind of wanted to do it though. He had been thinking about doing it for some time. Maybe Charlie getting his mask ripped off would finally be the motivation Doug needed.

Doug picked up the cooler full of beer and followed Big Barrie and Meat as they shoved Marshall ahead of them towards the apartment building door. Marshall's hands were tied behind his back.

They stood in the foyer of the building. It stunk like a mixture of moth balls, curry, and Lemon Pledge.

Doug made a motion to Alphonse. Five fingers. One Finger. Three fingers.

Alphonse shrugged his shoulders. *I don't get it.*

Doug did it again. Five fingers. One finger. Three fingers.

Alphonse shrugged again.

Doug dropped the cooler.

"Five one three!" he shouted. "Damn ignorant porkchop!"

At the sound of Doug's voice, Marshall struggled to break the rope at his back. Meat tossed him against the wall and held him there.

Alphonse raised his index finger to his lip. *"Shhhhhh!"*

"What the fuck does it matter now, you idiots?" Doug said. He shoved Alphonse aside. Tore off his own mask and punched in the number five-hundred and thirteen."

The buzzer to the apartment rang. Rang again. "Yeah?" A crackling voice on the other end.

"It's me," Doug said.

The buzzer for the front door to the apartment went off and Big Barrie opened the door.

Doug and his crew shuffled Marshall through the door and towards the elevator. The inside of the building reeked worse than the foyer.

"I'll kill you, Anger." Marshall spoke. "I knew it was you all along."

Didn't even raise his voice.

"You ain't killing nobody. You frickin' clown," Doug told Marshall. As the elevator dinged they all stepped in.

"You're all going to jail. What are you gonna do? You think my wife won't miss me? Take this damn bag off my head. I can't breathe. Where you taking me?"

Doug set the cooler of beer down and pressed button for floor number five. The elevator doors closed and they started upwards.

"Answer me, you bastards!" Marshall demanded.

The elevator door opened.

"As your superior I demand that..."

Doug had had enough. He slapped Marshall as hard as he could. His palm gripping well on the canvas mailsack hood.

Marshall fell over backwards and whimpered.

Doug went and stood over him. He ripped the bag from his head.

“What are you doing, Doug?” Alphonse shouted.

Marshall was sweating badly. His one eye was almost swollen shut. Blood leaked from his mouth and nose. He was sputtering. Frothing at the mouth. Covered in sweat. Enraged. Engorged with fear.

Doug stared him in the eye. Maskless the both of them. Face to face.

“I’m superior now, nigger bastard!” Doug said. “Meat, grab his fucking legs. We’re going to a fucking retirement party. It’s a celebration of a man’s life here.”

Doug picked up the cooler and walked from the elevator. “What apartment number is it again? He looked behind him. The boys still had their masks on. Hesitating. “Take those masks off, boys. He knows who it is now. Don’t worry though. He won’t say a word. The black bastard won’t know whether to shit or go blind after I get through with him,” Doug said. “What apartment number is it again?”

All the boys except Alphonse took their masks off.

“Five one threes.” Alphonse said.

“Down here.” Doug walked to his right as Meat and Big Barrie each took a leg and dragged the sputtering Marshall across the dirty hallway carpet of the old apartment building with all the holes in the drywall and flaky lights and abandoned shopping carts strewn here and there.

Five one three. Doug knocked on the door. There was music coming from inside. Tom Jones it sounded like.

Doug pounded the door again.

He stared at the boys. Take your mask off, Alphonse. Christ, ain’t you got no manners. We’re going visiting for God sakes.”

Marshall stared at them. His eyes wide with rage. Studying their faces as if he had never seen the men before. He stared at Alphonse. The only remaining holdout.

“I can’t believe it. Even you, Alphonse?”

Alphonse did not take the mask off.

The door finally opened.

Doug stepped inside with the cooler in his hands. The boys stepped in behind him pushing Marshall.

The old timer, Lionel, the retirement boy, was standing behind the open door watching them. He was pissed to the gills. Inside, the stereo was on. On a card table a spread of luncheon meat and a picked

over cake rested. Two older women with big bellies were cackling and smoking. They were looking at Meat as if he were a ham hock. There was another fellow who Doug recognized as Lionel's brother, Termite. So named for his constant chewing up of toothpicks. Termite was asleep in a chair. His head falling to the side. A bottle of half-finished beer clutched tightly in his hand. A toothpick hanging from the side of his mouth. He'd have a sore neck when he woke up.

Doug set the cooler down.

Lionel stumbled over to shake Doug's hand. "Glad you buggers come by," Lionel said. "Thought you'd forgot about me."

Doug shook his hand. Lionel was skinny and his teeth were mostly brown. His hair like dry wheat. A yellow cigarette stain on his bushy white moustache.

Lionel stumbled forward into Doug. "This is my sister-in-law, Carline..." he started to introduce one of the women, but then noticed Marshall.

"What the hell did ya bring him for?" Lionel asked. He shook his head. "Ah, what the hell. Glad you cold come Marshall." Lionel walked towards Marshall. He put his cigarette in his mouth and his bottle of beer in his left hand. He stuck out his right to give Marshall a shake. Then he noticed Marshall's bloody face.

"What the hell is this all about?" Lionel asked, stepping back.

The girls started milling about. "He's beat up real bad," the one who hadn't been introduced said.

Lionel backed away. "What's going on here, boys?" he threw the rest of his beer down his throat. Butted his cigarette in an ashtray on an end table beside Termite.

"Got a kitchen chair?" Doug asked Lionel.

Lionel ran to the kitchen and came out carrying a busted up metal kitchen chair with orange and brown flower seat cushion and back. The stuffing leaking from a tear.

He set it on the Parquet floor.

The lights were dim in the room.

"What are we gonna do, Doug?" Meat asked.

"Yeah, man. What is this?" Lionel asked.

Doug grabbed Marshall by the arm and threw him in the chair. Marshall stumbled and fell off. Doug picked him back up and set him down.

"It's a retirement present for you Lionel," Doug said. "Twenty-six damn years of this man telling me what to do. He started the same year I did, you know?"

"What the fuck?" Lionel said to no one in particular.

The boys just stood around.

Doug kept on. "Twenty-six years of his shit. He pointed at Marshall. You refuse to pay people's overtime. You won't get them new uniforms. You cheat and steal and lie and call me names. You treated me like a fucking dog for all the damn years I been working with you. You sent me out on routes that were overassessed and refused to pay my time. Where's the money go? You pocket it don't you? You fucker. When I put in my overtime slips, and you don't pay, where's the money go? Tell me. You think we're dumb? I know how it works. It's my word against yours and the higher-ups would never believe a fucking SUPERVISOR would lie. They'd never believe that. Right? You black bastard."

Doug clocked Marshall in the face with his fist.

Marshall tumbled off the chair. A mist of blood hung in the air. One of the women shrieked.

"This is gone too fars, Doug." Alphonse announced. "I'm leaving."

Alphonse never left. Just stood there fixed to the floor.

The rest of them stood in silence. The Tom Jones played on the stereo. "*What's up pussycat...whoa-whoa-whoa-ah...*"

Termite snored and farted in his sleep. Lionel laughed. "Twenty-six damn years, Doug. Give him what he deserves," Lionel said. "Give it to him." He swilled off his beer.

One of the women started to cry.

Doug positioned himself over Marshall. He pulled the gun from the back of his belt. Put the barrel to Marshall's cheek. "Where'd the money go?"

Marshall choked. He tried to move his face away from the gun, but Doug followed him. Marshall scurried up against the wall. Doug quickly put a knee into Marshall's stomach and had him pinned.

"You've treated me worse than a fucking piece of shit for twenty-six years. You ain't once ever smiled. You've shit on everyone in that damn station. You pull them into the office and scream at them so everyone can hear. They all want you dead. What I am doing here, old buddy. Old black bastard. Is saving your black bastard skin. Just tell me why you won't pay our overtime and I won't hurt you. We fill out our sheets. Everyday you come in the next morning and tell at least two people they ain't getting paid for their overtime. Why? Why do you do it?"

Marshall whimpered.

"Don't even bother," Doug said. "I know why you do it. I know that you push around the rookies and the ones that don't have enough nerve to make a fuss. Just cause you can. Cause you like it. You know what else?"

Marshall shook his head.

“I know that the overtime money comes out of supplies budget and I know the post office got it worked so the manager directly pockets any money he saves on supplies. I know at year-end, I’ll freeze my damn ass right off cause I’ll never get a new coat. I know better than to put in my overtime sheets at year end, cause I’m out there walking all day long and if I have a shitty day there’s no way for me to prove that I worked the overtime. So you can just say no. And unless I want to make my life hell by fighting it with the higher-ups, you know that I won’t make a stink. I know that my overtime money goes into your pocket. You know what that does to a man? You know how that makes a man feel? You wanna see how much I hate my goddam life with you in it?” Doug sighed. Like it was the only sound left in him to make. He thought he was going to shoot Marshall.

“FUCKIN! FUCK. FUCKING CHARLIE SHACKLES! FUCKED EVERYTHING UP!!!”

Doug raised the gun into his own mouth.

“*Doug!*” Alphonse shouted.

Doug pulled the trigger. He fell back on the floor. Stunned momentarily. Then in excruciating pain. The side of his face was gone. He felt his mouth where his cheek should have been. It was gone. As were his teeth on that side. And part of his cheek bone. He could feel his tongue poking out his mouth into the open air. Taste the acrid stinging gunpowder. Taste the gun smoke. The charred flesh.

“*Fuck,*” Was what Doug said. Before he started screaming and calling out for his mother.

* * * * *

Post time at race six. Savannah perked up to watch the race. Two buck chicken bet on a big payout triactor. She suddenly felt stupid. Betting on a longshot just because of its name. Horse one, six and five. She checked her program. Postie’s Miracle, Diedra’s Pony, Randy Heading West. In that order.

She squinted to see the television a bit better. She would need glasses soon. Getting older. But vanity kept her from going to the optometrist. Even though her benefits at the law firm would pay for it.

“And they’re off!”

The horses whipped around the track. A close race. Her triactor bust in the end though. With the horses finishing, five, one, six. An exciting finish, but it kept her out of the money. She felt good about the bet. She’d learn how to make better calls eventually. Charlie would show her the ins and outs. An extra few bucks and she could have boxed it. Or bet one to place. Or show. Would have paid. But there was always the next race. She hadn’t done that badly, and wished she could share her close call with someone.

How long did Charlie expect her to wait for him? She was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Being the only woman in the place.

‘Should have boxed it,’ she thought. Where the hell was Charlie? They hadn’t known each other that long, but she liked him and was beginning to worry. It was ten. They were supposed to meet at 8:30. She thought. There’s no way he’d be out delivering the mail this late.

Savannah began perusing the program. The seventh race. But her heart wasn’t in it. She thought of Charlie and how sweet he was and how they had met.

‘*Spring Time Dog Shit Melting in the Sun*, by Charlie Shackles.’

She’d never forget it.

It was at the Continuing Ed class at the local college. The Creative Writing class. They sat beside one another. On Tuesday and Thursday nights. From seven-thirty till nine-thirty. The teacher’s name was Lane Pritchard. Hailed in the course calendar as, “*An award winning author.*” Savannah had even gone to the library to find Lane’s “Award winning book.” She found it and read it. And discovered it was a tremendous, pretentious, bore about a poor little boy named Crane, growing up gay in a small rural Mennonite community. It had won some “Library Association Award,” or some shit like that. Published by a publisher that Savannah had never heard of. Their offices were in the gay part of town. The only good part was when Lane...or Crane...would go down to the river to watch his muscular older cousins swimming naked in the stream by his farm and masturbate in the woods.

Savannah laughed her head off. She wondered what those cousins would say to Lane now if they ever read the book. Which, she presumed, they probably had not.

Lane sat at the head of the class with a little Pug dog that dog wheezed with its every breath. Even in its sleep. She often wondered if there was something wrong with the dog. No animal who had that much trouble breathing deserved to live very long. Lane Pritchard. Good God, she wondered if he had made that name up, or what?

“*Spring Time Dog Shit Melting in the Sun*. By Charlie Shackles.”

Charlie had started reading his poem. It was his half hour. Charlie’s time slot to read, and have critiqued, whatever story or poem he had come up with since the beginning of the term.

‘*Charlie Shackles. Now that was a name for a writer.*’ Savannah had thought. ‘*A name for a man. Period! Not faggy at all. Not like Lane pritchard.*’

Charlie read his poem. “Spring Time Dog Shit Melting in the Sun or The Slippery Slope.” The final line was: “Please shovel your sidewalks.”

Charlie's poem wasn't appreciated.

The class almost unanimously decided that it was immature and foolish. Savannah argued that it was funny. And that funny was good enough. And that sometimes things can just entertain. That poetry could entertain. It didn't have to mean anything. She had stood up for Charlie, who had just sat there and taken the criticism smiling. No one bothered to argue with Savannah. They let her say what she had to say and just kept on criticizing Charlie's poem. Finally, deciding it was lousy.

Lane condescended: "Keep working," he searched his notebook for a second till he found the right name... "Charlie..." he smiled. "You'll get it." He put the pug on the floor by his feet.

Finally Savannah said: "You know, just cause you people don't like something doesn't make it bad."

No one said anything. Just shuffled their papers and ignored her. Then Lane Pritchard, sensing the anger about to spill out of Savannah, lipped his way onto the next writer in the alphabet. Going down his list. "Who's next? Deborah Telisky. What do you have for us today, Deborah?"

Deborah: An older woman, in her fifties, who wore long flowered dresses and Birkenstocks and kept her hair long and braided.

Deborah read a story about a pregnant woman trapped under an overturned snowmobile pining for her lover as she perished from the cold. And then, as if it couldn't get any worse, bore a still birthed baby, held it to her breast – bared to the frigid cruel elements of the earth.

Lane Pritchard praised the story, going as far as telling Deborah she was an '*undiscovered genius*.' With a flourishing of his hands and a flapping of his wrists. Then Lane's dog raised its hindquarter and pissed on Lane's pant leg.

Charlie turned to Savannah and said, "Now that's funny."

Savannah liked that. After Lane cleaned up, another poem was discussed, and the class was over, Charlie walked Savannah to her car.

"I'll see you next week?" she said, hand on the driver's side door handle.

"I don't think I'm going to come back," Charlie told her.

"Oh. Well, I guess I'll see you around then?"

"But...maybe you'd like to go out for coffee with me some time?"

Savannah smiled. "Sure," she said.

They never had coffee. They met at a coffee shop downtown. Went to a pub uptown. Then to the OTB in Chinatown. Since that day, Savannah had pictured nothing but the perfect man for her. Finally!

The man with the giant hat pointed at Charlie. He mouthed the words: “*You! Motherfucker!*”

“What the fuck did I do?” Charlie said. He looked behind him. The crackheads in the park had scattered.

“Fucking crackheads! Kids fucking play here!”

Charlie felt a lump in his stomach. He started to shake. Turned to walk away.

“I’m a fucking drug addict,” he said. “What am I gonna do? Fucked. Yeah, I am. Don’t look back. Don’t look back.”

He looked back.

The guy with the cowboy hat was staring at him.

Charlie looked ahead of himself. Towards Queen Street. Away from the guy with the cowboy hat.

“Kids fucking play here, man!” the guy said again.

Charlie put his head down and closed his eyes.

“Twenty-seven,” he said and started counting his steps.

When Charlie was a kid he used to try and guess how many steps it would take to walk from one block up to the next. He would guess fifty or a hundred, or whatever, close his eyes and start walking. Open them when he got to the number he had picked and see how close he was.

“Fucked twenty-one.” Charlie counted. “Fucked twenty-two. Fucked twenty-three. Fucked drug addict convict twenty-four.”

Charlie’s heart suddenly skipped and grabbed. A car horn blared. Charlie stopped dead. *‘Hmnn. Only twenty-four?’* he thought

He opened his eyes. Turned. He was in the middle of the street. He looked up just in time to see the street car heading straight for him. He put his hands out to stop it. Everything was moving in slow motion. Happening too fast for his brain to actually register the moment.

‘I don’t want this anymore!’

Somewhere in his brain. Like a pebble in a pool of still water.

Charlie saw the horror on the driver’s face. The driver’s big wide eyes and mouth opening to shout something. The driver looked like Marshall. He saw a ghostly apparition of Savannah reach out for his hand. Then the full weight of the train hit him and there was nothing else. No pain. Only instant death.

Fucked.

Yeah he truly was.

It was almost past time for race seven.

Charlie Shackles. The perfect man. Tall. Good looking. With an honest job. Like the one her own father had. A working man who would stay fit and be a good father to their children. The perfect life. Their lives unadorned. Boring, She the receptionist for a law firm. He a simple postman. But she liked that about him. She loved that about him. They could travel up north and camp for their summer vacations.

“It’s all luck, you know.” A voice suddenly rang in Savannah’s right ear.

There was a man sitting beside her. She looked around. She wondered where he had come from. She hadn’t seen him before. He was the only other white person in the place. He wore a tight button-up polyester shirt. Baby blue, with drawings of cartoon heads all over it. Looked like Andy Capp characters or something like that. Herman. Something. The first three of four buttons at the neck were left unbuttoned to reveal a swirl of hoary chest hair. His moustache was thick and brown. His hair also brown and long. Past his shoulders.

“So?” Savannah said. “What isn’t?”

“What isn’t what?” the man said.

Savannah tried to discern whether the man died the hair on his head. It didn’t appear that he did.

“All luck.” Savannah said.

The man looked at her as if she might be insane. He didn’t move. Sat reading a program and staring at the televisions. He ignored her.

‘Fuck it. I’m going home,’ Savannah thought. *‘I’m getting us some cell phones.’*

She stood, tossed her program on her chair, and walked out of the OTB.

The streets of Chinatown were mostly empty. She could smell the garbage in the air. Down the way she saw some older lady with bowed legs dump a bucket of water onto the street and waddled back inside whatever door she had come from. There were hunks of something in the water. Something that moved. Savannah went to check it out. She looked down. Live crabs. They pinched at each other and shifted slightly in the puddle of water that reflected a red neon sign that read: *“Phu”*.

Savannah saw the lights of a streetcar coming towards her. She watched it and waited. The streetcar stopped across the street. The doors opened, shut again. No one got out.

She looked at the crabs. Kicked one over onto its back. She bent in the street light and one-by-one picked them up and started tossing them down the sewer grate. After ten or eleven crabs, she stopped. It felt like someone was standing over her. She peered up. There was no one there. She took in the sky. With a crab in each hand she stared at the

moon hovering over the monolithic skyscrapers of downtown. She felt like she had never seen that moon before. Felt like this was the first time she had ever seen it in her life. A feeling so savage and unfamiliar. Although, of course, she knew that she had seen the moon before.. Felt like deja vu. Only the opposite. A shitty feeling. She decided that she didn't like it.

"I don't want to go to work on Monday," she thought, and went back to chucking crabs down the sewer.

END

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OUT OF SPADINA

by

Steve Olley

STEVE OLLEY hails from Zurich, Ontario. After spending a lot of his earlier life traveling in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Steve Olley finally settled close to the shores of Lake Huron, where he lives with his daughter, Elizabeth, and their trusty dog Chelsea. Steve has had his work published in The Toronto Star, Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine, Coffee Cramp, and his private detective, Jack Best, appears regularly in Mysterical-E.

“I don’t know who you guys think you’re dealing with.”

It was hard for the young black man to answer with Danny’s hand on his throat. His other hand had the young man’s arm pulled awkwardly up behind him.

The pimp tried to wriggle free, but Danny was too strong for him. Danny wore Levis, a black polar neck and a light sports jacket. His hair was kept short over a handsome but stubborn looking face. There was something workmanlike in the way he moved the man over to the open car door. There was no malice.

“Now consider this a gentle warning. Tell your boss to keep out of Spadina.”

He put the young man’s hand in the door opening, and then slammed the door shut. The guy screamed. Danny opened the door and the guy fell to the ground, nursing his broken fingers. Danny didn’t feel anything for the pimp, one way or the other. It was just his job.

Danny turned now to see what his partner in this warning was doing with the pimp’s prostitute. Wilkes had large bug eyes, greasy hair that was a mess of rat’s tails, and a dirty smudge of a mustache that tried to hide a hair lip, that stretched down over a mouthful of neglected teeth. Wilkes had the girl back against the wall, his knife pointing into her face while he fondled her. He sneered and snorted as she endured his groping.

Danny hated working with Wilkes.

“Come on, Wilkes.”

Wilkes ignored Danny. The prostitute must have been in her mid thirties; she was no stranger to the streets, but she was frightened. She knew what to look for in a man’s face to know when to be afraid, and with Wilkes she had every reason to fear.

“Wilkes, come on. Leave her alone.”

This time Danny’s words stirred Wilkes and he stopped his fondling. The girl relaxed and that was when Wilkes slashed the knife across her face. Then he let her go. He folded his knife and put it in his

pocket and laughed at the woman bleeding at his feet. He walked over to Danny and they both got into the car.

“You didn’t need to do that. Just the pimp, that’s what Bill said.”

“What’s your problem, Danny, she’s just a hooker.”

Danny sighed and pulled the car out of the alley.

* * * * *

Nancy watched Bill as he spoke to the young teenage woman. He was tender with her, soothing. He showed her the room with the bed in it. The poor girl seemed much too young to Nancy. She said she was 19, but Nancy doubted it; 16 was probably closer to the truth.

The girl had been on the streets for a week; too afraid to go to the shelters to seek help there. And that’s when Bill always showed up, offering comfort, a warm bed, food, and something that would take all the hurt away. Of course there was only one catch, but they didn’t find that out till they became addicted.

There was something about this young girl that touched Nancy; an innocence, a certain look that she recognized, or remembered from the mirror from her first days at Bill’s.

She had come to Spadina ten years before, but things had changed since then. Her job now was to take care of the girls, keep them clean, and keep them in line. She was Bill’s girl now and no other man could have her. She was his possession, and her black eye was a mark of his ownership, her punishment for speaking out when common sense should have told her not to. But lately, despite all her efforts, Nancy couldn’t seem to stop herself.

The young girl looked across the room at her, all sunken eyes and tangled hair.

Elroy appeared at the entrance to the room. He was in his mid-twenties, blond haired, wiry, with a jagged scar that split his left eyebrow. Nancy felt revulsion at his presence; Elroy was a snake, a worm.

“Boss.”

Bill looked up and Elroy raised his eyebrows to indicate that he needed to talk to him. So the three of them left the girl to sleep, and went back down the hall, past all the other rooms, to the office.

“Nancy, get me a drink,” said Bill.

Nancy fixed Bill a whisky rocks and added a little ginger ale.

“What is it, Elroy,” said Bill.

“There’s a social worker snooping around, asking questions.”

“I thought we’d paid her off.”

“This is a new one.”

Nancy brought over Bill’s whiskey and a beer for Elroy. It was at this time that Danny and Wilkes got back.

“Any trouble?” asked Bill.

Danny didn’t answer; he saw Nancy’s eye and a look passed between them. Nancy gave a slight shake of the head, and so Danny didn’t say anything.

“No problem,” said Wilkes. “Except Old Danny here has a go at me for cutting up the whore.”

“Because we didn’t go there to do that,” said Danny.

“What’s up Dan,” said Bill, “getting squeamish?”

“No,” said Danny. “It just wasn’t what we were there for. It’s not good business, you know that Bill. Wilkes is a liability. One day we’ll all pay for his stupidity.”

“Hey,” shouted Wilkes.

Danny ignored him.

“I am not a liability, you’re the liability.”

“Okay,” said Bill, standing up and walking over to the window, pulling down the sleeves of his jacket. He looked out over the city and ran his hand over his slicked back hair.

“We got a new girl,” said Elroy, itching to tell Wilkes. “Right choice she is.”

“Is she?” said a grinning Wilkes.

“She seems too young to me,” said Nancy.

“Who asked for your opinion?” said Bill.

“It’s just that if we’ve got a new social worker snooping around, why take unnecessary risks.”

“I said shut it,” said Bill; “unless you want another black eye.”

Nancy glared at him.

“Go and check on the girls, before you make me mad.”

He watched Nancy leave the room, and shook his head as she closed the door behind her.

“Maybe she’s right,” said Danny.

“Not you too, Dan?” said Bill.

Danny shrugged his shoulders.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll get this social worker wised up before the girl’s ready.”

Danny nodded, but he wasn’t happy. The girls looked younger every day.

Bill turned his attention back to the others.

“Listen, Elroy.” Elroy looked up like an obedient dog. “Keep an eye on this social worker, but from a distance, for now. See what she gets up to. I’ll make some enquiries. Maybe we can dig up some dirt on her.

“Wilkes you’re on duty in the club, but keep your hands off the girls. Danny you go home and get some sleep, I’ll call you later.”

As Danny left with the others, he saw Nancy. She was in the new girl’s room. The girl was curled into a ball on the floor, shivering. Nancy knelt beside her, a hand rubbing the girl’s back. She looked up as Danny passed; there were tears in her eyes.

* * * * *

Danny drove back to his apartment. The lights of the downtown covered the wet streets with a colored glow.

There was something in Nancy’s look that troubled him. He’d seen it before in someone else’s eyes; a look of resigned defiance; a look that indicated that—no matter what the consequences—action needed to be taken. A line had been drawn in the sand and it had been crossed. This time it was Nancy, but Danny’s memory was of another woman and that line in the sand had been crossed by Danny. And no matter what Danny had tried to do, it had all been too late; he’d lost her, lost everything – they’d taken it all away from him. He’d left and come to the big city and met Bill and found a place where his anger could be put to use. But that was five years ago, and the anger had faded a long time ago. All that was left now was habit, but it had been getting harder every day. Nancy was there to remind him of what he had become, to remind herself what she had become. But tonight, there was something in Nancy’s eyes that had stirred in him all those thoughts of regret; but it was too late now to go back to what he had been. There comes a point in your life when there is no turning back.

Danny was right. Nancy knew that she couldn’t go on with this anymore. Her line in the sand had been crossed. Like Danny she knew there was nothing she could do for herself; it was too late for that, but perhaps by doing something for someone else she could lessen the pain.

* * * * *

“I don’t know how you do it, Debbie, I mean, my god, the stories one hears.”

Debbie smiled at her friend. Philippa was a junior accountant for a big auditing firm in the towers downtown. They were sat in a small restaurant close to Downtown and Spadina. Debbie toyed with her pasta

and looked at Philippa and her boyfriend, Kenneth, an advertising executive.

“I guess I’ve always wanted to be a social worker for as long as I can remember. I couldn’t imagine devoting my life to anything else.”

“But the stories you hear. Are they true?”

Debbie smiled but didn’t answer.

“You’ve been a social worker for five years, haven’t you?” asked Kenneth.

Debbie nodded.

“Surely there are other areas of the city where you could work, that wouldn’t be as dangerous as Spadina?”

“But I think I can make more of a difference here,” said Debbie. “The need is greatest here.”

“Isn’t there a high burn out rate?”

“That’s true in all areas,” said Debbie.

“Haven’t you wanted to do something a little easier that probably pays more money?” said Kenneth.

“Yes, Debbie,” said Philippa, “then you wouldn’t need to live down here.”

“It’s not too bad. I have a nice apartment.”

“I still don’t understand you,” said Philippa.

“It’s what I know I have to do.”

“Well rather you than me. I think I’d rather stick to the suburbs.”

The waiter came with the bill and Kenneth paid, despite Debbie’s protests. As they put on their coats, Debbie thought about their conversation. She knew it would be easier and safer not to have taken this job, but she knew she could make a difference here; she was determined to. In her mind there was no question of walking away. She could never live with herself if she did nothing.

When they left the restaurant, Kenneth and Philippa said their goodbyes and then they climbed into a cab and headed off. Debbie was left by herself to walk the six blocks to her apartment. Within a block or two the area began to change. There was more graffiti and a lot of the stores were empty, dusty dark windows, some of them boarded up.

After she crossed the road and walked another block, Debbie knew she was being followed. She came to a brightly lit shop window; she stopped and glanced casually back. A young woman with a black eye passed by and looked at her and motioned her on.

Debbie had been expecting it to be a man, the same man she’d seen earlier, but the idea that it had been a woman threw her off. She walked on and found the woman around the corner waiting.

* * * * *

It was the new girl, Olivia, who had convinced Nancy. Nancy had reached the end; she could not, would not, let Olivia's life become like hers. What she managed to glean from the girl was that she was from a small town called Wakefield. Nancy knew that whatever she had runaway from, surely could not be as bad as what would become of her if she stayed here.

After talking with the social worker, Nancy's head was buzzing. She was much too nervous to go home. She walked out of Spadina, and into the Downtown area, past restaurants and bars where regular people led their regular lives. Nancy knew that she was exiled from that world; there was no way back for her, but for Olivia there was still a chance.

Nancy was disappointed with the social worker. Nancy thought they would swoop down that night, but of course nothing worked like that. The slow gears of justice had to move methodically, if indeed justice were to be served. The social worker, Debbie, had wanted names and addresses, and Nancy wrote it all down in the social workers notebook and gave it back to her. Debbie wanted her assurance that Nancy would give evidence if called upon; Nancy had agreed to it all. She'd been surprised just how easy it had been for her to give up Bill's name. But when she realized that things were not going to happen overnight, she got mad with the social worker, telling her that she didn't understand that if they left it too long then it would be too late.

Nancy left the downtown and walked back to Spadina, back to the badly lit streets, where the only real economy was the trading of sin and the purchase of addiction. Back to the only real home Nancy knew. Had she made a mistake? She knew that if she had waited, she would not have had the guts to go to the social worker. It would have been so much easier to do nothing, but instead she had acted, she had betrayed them all. She did not know what was harder to live with, watching Olivia be corrupted, or knowing that by her actions she had endangered everything.

All Nancy felt at that moment though, as the night grew long, was that she was tired. She headed back to her apartment, to the only peace she could ever hope to find, in the pillows of her bed, with the covers pulled up and her head full of pleasant dreams from another life of childhood so very, very long ago.

When Nancy turned the corner of her street she saw Bill's car and Elroy and Wilkes waiting around outside her apartment building, and her worst suspicions gripped her heart with fear.

She could have turned and ran; she could have gone to Debbie; but then who would have protected her girls? Who would have been there for Olivia?

Elroy jerked his head, indicating that Bill was up there waiting for her; and by the look on Elroy's face she knew they knew.

She found Bill sitting in the living room. The lights were off in the room, but a light from the kitchen reached out and brought a dull illumination to the room.

"It's you, Bill," Nancy said nervously. "I wasn't expecting you. Let me get you something to eat."

"I don't want nothing." Bill sat there his hard face stony in the dim light.

"Then let me put on the lamp," she moved towards it.

"Leave it," said Bill, his voice was cold. "There's enough light for what I've got to do."

"Bill, why do you look at me like that?"

Bill stood up and came towards her. He was breathing heavily. He grabbed Nancy by the head and throat and dragged her into the middle of the room.

"Bill – Bill! Speak to me! Tell me what I've done."

"You know what you've done. You were watched tonight. Elroy was watching the social worker."

"Bill, no, you mustn't."

"Elroy said you gave her something. What did you give her?"

"Nothing, Bill. Honest. We just met by accident, that's all it was, Bill; an accident. Elroy got it wrong. I didn't give her anything. Honest, Bill – Bill!"

He hit her hard with his fist and she fell down on the floor. There was an anger in him that reason could not quench. She was on the floor; blood came from her lip into her mouth. It was then that she saw the baseball bat.

"Bill! Please believe me. Bill, I love you Bill!"

She held on to him, tried to stop his arms from reaching for the bat.

He picked it up and raised it above his head. Nancy screamed. Outside on the street Elroy and Wilkes heard her scream and they flinched. But nobody came to help; everyone pretended they did not hear her scream. Bill hit her with the bat, again and again, till his anger began to subside.

Nancy did not move, did not moan, did not flinch. The blood flowed from her wounds. Bill's breathing was fast and furious. He staggered backward to the wall, and then saw what he had done. He sat back down in the chair trying to control his breathing. It was hard to look at her, so he lifted his head. The long night was drawing to a close, and through the window, to the east, Bill saw a faint glow in the darkness.

He sat for a moment, unable to stir, listening to see if he could hear movements coming from the other apartments, but there was nothing. He slowly became aware of his situation. He had to hide this, he knew

that now. But Elroy and Wilkes were too stupid to do it properly. He called Danny.

* * * * *

Danny stirred from sleep. He knew there was something wrong from Bill's voice.

"Dan, get over to Nancy's. I need you. Dan, clean it up for me. Don't leave no evidence now."

When Danny got there, Wilkes and Elroy were getting Bill into the car. There was blood on Bill's clothes.

"What happened?" asked Danny.

"It's Nancy," said Elroy. "Clean it up."

"Bill! What have you done?"

Bill didn't say anything. He was looking at his hands, a bewildered look in his eyes.

"Just get it cleaned up," shouted Wilkes, and then they drove off.

Danny raced up the stairs to Nancy's apartment. The door was unlocked. Danny went in and closed the door behind him.

Nancy was lying on the floor in a pool of her own blood. He went over to her, to feel for a pulse to make sure she was dead, and Nancy opened her eyes. She smiled when she saw that it was Danny kneeling beside her.

"Danny," she said. She was near death. "It was Bill. I went to the social worker. They've gone to get her. Help her. Cathcart Building, apartment 332."

"Don't talk, Nancy, I'll get an ambulance."

"It's too late for me, Danny, but not for the new girl. Get her out, Danny. Take her home. She lives in Wakefield."

"Nancy."

"It's all bad, Danny. It's all too bad. Do the right thing, Danny. I know it's in you."

"I will."

"Danny! Where are you Danny?"

"I'm with you, Nancy."

"I'm cold, Danny."

Then Nancy died.

As he knelt there with her blood leaching into his pants, an awareness came to Danny; a clear vision of the truth, about the past,

about the present, and what his role in the near future had to be. Things had gone wrong for him a long time ago, but now he knew that it didn't have to be that way. Nancy had shown him that; poor weak Nancy who did the right thing, despite the consequences. Now it was time for him to do the right thing; if he ever wanted to find peace.

He laid a blanket over her, and then quietly left the apartment. Down on the street the cool air felt good, clean. He got into his car and drove over to the Cathcart Building. The streetlights did not seem so bright now that the sky was beginning to fill with light. Everything was clear to Danny now. He knew what he had to do.

He ran up the stairs of the apartment building and then crept along the hall to apartment 332. He listened at the door. He could hear Wilkes being his usual loathsome self. He heard the social worker whimpering. Danny couldn't hear Elroy. He was probably taking care of Bill; getting him cleaned up or sorting out an alibi. Danny took out his gun and readied himself.

He leapt at the door and into the room. They were sitting on a couch. Wilkes had his knife at the woman's throat while he molested her.

"Drop the knife," shouted Danny.

"What's the idea!" squealed Wilkes.

"I said drop the knife!"

"What, are you going to shoot me, Danny?"

"In three seconds unless you drop that knife and get down on the floor."

"Danny!"

"Do it Wilkes!"

Wilkes dropped the knife and lay down on the floor. "You'll regret this Danny. You just signed your own death warrant."

"Shut it, or I'll put one in your head right now!"

Wilkes grunted, but said nothing more.

Danny went over to the social worker.

"Are you alright? I just came from Nancy's apartment. They killed her for talking to you. Wilkes was sent here to search for any incriminating evidence. I guess he had other things on his mind."

The social worker was still numb from fear, but her eyes suddenly widened in terror, and Danny realized too late that Wilkes had not come alone. Elroy smashed the butt of his gun into Danny's head. He fell forwards dazed, dropping his gun. Wilkes scurried up off the floor and grabbed his knife.

"Seems Danny's changed sides," said Wilkes. "Did you find anything?"

“Nothing, so let’s get out of here.”

“First things first,” said Wilkes. He went back to the woman.

“We haven’t got time for that now,” said Elroy. “Who knows if Danny didn’t call the cops.”

“This’ll only take a minute,” said Wilkes.

“For god’s sake!” Elroy was annoyed and turned to Wilkes. “Can’t you focus for one minute?”

As soon as Elroy turned towards Wilkes, Danny jumped up and grabbed Elroy’s gun. Wilkes jumped on the ground, grabbed Danny’s gun and fired. The bullet hit Danny in the side. He fired back and the bullet entered Wilkes’ chest and stopped his heart. Elroy jumped up and ran out of the apartment.

Debbie couldn’t stop trembling.

“It’s okay,” said Danny, “it’s over now.”

Danny knelt down beside Wilkes to make sure he was dead. He was. He took a throw of the couch and laid it over the body.

“Who are you?” said the social worker.

“My name’s Danny, I’m a friend of Nancy.”

“Nancy’s dead?”

“Yeah.”

“Did they do it?”

“No, their boss, Bill. Nancy was supposed to be his girl.”

“What about what Nancy told me? She gave me names and addresses. Look it’s all here in my notebook.”

She took out a notebook from the inside pocket of her coat that was hanging on the back of the door. Elroy probably hadn’t noticed it when he first came in through the door. Danny took the book and looked at the names and addresses written inside. He recognized Nancy’s handwriting. All the names were there, all that is except his.

“It’s all true,” said Danny.

“I’m calling the police.”

“I’ve got to go. Will you be okay?”

“Yes, but you’ve been hit.”

Danny looked down and saw that the side of his shirt was covered with blood.

“Do you have anything I can use to stop the bleeding?”

“Yes, but you need to get to a hospital.”

Debbie went and fetched a first aid kit. She wiped away the blood, wrapped a bandage around him.

“There’s no exit wound,” she said. She looked very concerned.

Danny put on the clean T-shirt that she had given him, put on his jacket and then headed out the door.

* * * * *

As he bent to climb into his car, the pain stabbed at him, and for a second his head was dizzy, but then it began to pass. He drove out from the Cathcart Building, and back along the main drag through Spadina. The sun was coming up into a cold looking sky. Streetcars rumbled over the tracks, grinding forwards through the rust and the grit.

As Danny drove he tried to think what Bill would do once he’d regained his senses. Bill would soon know that he hadn’t managed to silence the social worker and that the jig was up. He’d take the money and run. But Danny knew that Bill wouldn’t leave behind his most valuable possessions. He’d sell the girls, and he knew plenty of willing buyers. The brothels in Chinatown would take them up in a snap. But Bill would have to be quick; otherwise the police would swoop and they’d lose everything.

When Danny arrived at the back of the club, the bus was already being loaded with some of the girls. Danny got out of his car and pulled out his gun and shot a bullet into the front tire of the bus. Elroy came running around the side, but when he saw Danny he backed away. Danny ran forwards and grabbed the unarmed Elroy.

“Where’s Bill?”

“He’s inside.”

“I want the new girl.”

“She’s already on the bus.”

“Get her.”

Elroy went onto the bus and came back with the girl, Olivia. She was high and didn’t have a clue what was going on.

“Put her in my car.”

Elroy put the girl on the backseat and she lay down and went to sleep.

“Now take me to Bill.”

Elroy led Danny back into the club. He knocked on Bill’s office door, entered and then slammed the door back into Danny’s face.

“Bill watch out!” he yelled.

Danny kicked open the door. Bill fired two shots. They both missed. Danny fired his own gun and Bill fell back. The shot had gone through Bill’s thigh. He was losing blood fast.

In the distance Danny could hear sirens.

“Come here,” he shouted at Elroy. “Make sure he doesn’t bleed to death.” He knew Bill wasn’t going anywhere and Elroy was too afraid to leave him.

“Dan,” Bill spoke to him. “Why?”

“For Nancy, Bill; for Nancy and all the other innocent lives you corrupted.”

Bill said nothing, and Danny realized that he did not know Bill’s story. What had led him to this life? But it didn’t matter now. It was all too late; too late for all of them. But the girl; Nancy had realized that if there was to be any way to redemption, then it had to be through the girl.

The sirens were getting closer. Danny went back to the car. Olivia was asleep in the back. He knew that if he left her for the police she’d be safe, but then everyone would know where she’d been, and no matter what she did with her life, she’d always be labeled. If Danny took her back himself then no one would ever know, and Olivia would get a second chance, and surely that was the whole point to all this. He climbed in and drove away. Further down the street the police cars passed him as they headed for the club. He took the expressway out of town, then northwards and the long drive to Wakefield.

* * * * *

They had been driving for about an hour when the girl woke up. The light hurt her eyes. The fields were white with snow. The trees looked black and stark. She looked at Danny.

“Who are you? Where are we going?”

“My name’s Danny. I’m a friend of Nancy’s.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Wakefield.”

“No, I can’t go back there.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand. I can’t go back there.”

“Why? Were they physical with you?”

“No.”

“Then why did you runaway?”

“I’m not a kid anymore. I can do what I please.”

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“You’re not nineteen.”

“Eighteen.”

“Tell me the truth. I’ll find out anyway.”

The girl, Olivia, looked out the window, and then in a quiet voice said, “I’m fifteen.”

“Why did you run away?”

“My mom has a new boyfriend. She didn’t want me around.”

“What about your dad?”

“He’s not around anymore.”

“So your mom told you to leave?”

“No, he told me. He said she didn’t want me around; that I was old enough to look after myself.”

“Did you speak to your mom before you left?”

“No.”

“What’s the telephone number?”

“I’m not telling you. I don’t want to go there. Take me back to the city.”

“Why?”

“I want to go back. Nancy will understand. She’s good to me.”

“Do you understand what that place was?”

“Nancy said she’d look after me.”

“She did and that’s why I’m taking you back.”

“Where’s Nancy?”

“She’s dead.”

“What!”

“Bill killed her.”

Olivia went quiet and then started to shiver. Danny gave her his coat. She pulled it over herself, and went back to sleep.

* * * * *

Danny reckoned they were about an hour or less from Wakefield. His belly felt wet and when he looked down he saw that his T-shirt was covered with blood. He felt weak. His fingers tingled and the pain in his side was getting worse.

Olivia stirred and when she woke up she said, “Hey there’s blood on this coat.”

“Don’t worry,” he said.

“You’re bleeding.”

“Yeah.”

Olivia shivered again. “I want to go home,” she said.

“What’s the number?”

She told him and he keyed it in. A woman answered and Danny handed the phone to Olivia.

“Mom.”

It seems as soon as Olivia’s mom found out what her boyfriend had said, she kicked him out, and she’d been looking for Olivia ever since. After Olivia hung up, she sat there looking out the window, watching the cars pass and the sun coming up through the trees.

The pain was getting worse, and Danny couldn’t help but wince.

“Are you alright?” asked Olivia.

“I’m fine. I’ll go to a hospital after I drop you off.”

The sign for Wakefield came up and Danny watched Olivia’s face in the rear view mirror. Her face was relaxed, she was coming home. Olivia gave him directions till they pulled up outside a small house close to the centre of the town.

“Thank you, Danny.”

“You’re a good girl, Olivia, remember that.”

“I wish I could thank Nancy.”

“When things get tough, remember her, she’ll help you.”

Tears came into her eyes and she wiped them away with her sleeve. She took a deep breath, looked once more at Danny, nodded and then climbed out of the car. He watched her walk up the driveway, she may only have been fifteen but she had aged quickly these last few weeks; too quickly. Before she got to the door a woman came out. Olivia looked up and the two of them ran to each other and hugged. Danny watched and he thought about Nancy, and knew that she would be pleased.

The pain was not so bad now. His body felt numb and he felt very calm. He drove down the street a little way, till quite inexplicably the sunlight changed the color of the snow to a deep red, and even though it was very cold, Danny felt comfortably warm, as if he were laying down in a hot bath. He pulled the car over and turned off the engine and lay back in his seat, enjoying, after so long, the peace that now passed into his body.

END

SANCTUARY LOST

by

Nick Andreychuk

Nick Andreychuk is a Derringer Award-winning author who resides near

*Vancouver, BC. His stories can be found in **Crime and Suspense**, **Crimestalker***

*Casebook, FEDORA I & III, HARDBROILED, Mouth Full of Bullets, TECHNO-NOIR, and WHO DIED IN HERE?, among many other publications. Nick's work can also be found in **BULLET POINTS**, an upcoming anthology of short-short crime fiction that he co-edited.*

When it's hot and humid outside, like it was that night, the basement gets as muggy as a New Guinean tribesman's butt crack. But it didn't matter to me, 'cause that building's bowels were my own little sanctuary of sorts. It was a place where nobody knew me, and none of the cardboard-cutout middle-class residents of one-oh-six Shagton Lane *wanted* to know me. Hell, most of them would shit in their Calvins just to hear of some of the scrapes I'd been in. But that was all behind me.

Of course, my little pocket of sanity wasn't completely private, but the tenants only came looking for me in the dank, uninviting basement as a last resort. In some ways, working on the ornery old furnace wasn't any more enjoyable than working on one of the constantly leaking faucets or frequently clogged garbage disposals. But at least I was free from the unrelenting whining, nagging, and bitching.

So unexpected was her presence in the basement that day, that I didn't even realize I had company until she opened her mouth.

"My garbage disposal's clogged--"

I didn't give her a chance to finish. I'd discovered from lessons learned the hard way that I had to set my own timetable, or else I would *never* get a break. Everyone always wanted their problems fixed *now* or *this morning* or *yesterday*, and it was near impossible to satisfy all of them all of the time -- even when I ran myself ragged. And besides, my hard labor was rarely appreciated anyway.

So I set her straight right off.

"I'll get to it as soon as I can, but my first priority is this furnace. Then I've got a shower to caulk up on the sixth floor that's pretty urgent seeing as how the tenants in the apartment below are none too pleased about the shower *they're* getting."

The woman smiled absentmindedly, as though she was waiting for me to finish talking without really listening to what I was saying. "I was just wondering if I could dump some stuff into the incinerator--"

they're starting to smell..." she said, holding up some lumpy garbage bags.

I looked at her more closely, recognizing her as the young beauty from apartment ninety-six. She had her long, red-streaked black hair pulled back into a ponytail, and she was clothed in skin-tight aerobic wear. She didn't fill out her sports-bra the way I liked, but her well-rounded perkies were in perfect proportion to her tiny exposed waist. I'm pretty sure she was in her late teens or early twenties, but she seemed even younger since she wasn't wearin' her usual chick-mag perfect makeup.

'What the heck?' I thought.

I could think of worse ways to spend the next few minutes than to watch Ms. Ninety-six go about her business in her form-fitting attire. "Sure, go ahead," I said, trying to sound indifferent while forcing my eyes to stay above her neck.

As she opened the incinerator doors, she started to talk -- but I wasn't sure if she was actually talking to me, or just thinkin' aloud. "Wouldn't it be nice if everything were this easy? Something stinks -- just throw it into the fire. Tired of something -- just throw it into the fire and get something new."

I glanced up at her face, but she paid me no mind. If she *was* talkin' to me, she apparently didn't feel the need for eye contact. And I didn't get the impression she gave two shakes about my opinion. She just rambled on.

"Then again, I guess it *could* be that easy...if you had the money for all the new things, and if there weren't any complications. Ah, but there are always complications, aren't there?"

One of the garbage bags had a tear in it, and what appeared to be women's panties slipped out and fell to the cement floor. As she bent over to pick it up, I wondered if *she* was wearing panties, since I couldn't see any lines. She held the fallen item in front of her, eyeing it like a piece of a puzzle to be solved. It was definitely women's underwear -- a little silky black number.

"Now this here -- *this* is a complication," she said. "She didn't expect me to be home before six, so when I walked in on them, things got a little *complicated*..."

She tossed the panties into the fire, and smiled wearily. "We do actually have the money for new things, you know. She just never used it -- not on me anyway..."

It wasn't hard to believe that she and her mother would be doin' okay -- their little meat shop was always busy whenever I walked by it. I'd never gone in it though -- I could never quite get past the unappetizing sight of those severed pig heads sittin' in the window.

"*'I'm saving for our future,' she'd say. 'Someday we'll have a big house, we'll have a maid, and we'll wear fancy clothes.'*

Yeah, *right*. Somehow *someday* came sooner for *him* than it did for me. *His* new designer clothes were bunched up on the floor. And where does a butcher's assistant get an expensive new watch, if not from the back-stabbing whore of a butcher herself?"

She heaved another bag into the fire, pausin' afterwards to tuck some loose strands of damp hair behind her ears. I realized I'd been starin' at her, but I couldn't keep my eyes off her. If she noticed, I couldn't tell, because she still wasn't lookin' back at me.

"Hmmpf," she chuckled mirthlessly. "Of course, he was *my* assistant too, what with my being the 'manager' and all. I never gave him any flashy gifts -- how could I with what that stingy slut paid me? -- but I gave him *everything* else he wanted... Apparently that wasn't good enough for *him*. I guess he wanted the *steak* instead of the *veal*. Though I can hardly imagine what he saw in her. She was not an easy woman to work for -- the cuts of meat always had to be just so. I am somewhat grateful to her though -- teaching me how to 'slice and dice' was the only thing of real value she ever gave me."

She paused, and stared thoughtfully at another loose strand of hair that she'd wrapped around one of her delicate fingers. Without her yakkin', I didn't have an excuse to gawk at her, so I turned my attention back to the furnace.

But then she started again.

"Obviously," she said, "I *had* to know whether she'd taught *him* as skillfully as she'd taught me. And I doubt that she would've minded. To her, butchering was an art. And I created a masterpiece. Sure, he had the basic cleaver control down pat. But when I compared our work side-by-side, there was no doubt that I'd handled *him* with far more skill and finesse than he'd handled *her*."

Looking away from Ms. Ninety-six had the effect of clearing my head. It suddenly dawned on me what she was really talkin' about.

I turned back towards her.

She was playin' with her hair again, and I noticed that some of her unpolished fingernails had grime underneath them, similar to the color of the streaks in her hair.

There was a roiling deep down in my stomach, and I was treated to an unpleasant reminder of what I'd had for lunch.

She had no more smelly bags to burn, but she finished her story anyway. She still didn't look directly at me. Nonetheless, I longed for a priestly screen to hide behind.

"It was poetic justice, really. The way she'd stumbled towards me, pulling on her pants, tripping over her own belt buckle, and bashing her head on the Buddha statue that she'd never prayed to... And the fact that *he'd* done as I'd instructed because I was pointing her gun-shaped cigarette-lighter at him..."

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As if to demonstrate, she held her fingers in the shape of a gun, holding her wrist with her other hand to steady her aim.

That's when she turned to me, still pointin' her mock gun, and finally looked me in the eyes. She had this real disturbin' grin on her face, and she started towards me.

I left the basement then. I left the building too. There was nothing left there for me anymore. My sanctuary was no longer.

END

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SHE WATCHES HIM SWIM

by

Claude Lalumière

Claude Lalumière is a Montreal writer and editor. His fiction has appeared in Year's Best SF 12, Year's Best Fantasy 6, several volumes of The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica, and others. He has edited eight anthologies, including Witpunk (with Marty Halpern, 2003), Island Dreams: Montreal Writers of the Fantastic (2003), Lust for Life: Tales of Sex & Love (with Elise Moser, 2006), and Tesseract Twelve (2008). His work has been translated into French, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Spanish.

Veronica lays her handbag on the little white plastic table, kicks off her pink flip-flops, and arranges herself on the sun chair. She catches Harold's eye; he's sitting at the edge of the pier looking over his shoulder at her while dipping his feet in the lake. He's naked. She's not. She's wearing a dark grey one-piece bathing suit with green piping. She doesn't mind being naked in the heat of passion, but otherwise her breasts always get in the way. What's the big deal with men and nudity?

There's no-one to see them out here at the isolated cottage of Harold's Uncle Davey, as Harold had reminded her a few times -- when they were packing; en route, while they drove; and again when they were unpacking -- not so subtly hinting that he'd enjoy it if she could try a few days without clothes. She knew she could be too uptight, but she wouldn't make herself uncomfortable just so Harold could get a kick. Regardless, to make sure he wouldn't take her subsequent clothed state the wrong way, she'd initiated a hot, enthusiastic bout of sex -- doing several things she knew he especially liked -- before they'd completely settled in for their holiday.

This is Harold's cottage now. Hers, too. His uncle died and left him a surprisingly comfortable inheritance. Not nearly enough to live on for the rest of their lives, but enough to make some substantial changes and improvements. Already, even though Harold won't receive the bulk of the estate until next year, she's been making plans with that money. She hasn't shared these ideas with him. Whenever they talk about plans and the future, it turns into a quarrel. Plans make Harold panic.

Grinning, Harold waves at her. She yawns when she waves back. In the aftermath of sex she tends to get drowsy.

He stands up. The way the early afternoon sun hits his golden curls and his broad, sculpted shoulders makes him look like Apollo, the Greek god of the sun. Then he ruins the moment. Jumping awkwardly into the insanely large private lake, without the slightest hint of poise, Harold is more buffoon than god.

The glare from the sky gets in her eyes, so she reaches into her handbag. She finds her sunglasses and puts them on.

She watches Harold swim. It occurs to her that he swims like he lives: randomly, with no style and no plan.

Planning out her life makes her feel safe, secure. Lack of planning makes her tense and withdrawn.

Veronica's career is on the right path. She was recently given a promotion at the marketing firm. In the last five years, she's received three substantial raises. She worked hard and planned carefully to earn those rewards. She wants to make partner, and she'll make it happen.

Harold is the store manager for the main outlet of a local independent CD chain. He makes less than twice minimum wage; there's no higher to climb on that miniature corporate ladder; and he has no further ambition. He's been working at that same store for the twelve years they've been together. At 22, she'd hadn't had the foresight to imagine how things would play out, given how different the two of them were. How different they still are. More different than ever, maybe. Harold was just this tall, easy-going, goofy-charming, nice guy who kissed better than anyone. Sure, she'd fallen in love. Sure, she married him.

Look at him. He's not even trying to use any technique. Couldn't he at least attempt a breaststroke? Or a front crawl? Or even a dog paddle? No -- he's just splashing around, barely keeping afloat. He can't even tread water reliably. Sometimes, he can appear to be such a moron, and she forgets that she loves him.

The ironic thing is that Harold adores the water; it's almost mystical the attraction it has for him. But he doesn't know how to swim properly. Harold's like that about everything. He's never managed to learn anything. He loves music, and knows more trivia than anyone should ever care about, but he can't hold a tune, read sheet music, or play an instrument.

It's not about how things work, he says, it's more important how they live in your imagination. Whatever that means. Sounds like a rationalization for laziness to her.

And yet, Harold isn't exactly lazy. He does more than his share of chores with no complaints. He's dedicated to his dead-end job. He even exercises: goes running every morning before Veronica wakes up, then rouses her with vigorous, sweaty sex. She likes that. Always starting the day off with a bang. Or two, sometimes.

The nice thing about Harold is that he genuinely likes women. Most men say they do, but they don't, not really. *Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em* is a motto most guys don't admit to anymore, but they think it anyway. She notices it in their lack of empathy, their impatience with anything they can't immediately grasp -- like a woman's point of view. Like a woman's way of doing things.

Harold is different. He's endlessly fascinated by women. He reads mostly female authors -- fiction, philosophy, feminism, memoirs, you name it. His favourite singers and musicians include a large number of women -- not the teenybopper dance vixens, but real musicians, including jazz players, composers, punks, rockers, and a lot of hard to classify crossgenre iconoclasts -- most of which Veronica had never

heard of before. He has a keen eye for picking just the right clothes and jewellery for her -- often stuff she would never have thought of trying herself.

And Harold's kissing ... not like a prelude to something else, but like the kiss itself is what matters. Like the taste of a woman in his mouth is most delicious taste ever.

Like the taste of Veronica is the most delicious taste ever.

Yet, she's been wondering whether she should call it quits with Harold.

Really, she should have left years ago. But Harold is affectionate and strong and steadfast. It's a comfortable life.

She wants more. Maybe this money will make life a bit better, but Harold himself won't change. He won't suddenly start dressing sharply. Start a new career that'll take him places. Learn something that might enrich both their lives in a substantial fashion. She'd settle for being shocked. Sometimes, she fantasizes that Harold is keeping a dark secret that, once revealed, would entirely change the way she thinks of him and their life together.

When Veronica isn't nestled in the coziness of their home, she often finds herself embarrassed by her marriage to Harold. She might be alone running errands, or taking a walk with him, or having dinner with friends, or speaking with co-workers, and then it hits her. Shame. Inadequacy. Everyone else their age seems so adult, like Veronica wants to be. But she feels stunted by Harold's permanent, incurable adolescence.

In the past two years, she's had three affairs. Harold doesn't know. It would devastate him. Well, two of them would. The third one would probably make him excited, and maybe just a little wounded that he wasn't included. Her yoga instructor, Ingrid.

The other two, though -- it would be cruel to ever tell him. There was Tim, an ambitious and sleek colleague who'd been on loan from the London office. If he hadn't been married, she'd have seriously considered leaving Harold for him. Then there was Gustave, a burly and completely inappropriate man whom she'd met at the gym; he was too rough with her, and his attitudes about women were pre-Cambrian, but he'd made her come -- with her screaming like a porn starlet -- harder than anyone ever had. As skillful as Harold was, he'd never made her scream. Still, sex wasn't everything, and she could barely stand Gustave's company unless his cock was ramming into her. That one had ended only a few weeks ago.

What's all that commotion? Oh.

Is he ... ?

Yes, Harold's in trouble. His arms are flailing too nervously to do him any good; he's gulping in more water than he can cough out; and he's too far from either the pier or the shore.

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Mmm. She hadn't planned this ... but she's not entirely inflexible. Harold should be proud: he's constantly bugging her to be more flexible and spontaneous.

Veronica stays still. Behind her sunglasses, for all Harold knows, she's fallen asleep.

She watches him try to swim to safety.

It doesn't seem likely that he'll succeed.

END

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VIRGIN TROUBADOUR

by

Jason S. Ridler

*Jason S. Ridler has been a cemetery groundskeeper, a punk rock guitarist, and a bookstore clerk. His fiction and essays have been published in **ClarksWorld, Dark Recesses, Tales of Moreuvia, ChiZine, Nossa Morte, and The Internet Review of Science Fiction.** He is a graduate of the *Odyssey Writing Workshop*, and a Ph.D candidate at the *Royal Military College of Canada*. He lives in Kingston, Ontario.*

Richard's pretty face had bruised into a mockery of its former glory. Three teeth were missing. His eyes were swelling shut. And his arms were limp at his sides. Sitting on the toilet, head hanging back, he looked like an abused puppet.

Ben smiled, closed the stall door and washed the blood from his swollen knuckles. The masked face in the mirror smiled as the gurgles from the stall failed to become words.

"Know what, Rich?" Ben said. "I'm actually looking forward to wing night next week. I can't wait to hear how you explain this evening to me, of all people. Too funny." Ben wound his watch, left the washroom, and ascended the stairs into the heat and lust of the club. His heart pounded in time with the hideous beats of the music he hated. Time for phase two.

* * * * *

Stop.

Ben wound his watch and walked to his car.

Richard followed with swagger-steps. "See the way Deb changed her tune after I dropped the tip? Whew! Didn't seem to mind my hand on her ass when she picked up the fifty. Jesus, do things ever change?"

Please.

Ben laughed, teeth clenched. "Guess not. I'm still the designated driver."

"Hey, I did it last week, bud."

"Right, right," Ben said, thumbing the key's jagged edge.

"Not my problem you were so blitzed you can't remember. Every time, man, every time you drink whiskey you black out. Took both Cathy and I to haul your bloated carcass to your apartment."

Don't.

Ben unlocked the passenger door. Richard got in, combing his hair with his fingers. Those slender, wasted digits. What Ben could do with those hands! Master more scales, modes, and chords. Stop babysitting the rug rats and lead an advanced guitar class. For Richard, they were mousse shovels, made to grab ass and bring gin and tonics to his lips.

Ben slammed the door and watched Richard jump. He sauntered to his side and checked his watch. The silver hands on his Longines original marched across a black face. How many times had Dad's mumbled at the workbench, an exposed watch like a dissected baby robot under the light, speaking of things his fat fingers could never fix?

"This Longines is a gem. Came off a dead soldier. So you treat it with respect. Wind it often and she'll never let you down."

The hands read one forty five.

Ben got in the car.

"Damn near smashed my elbow, Benji." Richard's smile fell. "What's crawled up your ass and died?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"You *know* I can, Bud."

Ben nodded. Never friend. Always *bud*.

"It's about Cathy."

Silence. Richard's mouth opened slowly, but Ben spoke.

"Things are kinda stale." He sighed. "Fine, I'll say it. Boring. Never thought it could happen with her. But, what is it you say? Variety is the spice of life?"

"Damn straight," Richard mumbled, looking at his thin reflection in the window.

"Haven't had anything spicy for a long time.

Richard nodded, calm and wasted. "Never thought I'd hear you talk like this. I mean, I've never been a fan of hers, but you guys always seemed to be --"

"I love Cathy." Richard silenced at the speed of Ben's words. "I don't want to leave her. But this blandness is consuming me. I can't sleep or even think. I need your help, man."

"Jesus, Ben," Richard said, wiping his face. "I can get you laid easy--"

"No. No one I know, or one of your stable of playmates. I want something intense. Dangerous. Make up for lost time in one night. I want to go to the Troubadour."

Richard crashed back in his seat.

"Bud, that place opens at two thirty. And they don't let just anybody in. And I'm fucking hammered as it is. Besides, Cathy's a good gal, I mean, you don't want to ruin something --"

“I knew you wouldn’t understand. How could you? Jesus.”

“Hey, what I meant—“

“Just tell me where it is. I’ll drive you home. I’ll go alone if you can’t handle it.”

“What?” Richard sprang from the seat. “You’re the goddamn boozecan virgin. I’ve survived a dozen Troubadour nights, hopped up on shit you’d be scared to look at. You can’t even get in without being invited by a veteran. Jesus Christ, Bud, don’t tell me what I can’t handle.”

“So we’re going?”

“Hell yeah,” he said, cottonmouthed, staring angry at the dark world past his reflection. Ben started the car.

Richard passed out when they hit the parkway. Ben wound his watch and played some Django Reinhardt gypsy jazz nice and low. Music settled his nerves and he was thankful for the light traffic. But without Richard’s blabbing, her words crept through the old notes jangling through the stereo:

Don’t . . . Stop . . . Please.

He gripped the wheel and hit the gas.

In the heart of downtown, Ben woke up Richard and they found a parking spot five blocks from the club. They hustled until they came upon the sidewinder lineup that ran around the building.

It was cold. Grey clouds jammed across the oil black sky and threatened snow or freezing rain with every gust of wind. Weak streetlights and pocks of cigarette cherries glowed in the dark. Ben grunted, looking at the crowd. Street goths, fashionistas, and slumming suburbanites filled the line, a cavalcade of conceited risk seekers who closed ranks for warmth, yet they did their best to ignore each other with chic indifference.

Richard hugged himself as the line inched closer to the main doors. “Damn. Why couldn’t you be horny in spring?”

“Don’t be such a wuss,” Ben said.

Richard snorted. “Coming from you, that’s rich.”

“No, you are.” Ben smiled.

Richard laughed but gave him a strange look. “Hey, I’m here for you, Bud, but why now? What happened?”

Ben took a deep breath. “I’m just tired of the way she moves, feels. So bland. So unexcited. So predictable. Guess that makes me a bastard.”

“No, no way man, not at all. We all get like that, eventually. Can’t argue with Darwin.” A joint got passed down the line. Richard took a heavy toke before passing it, but Ben shook his head. “Come on, Bud, you’re tenser than steel. Better ease up now so you can ride the crazy waves coming.”

“Nah. I brought my own.”

Richard took another hit and passed the joint behind him, smoke trailing his words.

“Shit, Benji. The times they are a changing.”

“Indeed.”

The line moved forward. Ben checked the steady silver hands. It was two thirty. He wound his watch and smiled at the club’s punctuality.

Pulsing electronic music blocked out Richard’s attempt to pick up the stoned girls behind them. Soon they stood before the great wooden doors to what must have been a concert hall in the 1950s. Ben wondered what real musicians had hit the stage here, before the walls were raped by inhuman bass. They passed grey columns and were stopped by bouncers in parkas with prison tats and metal detectors.

“Hands up.” At Ben’s left, the giant crewcut monster got off a stool. “Gotta frisk ya.”

The Sumo on the right frisked Richard. Ben’s nerves twitched. He kept smiling and raised his arms. The meaty hands rolled all over him and in his pocket and he prayed that nothing would be found.

The bouncer yanked out the wallet and Ben’s blood raced to his feet. He leafed through it, stray notes from the last guitar class fall out. The bouncer’s held the wallet up, disgusted.

“Something wrong?” Ben said, dryly.

“How the hell do you sit with this turd shoved under your ass? Must dive on a tilt and walk with a limp.” Ben smiled and received the wallet. “Your tag?”

Ben looked at Richard, hands in the air as he was frisked. “I’m with him.”

“He’s a newbie,” Richard said, bending in the wind.

The bouncer huffed. “Then give me *your* tag, bitch, and don’t waste my time.”

“I’m Crystal Rich.”

The bouncer checked his list.

“Clear. Here.”

He held out a small plastic mask that only covered the eyes, like kids wore at Halloween. Dead centre was a small gold “N.” Ben reached for it.

“Fifty bucks cover,” the bouncer said. “Exact cash only. You don’t take the mask off in there, but you get to keep it.”

Ben took out three twenties, careful but casual, and handed them over, then put on the mask. It was warm and stank of recycled sweat.

Richard was already inside the yellow light of foyer, smiling. To his right, at the coat check, two women with cotton candy hair were kissing like drunken teens.

Richard winked.

“Welcome to the Troubadour, Newbie!”

Richard gave him the rules in the car. You didn’t buy booze at the bar. You bought juice: orange, grape, or peach. Then you looked for shadows with duffel bags wandering the club. They sold mickeys of liquor for twenty bucks. “So if they got raided no one could say it was a booze can,” Richard had said, laughing. “Fucking genius.”

Feverish wet heat filled the air and Ben took in all the decadence: the aggressive kissing across the sexes, hands reaching deep beneath their costumes, lustful looks and disdainful hisses, all surrounded by the thump and grind of the dance floor.

He hated it. It was selfish, hedonistic, and parasitic. No loyalty. No friendship. Just lust and domination. All infused with soulless notes punched out by acid freaks with keyboards. Fast, invasive, disposable ear candy: the soundtrack to Ben’s apocalypse.

They each got a large plastic cup full of grape before heading for the dance floor.

“I’ll hold these while you find some rum,” Ben yelled through the zap-zap music. “You know the place better than me. I’ll wait in the far corner. But no whiskey. I want to remember this night.”

Richard nodded, patted his shoulder like an older brother, and handed him the cup. He vanished between the sweaty bodies of the dance floor.

In the trash-filled corner, void of light and filled with party debris, Ben retreated. Spent condoms made him slip and spill, but he was invisible. He put one full drink on the ledge. He took a healthy drink from the other, then put it down. With sticky fingers, he pulled out his wallet and removed the small blister pack jammed into its far reaches, spilling scraps of paper as he went. He popped them out and dropped them in Richard’s fuller cup. They hit the bottom and began to dissolve.

In the dark, watching the drug, guilt tugged him. This was the razor’s edge. The burning bridge. Soon, it would be a moment frozen in time, unable to be corrected, unable to be reached. Locked in the past, in memory.

Memory. They always thought he lost it on whiskey. It had only happened once, in undergrad, but Richard made it folklore. It made Ben feel interesting for a blip, even last week, when they dragged him home. And put him to bed. And closed the door. His eyes had closed, too, but he was not asleep. And he’d heard it. Her yelp. He was up, at the door on rubber legs, then--

Please... don’t stop. Don’t stop, please. Rich, please don’t stop.

The pill was still dissolving. Ben grimaced. Shaky had said they'd dissolved fast, but could he really trust a guitar virtuoso who he'd caught smoking dope before class at Grace Music Academy? Shaky had said one knocked his memory out, but two blew his mind and screwed his limbs. But the retard-savant had said nothing about increased dissolve time. Gooseflesh prickled Ben's skin. What if they're aspirin?

A voice popped in his ears. "A watched roofie never dissolves."

He turned, hiding the cups behind him. The dog collar around her throat had a thin chain that ran between her firm breasts like a silver tie. Bright red hair with black streaks hung down in curls. Sparkles glittered all over her face. Her skirt barely covered her privates and she wasn't wearing anything else under there. The kind of girl that ended up dead on the forensic cop shows Cathy watched while Ben practiced his fingerings in silence. Except this one had a live and predatory smile.

"Sorry?"

She patted his shoulders. "Easy, Newbie. I'm not a narc. Just curious. You plan on sharing that with anyone? Some girls don't like it." She stood closer. "Some girls do. So long as they know what's coming. Makes everything so scary and loose."

She grabbed his crotch. His back hit the ledge and behind her he saw Richard, two mickeys in hand, waltzing drunk, looking for him. Ben needed time. She inched closer.

He kissed her and she gripped him hard. Blood stampeded through him, and time froze in a decadent silence as she bit his lip and pulled him closer, studded-tongue wavering in and out of his mouth, enticing him deeper, scraping his teeth. Her left hand wrapped around his back as her right ran up and down until he moaned.

She snapped back, still smiling.

"I'll find you later. When I'm thirsty." She wiped the glitter from her face and traced a G on his left cheek.

She sauntered past pale Richard, into the crowd.

"I . . . can't believe it," Richard said.

Ben turned, adjusted himself, and tried to cool down as Richard stood beside him.

"I didn't think you really meant it, but fuck, man, that was intense."

Ben turned and grabbed the cups. The pills vanished to nothing. He handed that one to Richard. "You have no idea."

They drank, Richard's being spiked hard and Ben's only a smidgin, and endured the sounds of rutting and electronic distortion. When the cups were empty, Richard pushed him to the dance floor. "I got my second wind, Bud! Let's do this!"

Ben wound his watch and did his best to fit in to the hazy din of flesh, chemicals, and strobe light eyes. Breasts rubbed his back, hands

over his thighs, whispers of *newbie* on the male and female lips. It was the longest hour he had known.

Richard danced with zombie cadence, face starting to bloat. Ben cut through the bodies and grabbed his wrist.

“You ok?” he screamed.

Richard’s head bobbed up and down.

“Wanna spark that joint I got? In the bathroom? Take the edge off?”

Richard smiled bright and screamed “Yeah, Bud!”

Ben dragged him through the mindless movers and groovers, and hustled down the stairs to the washroom. A man in silver pants and vest was fixing his hair at the counter.

Richard leaned on Ben’s shoulders, muttering, “*Bu, bu bu.*”

“Uh,” Ben said. “My buddy is about to revisit five pounds of chicken wings. You may not want to see this.”

“Not my bag,” said Silver Pants, and left them alone. Ben locked the door, hit the hand dryer, and pulled Richard into the last stall on the left. Richard hit the seat, fish eyed and head rolling. Ben closed the door and made a fist.

“You fucked Cathy.”

He drilled Richard’s nose and he gasped, weak arms rising only as far as his chest. Blood was trickling down hard.

“Thought you could have my friendship and fuck it too?”

Ben’s fat hand rammed Richard’s mouth, again, and again, until teeth hit the floor.

“I mean, what else are friends for? Right?” He punched his eyes, just as hard as the heavy bag he’d been using at the YMCA. Harder. And harder. Until Richard’s face was bloated and ugly.

“Now, we’re even. *Bud.*” He spat and the gob turned red and slid down Richard’s face on to his dress shirt. Ben stood and admired the mess he’d made with his fat hands. He couldn’t help smiling.

* * * * *

He left Richard behind and climbed the steps, passing the dance floor’s entrance, turning right to the exit, and slamming into the glitter girl. She smiled wide.

“Man, am I thirsty. Care to be my oasis?”

“Look, I don’t have it anymore...”

She took his hand, blood was dripping from a cut.

“You’re hurt.”

“No, I’m not...”

She licked his knuckle and slowly sucked his finger. “Mmm. Rich.”

He couldn’t help smiling.

“C’mon, Fingers. Quench me.”

They got more grape drink and stood in the dark. She spiked hers with something from a flask and Ben just let his stand on the ledge.

“Look,” Ben said, winding his watch with sharp twists, “I don’t want to be rude. But I don’t have that stuff anymore.”

“Gave it to your boyfriend?”

“I’m not gay.”

“Oh, I know that, Fingers.” She stood an inch away and moved her mouth around his lips as she spoke. “But I guess he’s out for the count. Won’t remember this night? But you will.”

She gripped his hand and slowly pulled it away from his watch and on to her pert breast. “You’ll be the only one to know all the sweet things you did.”

His heart thudded in his chest, thinking of Cathy. Ben’s mouth dried to dust. “I’m not . . . not doing anything.”

He breathed in her scent of red roses and nicotine.

“Of course not.”

Her hand was no longer on his.

“I’m not like him.”

She moaned softly as he squeezed soft, then hard.

“I’m a good man.”

Their lips touched.

“I love good men.” She pulled him into the corner and they kissed deep and hard. Her strong, slender fingers worked him up before he pushed his crotch to hers. She shivered and moaned as he angled her into the tight corner, each undoing the bare minimum as fast as possible before --

A breathless moment engulfed him like a sudden wave. The ticking watch hammered his vein, trying to slow his pulse, beat it down. He pulled back and she synched him tight between her thighs. Her words filled his head, drowning out the thumping music and his ragged breath. “Don’t stop, baby. Please don’t stop.”

She disappeared when they’d finished and fear pulled him in a thousand directions, locking him in the corner. Thoughts ran through him too fast to hold. Disease. Cathy. Disease.

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He watched them dance, hypnotized by their collective movement. Richard floated in their tide, smiling, and pale as death, waving him in to the flashing lights. Ben's pulse raced. He reached for his watch.

It was gone.

END

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NOVEL BY FRANK NORRIS

New York Times, April 12, 1914

Review of *Vandover and The Brute*, by Frank Norris, Doubleday and Page, Inc.

Something over a decade ago, William Dean Howells quoted, apropos of Frank Norris' work

'The unfinished window in Aladdin's palace

Unfinished must remain'

and added words of keen regret that it must be so – that a man who had not only shown signs of possessing actual genius, but who in earnestness and singleness of purpose stood out giant-wise among American writers, should have left us, his message only half-delivered. And now, after praise and blame are for the most part alike silent, the long arm of coincidence reaches back across the years and rescues for us a few words more.

Vandover and The Brute was written nearly twenty years ago, almost simultaneously we are told with *McTeague*. Plots and ideas for other novels supervened, and *Vandover* unrevised, and temporarily shelved. At the time of the San Francisco earthquake and fire the manuscript was in a storage warehouse that burned to the ground. It's contents, though, strange to say, thrown out, hit or miss into a vacant lot, escaped injury, and in the course of time the crate containing the manuscript found a resting place in another storehouse, where it remained for years, unlabeled, unidentified, awaiting a claimant. Only recently has the mystery been solved, and the manuscript, from which even the author's name had been cut, possibly by some autograph seeker, has been recognized at unquestionably the long-missing work of the long-dead author.

It is only fair to say, in extenuation of the not infrequent roughnesses and crudenesses in the book, that it appears to be practically the author's first draft. In the ordinary course of events it would have been subjected to much chiseling and polishing before it was presented to the public, which of course, it has not received. The idea of the novel is so big, however, it stands so firmly upon the fundamental things in human nature, that we may well confine ourselves to a consideration of Mister Norris's intent in the matter and let the details of its execution go.

It is the story of a sensitive, artistically inclined boy, with –to begin with—a very small Brute indeed hidden in the recesses of his soul. But there was no one, unfortunately, to warn him it was a Brute – instead,

everybody ignored the fact that it was there at all—and it grew bigger. And as it grew bigger the boy, Vandover, grew weaker, until finally he became completely Brute, and to all intents and purposes there was no mere Vandover. Briefly and baldly, that is all there is to it—but that is all there is to the tragedy of a large part of the human race.

There have been many tales told of the multiple personalities which sleep in us, of which probably the most gripping is Stevenson's famous romance. But all such stories have one fundamental weakness, looked at as moral documents: they are stories of fatality, not of cause and effect. The manifestations of multiple personality bear no relation to the man's voluntary inward life, which is all of him that really matters.

Vandover, on the other hand, is a story of growth, of evolution. In spite of our modern theorists on freedom—who aren't so very modern after all; one Nero was a consistent expositor of the cult—genuine growth, in the sense of desirable growth, is conditioned by inhibition, by restraint. Where these are lacking, something else grows; something invariably ugly, melancholy, and finally destructive—the brute in man. It is not merely a coincidence that every primitive race has its legend of the alternative from a living human being, the wer-animal.

It may be objected that the hero's final lapse into one of the most horrible of all forms of madness is inartistic; that it reduces the parable to too concrete a form, and overemphasizes the already obvious moral. Perhaps; yet one cannot help feeling that in a story of this sort there is something deeper than literary values to consider, and that the author's instinct was right. The figure of Vandover in his seizures, naked, four-footed, running up and down his room, his head low and swinging, is unspeakably frightful, yet it knits up his past and his future in the mind of the reader as nothing else could do. It makes the twilight of history articulate and links its cry of instinctive terror to the warning of the science of today.

One wonders what the reception of this book would have been had Frank Norris devoted himself to its completion and publication twenty years ago. One thing is certain, it would have created a tremendous sensation. At that time, the social evil had not become a fashionable topic of dinner-table conversation, and the episode of Flossie and young Haight, minor as it is, would have been a veritable bombshell. This episode, by the way, is a blemish, not because it dealt with the subject of "Damaged Goods" before "Damaged Goods" was thought of, but because it is unnecessary and out of balance. The main theme of the book, the usurpation of the throne of man's soul by the wolf of desire, is strong enough to stand alone, so strong, indeed, that the intrusion of a distracting motive is as irritating as the buzzing of a fly at a funeral.

It shows how far we have traveled from the standards of twenty years ago that *Vandover and The Brute* will find few readers today to question its morality, or even its propriety. Frank Norris, to whom art meant truth,

and truth art, would be glad to know (and perhaps he does) that his first book, the book he must have loved, and to which he perhaps dreamed of returning when he should have perfected a method worthy of it, appears at last in a time which judges it, not by conventional and artificial standards, but on the simple basis of the truth there is in it, and the quality of the technique. The latter, as we have explained before, it is not only kinder but fairer to leave undiscussed, though there are parts, notably the description of the shipwreck, that are superbly written; the truth in it will speak for itself.

END

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McTEAGUE
Part Four
by
FRANK NORRIS
Classic Noir

*Frank Norris was a naturalistic writer of the very late nineteenth century, who produced some of the darkest, hardest-edged prose of his day. **McTeague** is, perhaps, his best-known work, if only because it was the foundation for the infamous Erich von Stroheim silent film **Greed**. Largely inspired by the novels of Emile Zola and the scientific work of Charles Darwin, much of Norris's literary work focused on the efforts of ordinary men to conquer - or at least control - the raging beast within. **McTeague**, the story of an ill-fated love triangle in nineteenth century San Francisco, is still considered to be one of the great American classics, ranking up there with the works of Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner. How great an author Norris might have become in the fullness of time we will never know, as he died in 1902, just three years after publishing **McTeague**, at the very young age of thirty-two.*

***The Back Alley** will serialize **McTeague** over seven issues, and will include articles by scholars who focus on the work of Frank Norris to help the reader understand and appreciate this very early example of naturalistically noir fiction.*

The Story So Far:

McTeague, a hulking, slow-witted former car-boy in a silver mine, has opened a sham dentist parlor on Polk Street in late nineteenth century San Francisco. Schooled only by observing an itinerant dental butcher, and some superficial readings of 'Allen's Practical Dentist' books, he engages mostly in pulling teeth and administering gas (most likely ether or nitrous oxide). His best friend, budding socialist Marcus Schouler, introduces him to a distant cousin, Trina Sieppe. Trina has a broken tooth which needs mending. While Trina is waiting to have the tooth fixed, McTeague's housekeeper Maria Macapa sells her a lottery ticket. McTeague determines that Trina's tooth can't be saved, and he has to pull it and the one next to it and fashion replacements for them. It's an operation that takes a couple of weeks and several visits to complete. At a final session, he is forced to place her under anesthesia with gas. While she is asleep, McTeague is seized by an impulse that he fights mightily, but unsuccessfully. Yielding to what he calls his 'brute', McTeague kisses Trina forcefully. Ashamed, he returns to his work, and when Trina awakens she tells him that she 'never felt a thing'. McTeague, perhaps out of guilt, immediately- if somewhat roughly- proposes marriage to Trina. She becomes very upset, refuses his proposal, and begins to vomit.

As it happens, Marcus Schouler is also in love with Trina, a fact which McTeague knew even as he kissed her and asked her to marry him. As he lies in his dental parlor, guilt-ridden, he isn't aware that Maria Macapa is robbing him blind, taking instruments and dental gold foil to sell to a Jewish pawnbroker named Zerkow.

McTeague joins with Marcus one afternoon, while Marcus - who works as an assistant for Grannis, the dog doctor - is walking some of Grannis' 'patients'.

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Over a couple of beers, Marcus asks McTeague what is bothering him. After considerable persuasion, McTeague confesses that he loves Trina Sieppe. Marcus realizes that McTeague would marry Trina that very afternoon if she would have him, but Marcus does not think that he himself cares for her that much. He tells McTeague that he will 'pull out', and make way for McTeague to court Trina, in the interest of their friendship. McTeague is overcome with emotion.

To cheer his friend up, Marcus plays a trick on him. He demonstrates how he can put an entire billiards ball in his mouth. McTeague is dumbstruck. Marcus takes the ball out, and then challenges McTeague to do the same thing. He does, but the ball becomes stuck. McTeague begins to panic, until the ball comes loose of its own accord. Laughing over the joke, Marcus suggests that McTeague begin his courtship of Trina as soon as possible. In a piece of foreshadowing, Marcus points to two dogs snarling at each other through a picket fence and says, "By damn they don't love each other. Just listen; wouldn't that make a fight if the two got together? Have to try it some day."

Having received his friend's blessing, McTeague begins to court Trina. Because her family is from the Old World, all his dates with her are taken as family outings – picnics at the bay, family suppers at her home, and a memorable trip to Schuetzen Park across the bay. After that trip, he begins to see her every Sunday and Wednesday, and one day she meets him at the train without her family. They take a walk, and McTeague confesses to Trina his deepest desire – to have a large gilded tooth mounted outside his dental parlor to announce to one and all his profession.

Once again McTeague asks Trina to marry him, and he kisses her. Alarmed, she takes off and returns to her home, where she asks her mother what she should do. Trina can't decide whether to marry McTeague – on the one hand she finds herself aroused by him, but she is also frightened by his size and rare outbursts of temper. She realized at last that McTeague had awakened the Woman in her, and that she was, for better or worse, irrevocably bonded to him.

Marcus suggests to McTeague that he take Trina to the theater – something that would be a completely novel experience for both of them. McTeague takes Trina and her family to the theater in San Francisco. Never having seen a vaudeville show before, McTeague is amazed at all the different acts, and only leaves reluctantly when Trina's young brother August wets the pants of his new Lord Fauntleroy suit.

Upon returning to McTeague's dental parlors, where McTeague intends to treat the family to dinner, they are called down by Maria Macapa, who excitedly proclaims that Trina's lottery ticket had the winning number, and that she has won five thousand dollars! Everyone is excited, except for Marcus Schouler, who realizes that by giving Trina up to save his friendship with McTeague, he has also given up any chance of sharing in his cousin's amazing new wealth.

"You fool, you fool, Marcus Schouler! (he exclaims) If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life -- to give up the girl, yes -- but this," he stamped his foot with rage -- "to throw five thousand dollars out of the window -- to stuff it into the pockets of someone else, when it might have been yours, when you might have had Trina AND the money -- and all for what? Because we were pals . Oh, 'pals' is all right -- but five thousand dollars -- to have played it right into his hands -- God DAMN the luck!"

Over the next two months, Trina and McTeague prepare for their impending wedding. McTeague has big plans for the five thousand dollars Trina won in the lottery—a new house, lavish furnishings, feasts—but it soon becomes evident that Trina is frugal, and satisfied with a small monthly dividend from investing the money. She finally invests in her Uncle Oelbermann's toy store in the Mission District, at an interest rate of six percent.

Marcus Schouler, in the mean time, has grown more and more resentful about losing his chance at Trina's money. He picks arguments with McTeague, claiming that the dentist owes him money, and then refusing it when McTeague offers to pay him back. McTeague is distressed and puzzled over what he might have done to insult his dear friend. Finally, during one particularly vehement argument in a bar, Marcus demands part of the five thousand dollars as a reward for bringing McTeague and Trina together. When McTeague refuses, Marcus breaks McTeague's pipe, and throws a knife at him.

Trina has a surprise for McTeague, however. She brings him a present one day—a huge gilded tooth to go over the door of his dentist studios, the very tooth he had dreamed of placing there.

On the eve of the wedding, Trina's mother brings McTeague and Marcus together in her home and demands that they reconcile. They do so, and become friends again. Trina is still upset at Marcus for demanding part of the money, and declares, "It's mine! All mine!" She immediately relents, however, and amends her declaration by saying, "That is, it's ours."

McTeague and Trina are married, and Marcus makes quite a show of congratulating Trina on her nuptials. However, when it comes time for Trina's family to return to Oakland, she panics, and tells her mother that she is afraid. Her mother attempts to comfort her, and then the family leaves her alone with McTeague. When he attempts to embrace her, she panics again, and can only tell him that she is frightened by the sheer size and power of him. He professes his love for her again, and she yields willingly to him.

As she embraces him, she says, "You must be good to me -- very, very good to me, dear -- for you're all that I have in the world now."

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Chapter 10

That summer passed, then the winter. The wet season began in the last days of September and continued all through October, November, and December. At long intervals would come a week of perfect days, the sky without a cloud, the air motionless, but touched with a certain nimbleness, a faint effervescence that was exhilarating. Then, without warning, during a night when a south wind blew, a gray scroll of cloud would unroll and hang high over the city, and the rain would come pattering down again, at first in scattered showers, then in an uninterrupted drizzle.

All day long Trina sat in the bay window of the sitting-room that commanded a view of a small section of Polk Street. As often as she raised her head she could see the big market, a confectionery store, a bell-hanger's shop, and, farther on, above the roofs, the glass skylights and water tanks of the big public baths. In the nearer foreground ran the street itself; the cable cars trundled up and down, thumping heavily over the joints of the rails; market carts by the score came and went, driven at a great rate by preoccupied young men in their shirt sleeves, with pencils behind their ears, or by reckless boys in blood-stained butcher's aprons. Upon the sidewalks the little world of Polk Street swarmed and jostled through its daily round of life. On fine days the great ladies from the avenue, one block above, invaded the street, appearing before the butcher stalls, intent upon their day's marketing. On rainy days their servants --

the Chinese cooks or the second girls -- took their places. These servants gave themselves great airs, carrying their big cotton umbrellas as they had seen their mistresses carry their parasols, and haggling in supercilious fashion with the market men, their chins in the air.

The rain persisted. Everything in the range of Trina's vision, from the tarpaulins on the market-cart horses to the panes of glass in the roof of the public baths, looked glazed and varnished. The asphalt of the sidewalks shone like the surface of a patent leather boot; every hollow in the street held its little puddle, that winked like an eye each time a drop of rain struck into it.

Trina still continued to work for Uncle Oelbermann. In the mornings she busied herself about the kitchen, the bedroom, and the sitting-room; but in the afternoon, for two or three hours after lunch, she was occupied with the Noah's ark animals. She took her work to the bay window, spreading out a great square of canvas underneath her chair, to catch the chips and shavings, which she used afterwards for lighting fires. One after another she caught up the little blocks of straight-grained pine, the knife flashed between her fingers, the little figure grew rapidly under her touch, was finished and ready for painting in a wonderfully short time, and was tossed into the basket that stood at her elbow.

But very often during that rainy winter after her marriage Trina would pause in her work, her hands falling idly into her lap, her eyes -- her narrow, pale blue eyes -- growing wide and thoughtful as she gazed, unseeing, out into the rain-washed street.

She loved McTeague now with a blind, unreasoning love that admitted of no doubt or hesitancy. Indeed, it seemed to her that it was only AFTER her marriage with the dentist that she had really begun to love him. With the absolute final surrender of herself, the irrevocable, ultimate submission, had come an affection the like of which she had never dreamed in the old B Street days. But Trina loved her husband, not because she fancied she saw in him any of those noble and generous qualities that inspire affection. The dentist might or might not possess them, it was all one with Trina. She loved him because she had given herself to him freely, unreservedly; had merged her individuality into his; she was his, she belonged to him forever and forever. Nothing that he could do (so she told herself), nothing that she herself could do, could change her in this respect. McTeague might cease to love her, might leave her, might even die; it would be all the same, SHE WAS HIS.

But it had not been so at first. During those long, rainy days of the fall, days when Trina was left alone for hours, at that time when the excitement and novelty of the honeymoon were dying down, when the new household was settling into its grooves, she passed through many an hour of misgiving, of doubt, and even of actual regret.

Never would she forget one Sunday afternoon in particular. She had been married but three weeks. After dinner she and little Miss Baker had gone for a bit of a walk to take advantage of an hour's sunshine and to look at some wonderful geraniums in a florist's window on Sutter Street. They had been caught in a shower, and on returning to the flat the little dressmaker had insisted on fetching Trina up to her tiny room and brewing her a cup of strong tea, "to take the chill off." The two women had chatted over their teacups the better part of the afternoon, then Trina had returned to her rooms. For nearly three hours McTeague had been out of her thoughts, and as she came through their little suite, singing softly to herself, she suddenly came upon him quite unexpectedly. Her husband was in the "Dental Parlors," lying back in his operating chair, fast asleep. The little stove was crammed with coke, the room was overheated, the air thick and foul with the odors of ether, of coke gas, of stale beer and cheap tobacco. The dentist sprawled his gigantic limbs over the worn velvet of the operating chair; his coat and vest and shoes were off, and his huge feet, in their thick gray socks, dangled over the edge of the foot-rest; his pipe, fallen from his half-open mouth, had spilled the ashes into his lap; while on the floor, at his side stood the half-empty pitcher of steam beer. His head had rolled limply upon one shoulder, his face was red with sleep, and from his open mouth came a terrific sound of snoring.

For a moment Trina stood looking at him as he lay thus, prone, inert, half-dressed, and stupefied with the heat of the room, the steam beer, and the fumes of the cheap tobacco. Then her little chin quivered and a sob rose to her throat; she fled from the "Parlors," and locking herself in her bedroom, flung herself on the bed and burst into an agony of weeping. Ah, no, ah, no, she could not love him. It had all been a dreadful mistake, and now it was irrevocable; she was bound to this man for life. If it was as bad as this now, only three weeks after her marriage, how would it be in the years to come? Year after year, month after month, hour after hour, she was to see this same face, with its salient jaw, was to feel the touch of those enormous red hands, was to hear the heavy, elephantine tread of those huge feet -- in thick gray socks. Year after year, day after day, there would be no change, and it would last all her life. Either it would be one long continued revulsion, or else -- worse than all -- she would come to be content with him, would come to be like him, would sink to the level of steam beer and cheap tobacco, and all her pretty ways, her clean, trim little habits, would be forgotten, since they would be thrown away upon her stupid, brutish husband. "Her husband!" THAT, was her husband in there -- she could yet hear his snores -- for life, for life. A great despair seized upon her. She buried her face in the pillow and thought of her mother with an infinite longing.

Aroused at length by the chittering of the canary, McTeague had awakened slowly. After a while he had taken down his concertina and played upon it the six very mournful airs that he knew.

Face downward upon the bed, Trina still wept. Throughout that little suite could be heard but two sounds, the lugubrious strains of the concertina and the noise of stifled weeping.

That her husband should be ignorant of her distress seemed to Trina an additional grievance. With perverse inconsistency she began to wish him to come to her, to comfort her. He ought to know that she was in trouble, that she was lonely and unhappy.

"Oh, Mac," she called in a trembling voice. But the concertina still continued to wail and lament. Then Trina wished she were dead, and on the instant jumped up and ran into the "Dental Parlors," and threw herself into her husband's arms, crying: "Oh, Mac, dear, love me, love me big! I'm so unhappy."

"What -- what -- what -- " the dentist exclaimed, starting up bewildered, a little frightened.

"Nothing, nothing, only LOVE me, love me always and always."

But this first crisis, this momentary revolt, as much a matter of high-strung feminine nerves as of anything else, passed, and in the end Trina's affection for her "old bear" grew in spite of herself. She began to love him more and more, not for what he was, but for what she had given up to him. Only once again did Trina undergo a reaction against her husband, and then it was but the matter of an instant, brought on, curiously enough, by the sight of a bit of egg on McTeague's heavy mustache one morning just after breakfast.

Then, too, the pair had learned to make concessions, little by little, and all unconsciously they adapted their modes of life to suit each other. Instead of sinking to McTeague's level as she had feared, Trina found that she could make McTeague rise to hers, and in this saw a solution of many a difficult and gloomy complication.

For one thing, the dentist began to dress a little better, Trina even succeeding in inducing him to wear a high silk hat and a frock coat of a Sunday. Next he relinquished his Sunday afternoon's nap and beer in favor of three or four hours spent in the park with her -- the weather permitting. So that gradually Trina's misgivings ceased, or when they did assail her, she could at last meet them with a shrug of the shoulders, saying to herself meanwhile, "Well, it's done now and it can't be helped; one must make the best of it."

During the first months of their married life these nervous relapses of hers had alternated with brusque outbursts of affection when her only fear was that her husband's love did not equal her own. Without an instant's warning, she would clasp him about the neck, rubbing her cheek against his, murmuring:

"Dear old Mac, I love you so, I love you so. Oh, aren't we happy together, Mac, just us two and no one else? You love me as much as I love you, don't you, Mac? Oh, if you shouldn't -- if you SHOULDNT."

But by the middle of the winter Trina's emotions, oscillating at first from one extreme to another, commenced to settle themselves to an equilibrium of calmness and placid quietude. Her household duties began more and more to absorb her attention, for she was an admirable housekeeper, keeping the little suite in marvellous good order and regulating the schedule of expenditure with an economy that often bordered on positive niggardliness. It was a passion with her to save money. In the bottom of her trunk, in the bedroom, she hid a brass match-safe that answered the purposes of a savings bank. Each time she added a quarter or a half dollar to the little store she laughed and sang with a veritable childish delight; whereas, if the butcher or milkman compelled her to pay an overcharge she was unhappy for the rest of the day. She did not save this money for any ulterior purpose, she hoarded instinctively, without knowing why, responding to the dentist's remonstrances with:

"Yes, yes, I know I'm a little miser, I know it."

Trina had always been an economical little body, but it was only since her great winning in the lottery that she had become especially penurious. No doubt, in her fear lest their great good luck should demoralize them and lead to habits of extravagance, she had recoiled too far in the other direction. Never, never, never should a penny of that miraculous fortune be spent; rather should it be added to. It was a nest egg, a monstrous, roc-like nest egg, not so large, however, but that it could be made larger. Already by the end of that winter Trina had begun to make up the deficit of two hundred dollars that she had been forced to expend on the preparations for her marriage.

McTeague, on his part, never asked himself now-a-days whether he loved Trina the wife as much as he had loved Trina the young girl. There had been a time when to kiss Trina, to take her in his arms, had thrilled him from head to heel with a happiness that was beyond words; even the smell of her wonderful odorous hair had sent a sensation of faintness all through him. That time was long past now. Those sudden outbursts of affection on the part of his little woman, outbursts that only increased in vehemence the longer they lived together, puzzled rather than pleased him. He had come to submit to them good-naturedly, answering her passionate inquiries with a "Sure, sure, Trina, sure I love you. What -- what's the matter with you?"

There was no passion in the dentist's regard for his wife. He dearly liked to have her near him, he took an enormous pleasure in watching her as she moved about their rooms, very much at home, gay and singing from morning till night; and it was his great delight to call her into the "Dental Parlors" when a patient was in the chair and, while he held the

plugger, to have her rap in the gold fillings with the little box-wood mallet as he had taught her. But that tempest of passion, that overpowering desire that had suddenly taken possession of him that day when he had given her ether, again when he had caught her in his arms in the B Street station, and again and again during the early days of their married life, rarely stirred him now. On the other hand, he was never assailed with doubts as to the wisdom of his marriage.

McTeague had relapsed to his wonted stolidity. He never questioned himself, never looked for motives, never went to the bottom of things. The year following upon the summer of his marriage was a time of great contentment for him; after the novelty of the honeymoon had passed he slipped easily into the new order of things without a question. Thus his life would be for years to come. Trina was there; he was married and settled. He accepted the situation. The little animal comforts which for him constituted the enjoyment of life were ministered to at every turn, or when they were interfered with -- as in the case of his Sunday afternoon's nap and beer -- some agreeable substitute was found. In her attempts to improve McTeague -- to raise him from the stupid animal life to which he had been accustomed in his bachelor days -- Trina was tactful enough to move so cautiously and with such slowness that the dentist was unconscious of any process of change. In the matter of the high silk hat, it seemed to him that the initiative had come from himself.

Gradually the dentist improved under the influence of his little wife. He no longer went abroad with frayed cuffs about his huge red wrists -- or worse, without any cuffs at all. Trina kept his linen clean and mended, doing most of his washing herself, and insisting that he should change his flannels -- thick red flannels they were, with enormous bone buttons -- once a week, his linen shirts twice a week, and his collars and cuffs every second day. She broke him of the habit of eating with his knife, she caused him to substitute bottled beer in the place of steam beer, and she induced him to take off his hat to Miss Baker, to Heise's wife, and to the other women of his acquaintance. McTeague no longer spent an evening at Frenna's. Instead of this he brought a couple of bottles of beer up to the rooms and shared it with Trina. In his "Parlors" he was no longer gruff and indifferent to his female patients; he arrived at that stage where he could work and talk to them at the same time; he even accompanied them to the door, and held it open for them when the operation was finished, bowing them out with great nods of his huge square-cut head.

Besides all this, he began to observe the broader, larger interests of life, interests that affected him not as an individual, but as a member of a class, a profession, or a political party. He read the papers, he subscribed to a dental magazine; on Easter, Christmas, and New Year's he went to church with Trina. He commenced to have opinions, convictions -- it was not fair to deprive tax-paying women of the privilege to vote; a university education should not be a prerequisite for admission to a dental college; the Catholic priests were to be restrained in their efforts to gain control of the public schools.

But most wonderful of all, McTeague began to have ambitions -- very vague, very confused ideas of something better -- ideas for the most part borrowed from Trina. Some day, perhaps, he and his wife would have a house of their own. What a dream! A little home all to themselves, with six rooms and a bath, with a grass plat in front and calla-lilies. Then there would be children. He would have a son, whose name would be Daniel, who would go to High School, and perhaps turn out to be a prosperous plumber or house painter. Then this son Daniel would marry a wife, and they would all live together in that six-room-and-bath house; Daniel would have little children. McTeague would grow old among them all. The dentist saw himself as a venerable patriarch surrounded by children and grandchildren.

So the winter passed. It was a season of great happiness for the McTeagues; the new life jostled itself into its grooves. A routine began.

On weekdays they rose at half-past six, being awakened by the boy who brought the bottled milk, and who had instructions to pound upon the bedroom door in passing. Trina made breakfast -- coffee, bacon and eggs, and a roll of Vienna bread from the bakery. The breakfast was eaten in the kitchen, on the round deal table covered with the shiny oilcloth table-spread tacked on. After breakfast the dentist immediately betook himself to his "Parlors" to meet his early morning appointments -- those made with the clerks and shop girls who stopped in for half an hour on their way to their work.

Trina, meanwhile, busied herself about the suite, clearing away the breakfast, sponging off the oilcloth table-spread, making the bed, pottering about with a broom or duster or cleaning rag. Towards ten o'clock she opened the windows to air the rooms, then put on her drab jacket, her little round turban with its red wing, took the butcher's and grocer's books from the knife basket in the drawer of the kitchen table, and descended to the street, where she spent a delicious hour -- now in the huge market across the way, now in the grocer's store with its fragrant aroma of coffee and spices, and now before the counters of the haberdasher's, intent on a bit of shopping, turning over ends of veiling, strips of elastic, or slivers of whalebone. On the street she rubbed elbows with the great ladies of the avenue in their beautiful dresses, or at intervals she met an acquaintance or two -- Miss Baker, or Heise's lame wife, or Mrs. Ryer. At times she passed the flat and looked up at the windows of her home, marked by the huge golden molar that projected, flashing, from the bay window of the "Parlors." She saw the open windows of the sitting-room, the Nottingham lace curtains stirring and billowing in the draft, and she caught sight of Maria Macapa's towelled head as the Mexican maid-of-all-work went to and fro in the suite, sweeping or carrying away the ashes. Occasionally in the windows of the "Parlors" she beheld McTeague's rounded back as he bent to his work. Sometimes, even, they saw each other and waved their hands gayly in recognition.

By eleven o'clock Trina returned to the flat, her brown net reticule -- once her mother's -- full of parcels. At once she set about getting lunch -- sausages, perhaps, with mashed potatoes; or last evening's joint warmed over or made into a stew; chocolate, which Trina adored, and a side dish or two -- a salted herring or a couple of artichokes or a salad. At half-past twelve the dentist came in from the "Parlors," bringing with him the smell of creosote and of ether. They sat down to lunch in the sitting-room. They told each other of their doings throughout the forenoon; Trina showed her purchases, McTeague recounted the progress of an operation. At one o'clock they separated, the dentist returning to the "Parlors," Trina settling to her work on the Noah's ark animals. At about three o'clock she put this work away, and for the rest of the afternoon was variously occupied -- sometimes it was the mending, sometimes the wash, sometimes new curtains to be put up, or a bit of carpet to be tacked down, or a letter to be written, or a visit -- generally to Miss Baker -- to be returned. Towards five o'clock the old woman whom they had hired for that purpose came to cook supper, for even Trina was not equal to the task of preparing three meals a day.

This woman was French, and was known to the flat as Augustine, no one taking enough interest in her to inquire for her last name; all that was known of her was that she was a decayed French laundress, miserably poor, her trade long since ruined by Chinese competition. Augustine cooked well, but she was otherwise undesirable, and Trina lost patience with her at every moment. The old French woman's most marked characteristic was her timidity. Trina could scarcely address her a simple direction without Augustine quailing and shrinking; a reproof, however gentle, threw her into an agony of confusion; while Trina's anger promptly reduced her to a state of nervous collapse, wherein she lost all power of speech, while her head began to bob and nod with an incontrollable twitching of the muscles, much like the oscillations of the head of a toy donkey. Her timidity was exasperating, her very presence in the room unstrung the nerves, while her morbid eagerness to avoid offence only served to develop in her a clumsiness that was at times beyond belief. More than once Trina had decided that she could no longer put up with Augustine but each time she had retained her as she reflected upon her admirably cooked cabbage soups and tapioca puddings, and -- which in Trina's eyes was her chiefest recommendation -- the pittance for which she was contented to work.

Augustine had a husband. He was a spirit-medium -- a "professor." At times he held seances in the larger rooms of the flat, playing vigorously upon a mouth-organ and invoking a familiar whom he called "Edna," and whom he asserted was an Indian maiden.

The evening was a period of relaxation for Trina and McTeague. They had supper at six, after which McTeague smoked his pipe and read the papers for half an hour, while Trina and Augustine cleared away the table and washed the dishes. Then, as often as not, they went out together. One of their amusements was to go "down town" after dark and

promenade Market and Kearney Streets. It was very gay; a great many others were promenading there also. All of the stores were brilliantly lighted and many of them still open. They walked about aimlessly, looking into the shop windows. Trina would take McTeague's arm, and he, very much embarrassed at that, would thrust both hands into his pockets and pretend not to notice. They stopped before the jewellers' and milliners' windows, finding a great delight in picking out things for each other, saying how they would choose this and that if they were rich. Trina did most of the talking. McTeague merely approving by a growl or a movement of the head or shoulders; she was interested in the displays of some of the cheaper stores, but he found an irresistible charm in an enormous golden molar with four prongs that hung at a corner of Kearney Street. Sometimes they would look at Mars or at the moon through the street telescopes or sit for a time in the rotunda of a vast department store where a band played every evening.

Occasionally they met Heise the harness-maker and his wife, with whom they had become acquainted. Then the evening was concluded by a four-cornered party in the Luxembourg, a quiet German restaurant under a theatre. Trina had a tamale and a glass of beer, Mrs. Heise (who was a decayed writing teacher) ate salads, with glasses of grenadine and currant syrups. Heise drank cocktails and whiskey straight, and urged the dentist to join him. But McTeague was obstinate, shaking his head. "I can't drink that stuff," he said. "It don't agree with me, somehow; I go kinda crazy after two glasses." So he gorged himself with beer and frankfurter sausages plastered with German mustard.

When the annual Mechanic's Fair opened, McTeague and Trina often spent their evenings there, studying the exhibits carefully (since in Trina's estimation education meant knowing things and being able to talk about them). Wearying of this they would go up into the gallery, and, leaning over, look down into the huge amphitheatre full of light and color and movement.

There rose to them the vast shuffling noise of thousands of feet and a subdued roar of conversation like the sound of a great mill. Mingled with this was the purring of distant machinery, the splashing of a temporary fountain, and the rhythmic jangling of a brass band, while in the piano exhibit a hired performer was playing upon a concert grand with a great flourish. Nearer at hand they could catch ends of conversation and notes of laughter, the noise of moving dresses, and the rustle of stiffly starched skirts. Here and there school children elbowed their way through the crowd, crying shrilly, their hands full of advertisement pamphlets, fans, picture cards, and toy whips, while the air itself was full of the smell of fresh popcorn.

They even spent some time in the art gallery. Trina's cousin Selina, who gave lessons in hand painting at two bits an hour, generally had an exhibit on the walls, which they were interested to find. It usually was a bunch of yellow poppies painted on black velvet and framed in gilt. They

stood before it some little time, hazarding their opinions, and then moved on slowly from one picture to another. Trina had McTeague buy a catalogue and made a duty of finding the title of every picture. This, too, she told McTeague, as a kind of education one ought to cultivate. Trina professed to be fond of art, having perhaps acquired a taste for painting and sculpture from her experience with the Noah's ark animals.

"Of course," she told the dentist, "I'm no critic, I only know what I like." She knew that she liked the "Ideal Heads," lovely girls with flowing straw-colored hair and immense, upturned eyes. These always had for title, "Reverie," or "An Idyll," or "Dreams of Love."

"I think those are lovely, don't you, Mac?" she said.

"Yes, yes," answered McTeague, nodding his head, bewildered, trying to understand. "Yes, yes, lovely, that's the word. Are you dead sure now, Trina, that all that's hand-painted just like the poppies?"

Thus the winter passed, a year went by, then two. The little life of Polk Street, the life of small traders, drug clerks, grocers, stationers, plumbers, dentists, doctors, spirit-mediums, and the like, ran on monotonously in its accustomed grooves. The first three years of their married life wrought little change in the fortunes of the McTeagues. In the third summer the branch post-office was moved from the ground floor of the flat to a corner farther up the street in order to be near the cable line that ran mail cars. Its place was taken by a German saloon, called a "Wein Stube," in the face of the protests of every female lodger. A few months later quite a little flurry of excitement ran through the street on the occasion of "The Polk Street Open Air Festival," organized to celebrate the introduction there of electric lights. The festival lasted three days and was quite an affair. The street was garlanded with yellow and white bunting; there were processions and "floats" and brass bands. Marcus Schouler was in his element during the whole time of the celebration. He was one of the marshals of the parade, and was to be seen at every hour of the day, wearing a borrowed high hat and cotton gloves, and galloping a broken-down cab-horse over the cobbles. He carried a baton covered with yellow and white calico, with which he made furious passes and gestures. His voice was soon reduced to a whisper by continued shouting, and he raged and fretted over trifles till he wore himself thin. McTeague was disgusted with him. As often as Marcus passed the window of the flat the dentist would mutter:

"Ah, you think you're smart, don't you?"

The result of the festival was the organizing of a body known as the "Polk Street Improvement Club," of which Marcus was elected secretary. McTeague and Trina often heard of him in this capacity through Heise the harness-maker. Marcus had evidently come to have political aspirations. It appeared that he was gaining a reputation as a maker of speeches, delivered with fiery emphasis, and occasionally reprinted in

the "Progress," the organ of the club -- "outraged constituencies," "opinions warped by personal bias," "eyes blinded by party prejudice," etc.

Of her family, Trina heard every fortnight in letters from her mother. The upholstery business which Mr. Sieppe had bought was doing poorly, and Mrs. Sieppe bewailed the day she had ever left B Street. Mr. Sieppe was losing money every month. Owgooste, who was to have gone to school, had been forced to go to work in "the store," picking waste. Mrs. Sieppe was obliged to take a lodger or two. Affairs were in a very bad way. Occasionally she spoke of Marcus. Mr. Sieppe had not forgotten him despite his own troubles, but still had an eye out for some one whom Marcus could "go in with" on a ranch.

It was toward the end of this period of three years that Trina and McTeague had their first serious quarrel. Trina had talked so much about having a little house of their own at some future day, that McTeague had at length come to regard the affair as the end and object of all their labors. For a long time they had had their eyes upon one house in particular. It was situated on a cross street close by, between Polk Street and the great avenue one block above, and hardly a Sunday afternoon passed that Trina and McTeague did not go and look at it. They stood for fully half an hour upon the other side of the street, examining every detail of its exterior, hazarding guesses as to the arrangement of the rooms, commenting upon its immediate neighborhood -- which was rather sordid. The house was a wooden two-story arrangement, built by a misguided contractor in a sort of hideous Queen Anne style, all scrolls and meaningless mill work, with a cheap imitation of stained glass in the light over the door. There was a microscopic front yard full of dusty calla-lilies. The front door boasted an electric bell. But for the McTeagues it was an ideal home. Their idea was to live in this little house, the dentist retaining merely his office in the flat. The two places were but around the corner from each other, so that McTeague could lunch with his wife, as usual, and could even keep his early morning appointments and return to breakfast if he so desired.

However, the house was occupied. A Hungarian family lived in it. The father kept a stationery and notion "bazaar" next to Heise's harness-shop on Polk Street, while the oldest son played a third violin in the orchestra of a theatre. The family rented the house unfurnished for thirty-five dollars, paying extra for the water.

But one Sunday as Trina and McTeague on their way home from their usual walk turned into the cross street on which the little house was situated, they became promptly aware of an unwonted bustle going on upon the sidewalk in front of it. A dray was back against the curb, an express wagon drove away loaded with furniture; bedsteads, looking-glasses, and washbowls littered the sidewalks. The Hungarian family were moving out.

"Oh, Mac, look!" gasped Trina.

"Sure, sure," muttered the dentist.

After that they spoke but little. For upwards of an hour the two stood upon the sidewalk opposite, watching intently all that went forward, absorbed, excited.

On the evening of the next day they returned and visited the house, finding a great delight in going from room to room and imagining themselves installed therein. Here would be the bedroom, here the dining-room, here a charming little parlor. As they came out upon the front steps once more they met the owner, an enormous, red-faced fellow, so fat that his walking seemed merely a certain movement of his feet by which he pushed his stomach along in front of him. Trina talked with him a few moments, but arrived at no understanding, and the two went away after giving him their address. At supper that night McTeague said:

"Huh -- what do you think, Trina?"

Trina put her chin in the air, tilting back her heavy tiara of swarthy hair.

"I am not so sure yet. Thirty-five dollars and the water extra. I don't think we can afford it, Mac."

"Ah, pshaw!" growled the dentist, "sure we can."

"It isn't only that," said Trina, "but it'll cost so much to make the change."

"Ah, you talk's though we were paupers. Ain't we got five thousand dollars?"

Trina flushed on the instant, even to the lobes of her tiny pale ears, and put her lips together.

"Now, Mac, you know I don't want you should talk like that. That money's never, never to be touched."

"And you've been savun up a good deal, besides," went on McTeague, exasperated at Trina's persistent economies. "How much money have you got in that little brass match-safe in the bottom of your trunk? Pretty near a hundred dollars, I guess -- ah, sure." He shut his eyes and nodded his great head in a knowing way.

Trina had more than that in the brass match-safe in question, but her instinct of hoarding had led her to keep it a secret from her husband. Now she lied to him with prompt fluency.

"A hundred dollars! What are you talking of, Mac? I've not got fifty. I've not got THIRTY."

"Oh, let's take that little house," broke in McTeague. "We got the chance now, and it may never come again. Come on, Trina, shall we? Say, come on, shall we, huh?"

"We'd have to be awful saving if we did, Mac."

"Well, sure, I say let's take it."

"I don't know," said Trina, hesitating. "Wouldn't it be lovely to have a house all to ourselves? But let's not decide until to-morrow."

The next day the owner of the house called. Trina was out at her morning's marketing and the dentist, who had no one in the chair at the time, received him in the "Parlors." Before he was well aware of it, McTeague had concluded the bargain. The owner bewildered him with a world of phrases, made him believe that it would be a great saving to move into the little house, and finally offered it to him "water free."

"All right, all right," said McTeague, "I'll take it."

The other immediately produced a paper.

"Well, then, suppose you sign for the first month's rent, and we'll call it a bargain. That's business, you know," and McTeague, hesitating, signed.

"I'd like to have talked more with my wife about it first," he said, dubiously.

"Oh, that's all right," answered the owner, easily. "I guess if the head of the family wants a thing, that's enough."

McTeague could not wait until lunch time to tell the news to Trina. As soon as he heard her come in, he laid down the plaster-of-paris mould he was making and went out into the kitchen and found her chopping up onions.

"Well, Trina," he said, "we got that house. I've taken it."

"What do you mean?" she answered, quickly. The dentist told her.

"And you signed a paper for the first month's rent?"

"Sure, sure. That's business, you know."

"Well, why did you DO it?" cried Trina. "You might have asked ME something about it. Now, what have you done? I was talking with Mrs. Ryer about that house while I was out this morning, and she said the Hungarians moved out because it was absolutely unhealthy; there's water been standing in the basement for months. And she told me, too," Trina went on indignantly, "that she knew the owner, and she was sure we could get the house for thirty if we'd bargain for it. Now what have you gone and done? I hadn't made up my mind about taking the house at all. And now I WON'T take it, with the water in the basement and all."

"Well -- well," stammered McTeague, helplessly, "we needn't go in if it's unhealthy."

"But you've signed a PAPER," cried Trina, exasperated. "You've got to pay that first month's rent, anyhow -- to forfeit it. Oh, you are so stupid! There's thirty-five dollars just thrown away. I SHAN'T go into that house; we won't move a FOOT out of here. I've changed my mind about it, and there's water in the basement besides."

"Well, I guess we can stand thirty-five dollars," mumbled the dentist, "if we've got to."

"Thirty-five dollars just thrown out of the window," cried Trina, her teeth clicking, every instinct of her parsimony aroused. "Oh, you the thick-wittedest man that I ever knew. Do you think we're millionaires? Oh, to think of losing thirty-five dollars like that." Tears were in her eyes, tears of grief as well as of anger. Never had McTeague seen his little woman so aroused. Suddenly she rose to her feet and slammed the chopping-bowl down upon the table. "Well, I won't pay a nickel of it," she exclaimed.

"Huh? What, what?" stammered the dentist, taken all aback by her outburst.

"I say that you will find that money, that thirty-five dollars, yourself."

"Why -- why -- -- "

"It's your stupidity got us into this fix, and you'll be the one that'll suffer by it."

"I can't do it, I WON'T do it. We'll -- we'll share and share alike. Why, you said -- you told me you'd take the house if the water was free."

"I NEVER did. I NEVER did. How can you stand there and say such a thing?"

"You did tell me that," vociferated McTeague, beginning to get angry in his turn.

"Mac, I didn't, and you know it. And what's more, I won't pay a nickel. Mr. Heise pays his bill next week, it's forty-three dollars, and you can just pay the thirty-five out of that."

"Why, you got a whole hundred dollars saved up in your match-safe," shouted the dentist, throwing out an arm with an awkward gesture. "You pay half and I'll pay half, that's only fair."

"No, no, NO," exclaimed Trina. "It's not a hundred dollars. You won't touch it; you won't touch my money, I tell you."

"Ah, how does it happen to be yours, I'd like to know?"

"It's mine! It's mine! It's mine!" cried Trina, her face scarlet, her teeth clicking like the snap of a closing purse.

"It ain't any more yours than it is mine."

"Every penny of it is mine."

"Ah, what a fine fix you'd get me into," growled the dentist. "I've signed the paper with the owner; that's business, you know, that's business, you know; and now you go back on me. Suppose we'd taken the house, we'd 'a' shared the rent, wouldn't we, just as we do here?"

Trina shrugged her shoulders with a great affectation of indifference and began chopping the onions again.

"You settle it with the owner," she said. "It's your affair; you've got the money." She pretended to assume a certain calmness as though the matter was something that no longer affected her. Her manner exasperated McTeague all the more.

"No, I won't; no, I won't; I won't either," he shouted. "I'll pay my half and he can come to you for the other half." Trina put a hand over her ear to shut out his clamor.

"Ah, don't try and be smart," cried McTeague. "Come, now, yes or no, will you pay your half?"

"You heard what I said."

"Will you pay it?"

"No."

"Miser!" shouted McTeague. "Miser! you're worse than old Zerkow. All right, all right, keep your money. I'll pay the whole thirty-five. I'd rather lose it than be such a miser as you."

"Haven't you got anything to do," returned Trina, "instead of staying here and abusing me?"

"Well, then, for the last time, will you help me out?" Trina cut the heads of a fresh bunch of onions and gave no answer.

"Huh? will you?"

"I'd like to have my kitchen to myself, please," she said in a mincing way, irritating to a last degree. The dentist stamped out of the room, banging the door behind him.

For nearly a week the breach between them remained unhealed. Trina only spoke to the dentist in monosyllables, while he, exasperated at her calmness and frigid reserve, sulked in his "Dental Parlors," muttering terrible things beneath his mustache, or finding solace in his concertina, playing his six lugubrious airs over and over again, or swearing frightful oaths at his canary. When Heise paid his bill, McTeague, in a fury, sent the amount to the owner of the little house.

There was no formal reconciliation between the dentist and his little woman. Their relations readjusted themselves inevitably. By the end of the week they were as amicable as ever, but it was long before they spoke of the little house again. Nor did they ever revisit it of a Sunday afternoon. A month or so later the Ryers told them that the owner himself had moved in. The McTeagues never occupied that little house.

But Trina suffered a reaction after the quarrel. She began to be sorry she had refused to help her husband, sorry she had brought matters to such an issue. One afternoon as she was at work on the Noah's ark animals, she surprised herself crying over the affair. She loved her "old bear" too much to do him an injustice, and perhaps, after all, she had been in the wrong. Then it occurred to her how pretty it would be to come up behind him unexpectedly, and slip the money, thirty-five dollars, into his hand, and pull his huge head down to her and kiss his bald spot as she used to do in the days before they were married.

Then she hesitated, pausing in her work, her knife dropping into her lap, a half-whittled figure between her fingers. If not thirty-five dollars, then at least fifteen or sixteen, her share of it. But a feeling of reluctance, a sudden revolt against this intended generosity, arose in her.

"No, no," she said to herself. "I'll give him ten dollars. I'll tell him it's all I can afford. It IS all I can afford."

She hastened to finish the figure of the animal she was then at work upon, putting in the ears and tail with a drop of glue, and tossing it into the basket at her side. Then she rose and went into the bedroom and opened her trunk, taking the key from under a corner of the carpet where she kept it hid.

At the very bottom of her trunk, under her bridal dress, she kept her savings. It was all in change -- half dollars and dollars for the most part, with here and there a gold piece. Long since the little brass match-box had overflowed. Trina kept the surplus in a chamois-skin sack she had made from an old chest protector. Just now, yielding to an impulse which often seized her, she drew out the match-box and the chamois sack, and emptying the contents on the bed, counted them carefully. It came to one hundred and sixty-five dollars, all told. She counted it and recounted it and made little piles of it, and rubbed the gold pieces between the folds of her apron until they shone.

"Ah, yes, ten dollars is all I can afford to give Mac," said Trina, "and even then, think of it, ten dollars -- it will be four or five months before I can save that again. But, dear old Mac, I know it would make him feel glad, and perhaps," she added, suddenly taken with an idea, "perhaps Mac will refuse to take it."

She took a ten-dollar piece from the heap and put the rest away. Then she paused:

"No, not the gold piece," she said to herself. "It's too pretty. He can have the silver." She made the change and counted out ten silver dollars into her palm. But what a difference it made in the appearance and weight of the little chamois bag! The bag was shrunken and withered, long wrinkles appeared running downward from the draw-string. It was a lamentable sight. Trina looked longingly at the ten broad pieces in her hand. Then suddenly all her intuitive desire of saving, her instinct of hoarding, her love of money for the money's sake, rose strong within her.

"No, no, no," she said. "I can't do it. It may be mean, but I can't help it. It's stronger than I." She returned the money to the bag and locked it and the brass match-box in her trunk, turning the key with a long breath of satisfaction.

She was a little troubled, however, as she went back into the sitting-room and took up her work.

"I didn't use to be so stingy," she told herself. "Since I won in the lottery I've become a regular little miser. It's growing on me, but never mind, it's a good fault, and, anyhow, I can't help it."

Chapter 11

On that particular morning the McTeagues had risen a half hour earlier than usual and taken a hurried breakfast in the kitchen on the deal table with its oilcloth cover. Trina was house-cleaning that week and had a presentiment of a hard day's work ahead of her, while McTeague remembered a seven o'clock appointment with a little German shoemaker.

At about eight o'clock, when the dentist had been in his office for over an hour, Trina descended upon the bedroom, a towel about her head and the roller-sweeper in her hand. She covered the bureau and sewing machine with sheets, and unhooked the chenille portieres between the bedroom and the sitting-room. As she was tying the Nottingham lace curtains at the window into great knots, she saw old Miss Baker on the opposite sidewalk in the street below, and raising the sash called down to her.

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. McTeague," cried the retired dressmaker, facing about, her head in the air. Then a long conversation was begun, Trina, her arms folded under her breast, her elbows resting on the window ledge, willing to be idle for a moment; old Miss Baker, her market-basket on her arm, her hands wrapped in the ends of her worsted shawl against the cold of the early morning. They exchanged phrases, calling to each other from window to curb, their breath coming from their lips in faint puffs of vapor, their voices shrill, and raised to dominate the clamor of the waking street. The newsboys had made their appearance on the street, together with the day laborers. The cable cars had begun to fill up; all along the street could be seen the shopkeepers taking down their shutters; some were still breakfasting. Now and then a waiter from one of the cheap restaurants crossed from one sidewalk to another, balancing on one palm a tray covered with a napkin.

"Aren't you out pretty early this morning, Miss Baker?" called Trina.

"No, no," answered the other. "I'm always up at half-past six, but I don't always get out so soon. I wanted to get a nice head of cabbage and some lentils for a soup, and if you don't go to market early, the restaurants get all the best."

"And you've been to market already, Miss Baker?"

"Oh, my, yes; and I got a fish -- a sole -- see." She drew the sole in question from her basket.

"Oh, the lovely sole!" exclaimed Trina.

"I got this one at Spadella's; he always has good fish on Friday. How is the doctor, Mrs. McTeague?"

"Ah, Mac is always well, thank you, Miss Baker."

"You know, Mrs. Ryer told me," cried the little dressmaker, moving forward a step out of the way of a "glass-put-in" man, "that Doctor McTeague pulled a tooth of that Catholic priest, Father -- oh, I forget his name -- anyhow, he pulled his tooth with his fingers. Was that true, Mrs. McTeague?"

"Oh, of course. Mac does that almost all the time now, 'specially with front teeth. He's got a regular reputation for it. He says it's brought him more patients than even the sign I gave him," she added, pointing to the big golden molar projecting from the office window.

"With his fingers! Now, think of that," exclaimed Miss Baker, wagging her head. "Isn't he that strong! It's just wonderful. Cleaning house to-day?" she inquired, glancing at Trina's towelled head.

"Um hum," answered Trina. "Maria Macapa's coming in to help pretty soon."

At the mention of Maria's name the little old dressmaker suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"Well, if I'm not here talking to you and forgetting something I was just dying to tell you. Mrs. McTeague, what ever in the world do you suppose? Maria and old Zerkow, that red-headed Polish Jew, the rag-bottles-sacks man, you know, they're going to be married."

"No!" cried Trina, in blank amazement. "You don't mean it."

"Of course I do. Isn't it the funniest thing you ever heard of?"

"Oh, tell me all about it," said Trina, leaning eagerly from the window. Miss Baker crossed the street and stood just beneath her.

"Well, Maria came to me last night and wanted me to make her a new gown, said she wanted something gay, like what the girls at the candy store wear when they go out with their young men. I couldn't tell what had got into the girl, until finally she told me she wanted something to get married in, and that Zerkow had asked her to marry him, and that she was going to do it. Poor Maria! I guess it's the first and only offer she ever received, and it's just turned her head."

"But what DO those two see in each other?" cried Trina. "Zerkow is a horror, he's an old man, and his hair is red and his voice is gone, and then he's a Jew, isn't he?"

"I know, I know; but it's Maria's only chance for a husband, and she don't mean to let it pass. You know she isn't quite right in her head,

anyhow. I'm awfully sorry for poor Maria. But I can't see what Zerkow wants to marry her for. It's not possible that he's in love with Maria, it's out of the question. Maria hasn't a sou, either, and I'm just positive that Zerkow has lots of money."

"I'll bet I know why," exclaimed Trina, with sudden conviction; "yes, I know just why. See here, Miss Baker, you know how crazy old Zerkow is after money and gold and those sort of things."

"Yes, I know; but you know Maria hasn't -- -- "

"Now, just listen. You've heard Maria tell about that wonderful service of gold dishes she says her folks used to own in Central America; she's crazy on that subject, don't you know. She's all right on everything else, but just start her on that service of gold plate and she'll talk you deaf. She can describe it just as though she saw it, and she can make you see it, too, almost. Now, you see, Maria and Zerkow have known each other pretty well. Maria goes to him every two weeks or so to sell him junk; they got acquainted that way, and I know Maria's been dropping in to see him pretty often this last year, and sometimes he comes here to see her. He's made Maria tell him the story of that plate over and over and over again, and Maria does it and is glad to, because he's the only one that believes it. Now he's going to marry her just so's he can hear that story every day, every hour. He's pretty near as crazy on the subject as Maria is. They're a pair for you, aren't they? Both crazy over a lot of gold dishes that never existed. Perhaps Maria'll marry him because it's her only chance to get a husband, but I'm sure it's more for the reason that she's got some one to talk to now who believes her story. Don't you think I'm right?"

"Yes, yes, I guess you're right," admitted Miss Baker.

"But it's a queer match anyway you put it," said Trina, musingly.

"Ah, you may well say that," returned the other, nodding her head. There was a silence. For a long moment the dentist's wife and the retired dressmaker, the one at the window, the other on the sidewalk, remained lost in thought, wondering over the strangeness of the affair.

But suddenly there was a diversion. Alexander, Marcus Schouler's Irish setter, whom his master had long since allowed the liberty of running untrammelled about the neighborhood, turned the corner briskly and came trotting along the sidewalk where Miss Baker stood. At the same moment the Scotch collie who had at one time belonged to the branch post-office issued from the side door of a house not fifty feet away. In an instant the two enemies had recognized each other. They halted abruptly, their fore feet planted rigidly. Trina uttered a little cry.

"Oh, look out, Miss Baker. Those two dogs hate each other just like humans. You best look out. They'll fight sure." Miss Baker sought safety

in a nearby vestibule, whence she peered forth at the scene, very interested and curious. Maria Macapa's head thrust itself from one of the top-story windows of the flat, with a shrill cry. Even McTeague's huge form appeared above the half curtains of the "Parlor" windows, while over his shoulder could be seen the face of the "patient," a napkin tucked in his collar, the rubber dam depending from his mouth. All the flat knew of the feud between the dogs, but never before had the pair been brought face to face.

Meanwhile, the collie and the setter had drawn near to each other; five feet apart they paused as if by mutual consent. The collie turned sidewise to the setter; the setter instantly wheeled himself flank on to the collie. Their tails rose and stiffened, they raised their lips over their long white fangs, the napes of their necks bristled, and they showed each other the vicious whites of their eyes, while they drew in their breaths with prolonged and rasping snarls. Each dog seemed to be the personification of fury and unsatisfied hate. They began to circle about each other with infinite slowness, walking stiffed-legged and upon the very points of their feet. Then they wheeled about and began to circle in the opposite direction. Twice they repeated this motion, their snarls growing louder. But still they did not come together, and the distance of five feet between them was maintained with an almost mathematical precision. It was magnificent, but it was not war. Then the setter, pausing in his walk, turned his head slowly from his enemy. The collie sniffed the air and pretended an interest in an old shoe lying in the gutter. Gradually and with all the dignity of monarchs they moved away from each other. Alexander stalked back to the corner of the street. The collie paced toward the side gate whence he had issued, affecting to remember something of great importance. They disappeared. Once out of sight of one another they began to bark furiously.

"Well, I NEVER!" exclaimed Trina in great disgust. "The way those two dogs have been carrying on you'd 'a' thought they would 'a' just torn each other to pieces when they had the chance, and here I'm wasting the whole morning -- -- " she closed her window with a bang.

"Sick 'im, sick 'im," called Maria Macapa, in a vain attempt to promote a fight.

Old Miss Baker came out of the vestibule, pursing her lips, quite put out at the fiasco. "And after all that fuss," she said to herself aggrievedly.

The little dressmaker bought an envelope of nasturtium seeds at the florist's, and returned to her tiny room in the flat. But as she slowly mounted the first flight of steps she suddenly came face to face with Old Grannis, who was coming down. It was between eight and nine, and he was on his way to his little dog hospital, no doubt. Instantly Miss Baker was seized with trepidation, her curious little false curls shook, a faint -- a very faint -- flush came into her withered cheeks, and her heart beat so violently under the worsted shawl that she felt obliged to shift the

market-basket to her other arm and put out her free hand to steady herself against the rail.

On his part, Old Grannis was instantly overwhelmed with confusion. His awkwardness seemed to paralyze his limbs, his lips twitched and turned dry, his hand went tremblingly to his chin. But what added to Miss Baker's miserable embarrassment on this occasion was the fact that the old Englishman should meet her thus, carrying a sordid market-basket full of sordid fish and cabbage. It seemed as if a malicious fate persisted in bringing the two old people face to face at the most inopportune moments.

Just now, however, a veritable catastrophe occurred. The little old dressmaker changed her basket to her other arm at precisely the wrong moment, and Old Grannis, hastening to pass, removing his hat in a hurried salutation, struck it with his forearm, knocking it from her grasp, and sending it rolling and bumping down the stairs. The sole fell flat upon the first landing; the lentils scattered themselves over the entire flight; while the cabbage, leaping from step to step, thundered down the incline and brought up against the street door with a shock that reverberated through the entire building.

The little retired dressmaker, horribly vexed, nervous and embarrassed, was hard put to it to keep back the tears. Old Grannis stood for a moment with averted eyes, murmuring: "Oh, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I -- I really -- I beg your pardon, really -- really."

Marcus Schouler, coming down stairs from his room, saved the situation.

"Hello, people," he cried. "By damn! you've upset your basket -- you have, for a fact. Here, let's pick um up." He and Old Grannis went up and down the flight, gathering up the fish, the lentils, and the sadly battered cabbage. Marcus was raging over the pusillanimity of Alexander, of which Maria had just told him.

"I'll cut him in two -- with the whip," he shouted. "I will, I will, I say I will, for a fact. He wouldn't fight, hey? I'll give um all the fight he wants, nasty, mangy cur. If he won't fight he won't eat. I'm going to get the butcher's bull pup and I'll put um both in a bag and shake um up. I will, for a fact, and I guess Alec will fight. Come along, Mister Grannis," and he took the old Englishman away.

Little Miss Baker hastened to her room and locked herself in. She was excited and upset during all the rest of the day, and listened eagerly for Old Grannis's return that evening. He went instantly to work binding up "The Breeder and Sportsman," and back numbers of the "Nation." She heard him softly draw his chair and the table on which he had placed his little binding apparatus close to the wall. At once she did the same, brewing herself a cup of tea. All through that evening the two old people

"kept company" with each other, after their own peculiar fashion. "Setting out with each other" Miss Baker had begun to call it. That they had been presented, that they had even been forced to talk together, had made no change in their relative positions. Almost immediately they had fallen back into their old ways again, quite unable to master their timidity, to overcome the stifling embarrassment that seized upon them when in each other's presence. It was a sort of hypnotism, a thing stronger than themselves. But they were not altogether dissatisfied with the way things had come to be. It was their little romance, their last, and they were living through it with supreme enjoyment and calm contentment.

Marcus Schouler still occupied his old room on the floor above the McTeagues. They saw but little of him, however. At long intervals the dentist or his wife met him on the stairs of the flat. Sometimes he would stop and talk with Trina, inquiring after the Sieppes, asking her if Mr. Sieppe had yet heard of any one with whom he, Marcus, could "go in with on a ranch." McTeague, Marcus merely nodded to. Never had the quarrel between the two men been completely patched up. It did not seem possible to the dentist now that Marcus had ever been his "pal," that they had ever taken long walks together. He was sorry that he had treated Marcus gratis for an ulcerated tooth, while Marcus daily recalled the fact that he had given up his "girl" to his friend -- the girl who had won a fortune -- as the great mistake of his life. Only once since the wedding had he called upon Trina, at a time when he knew McTeague would be out. Trina had shown him through the rooms and had told him, innocently enough, how gay was their life there. Marcus had come away fairly sick with envy; his rancor against the dentist -- and against himself, for that matter -- knew no bounds. "And you might 'a' had it all yourself, Marcus Schouler," he muttered to himself on the stairs. "You mushhead, you damn fool!"

Meanwhile, Marcus was becoming involved in the politics of his ward. As secretary of the Polk Street Improvement Club -- which soon developed into quite an affair and began to assume the proportions of a Republican political machine -- he found he could make a little, a very little more than enough to live on. At once he had given up his position as Old Grannis's assistant in the dog hospital. Marcus felt that he needed a wider sphere. He had his eye upon a place connected with the city pound. When the great railroad strike occurred, he promptly got himself engaged as deputy-sheriff, and spent a memorable week in Sacramento, where he involved himself in more than one terrible melee with the strikers. Marcus had that quickness of temper and passionate readiness to take offence which passes among his class for bravery. But whatever were his motives, his promptness to face danger could not for a moment be doubted. After the strike he returned to Polk Street, and throwing himself into the Improvement Club, heart, soul, and body, soon became one of its ruling spirits. In a certain local election, where a huge paving contract was at stake, the club made itself felt in the ward, and Marcus so managed his cards and pulled his wires that, at the end of the matter, he found himself some four hundred dollars to the good.

When McTeague came out of his "Parlors" at noon of the day upon which Trina had heard the news of Maria Macapa's intended marriage, he found Trina burning coffee on a shovel in the sitting-room. Try as she would, Trina could never quite eradicate from their rooms a certain faint and indefinable odor, particularly offensive to her. The smell of the photographer's chemicals persisted in spite of all Trina could do to combat it. She burnt pastilles and Chinese punk, and even, as now, coffee on a shovel, all to no purpose. Indeed, the only drawback to their delightful home was the general unpleasant smell that pervaded it -- a smell that arose partly from the photographer's chemicals, partly from the cooking in the little kitchen, and partly from the ether and creosote of the dentist's "Parlors."

As McTeague came in to lunch on this occasion, he found the table already laid, a red cloth figured with white flowers was spread, and as he took his seat his wife put down the shovel on a chair and brought in the stewed codfish and the pot of chocolate. As he tucked his napkin into his enormous collar, McTeague looked vaguely about the room, rolling his eyes.

During the three years of their married life the McTeagues had made but few additions to their furniture, Trina declaring that they could not afford it. The sitting-room could boast of but three new ornaments. Over the melodeon hung their marriage certificate in a black frame. It was balanced upon one side by Trina's wedding bouquet under a glass case, preserved by some fearful unknown process, and upon the other by the photograph of Trina and the dentist in their wedding finery. This latter picture was quite an affair, and had been taken immediately after the wedding, while McTeague's broadcloth was still new, and before Trina's silks and veil had lost their stiffness. It represented Trina, her veil thrown back, sitting very straight in a rep armchair, her elbows well in at her sides, holding her bouquet of cut flowers directly before her. The dentist stood at her side, one hand on her shoulder, the other thrust into the breast of his "Prince Albert," his chin in the air, his eyes to one side, his left foot forward in the attitude of a statue of a Secretary of State.

"Say, Trina," said McTeague, his mouth full of codfish, "Heise looked in on me this morning. He says 'What's the matter with a basket picnic over at Schuetzen Park next Tuesday?' You know the paper-hangers are going to be in the "Parlors" all that day, so I'll have a holiday. That's what made Heise think of it. Heise says he'll get the Ryers to go too. It's the anniversary of their wedding day. We'll ask Selina to go; she can meet us on the other side. Come on, let's go, huh, will you?"

Trina still had her mania for family picnics, which had been one of the Sieppes most cherished customs; but now there were other considerations.

"I don't know as we can afford it this month, Mac," she said, pouring the chocolate. "I got to pay the gas bill next week, and there's the papering of your office to be paid for some time."

"I know, I know," answered her husband. "But I got a new patient this week, had two molars and an upper incisor filled at the very first sitting, and he's going to bring his children round. He's a barber on the next block."

"Well you pay half, then," said Trina. "It'll cost three or four dollars at the very least; and mind, the Heises pay their own fare both ways, Mac, and everybody gets their OWN lunch. Yes," she added, after a pause, "I'll write and have Selina join us. I haven't seen Selina in months. I guess I'll have to put up a lunch for her, though," admitted Trina, "the way we did last time, because she lives in a boarding-house now, and they make a fuss about putting up a lunch."

They could count on pleasant weather at this time of the year -- it was May -- and that particular Tuesday was all that could be desired. The party assembled at the ferry slip at nine o'clock, laden with baskets. The McTeagues came last of all; Ryer and his wife had already boarded the boat. They met the Heises in the waiting-room.

"Hello, Doctor," cried the harness-maker as the McTeagues came up. "This is what you'd call an old folks' picnic, all married people this time."

The party foregathered on the upper deck as the boat started, and sat down to listen to the band of Italian musicians who were playing outside this morning because of the fineness of the weather.

"Oh, we're going to have lots of fun," cried Trina. "If it's anything I do love it's a picnic. Do you remember our first picnic, Mac?"

"Sure, sure," replied the dentist; "we had a Gotha truffle."

"And August lost his steamboat, put in Trina, "and papa smacked him. I remember it just as well."

"Why, look there," said Mrs. Heise, nodding at a figure coming up the companion-way. "Ain't that Mr. Schouler?"

It was Marcus, sure enough. As he caught sight of the party he gaped at them a moment in blank astonishment, and then ran up, his eyes wide.

"Well, by damn!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "What's up? Where you all going, anyhow? Say, ain't ut queer we should all run up against each other like this?" He made great sweeping bows to the three women, and shook hands with "Cousin Trina," adding, as he turned to the men of the party, "Glad to see you, Mister Heise. How do, Mister Ryer?" The dentist, who had formulated some sort of reserved greeting, he ignored

completely. McTeague settled himself in his seat, growling inarticulately behind his mustache.

"Say, say, what's all up, anyhow?" cried Marcus again.

"It's a picnic," exclaimed the three women, all speaking at once; and Trina added, "We're going over to the same old Schuetzen Park again. But you're all fixed up yourself, Cousin Mark; you look as though you were going somewhere yourself."

In fact, Marcus was dressed with great care. He wore a new pair of slate-blue trousers, a black "cutaway," and a white lawn "tie" (for him the symbol of the height of elegance). He carried also his cane, a thin wand of ebony with a gold head, presented to him by the Improvement Club in "recognition of services."

"That's right, that's right," said Marcus, with a grin. "I'm takun a holiday myself to-day. I had a bit of business to do over at Oakland, an' I thought I'd go up to B Street afterward and see Selina. I haven't called on -- -- "

But the party uttered an exclamation.

"Why, Selina is going with us."

"She's going to meet us at the Schuetzen Park station" explained Trina.

Marcus's business in Oakland was a fiction. He was crossing the bay that morning solely to see Selina. Marcus had "taken up with" Selina a little after Trina had married, and had been "rushing" her ever since, dazzled and attracted by her accomplishments, for which he pretended a great respect. At the prospect of missing Selina on this occasion, he was genuinely disappointed. His vexation at once assumed the form of exasperation against McTeague. It was all the dentist's fault. Ah, McTeague was coming between him and Selina now as he had come between him and Trina. Best look out, by damn! how he monkeyed with him now. Instantly his face flamed and he glanced over furiously at the dentist, who, catching his eye, began again to mutter behind his mustache.

"Well, say," began Mrs. Ryer, with some hesitation, looking to Ryer for approval, "why can't Marcus come along with us?"

"Why, of course," exclaimed Mrs. Heise, disregarding her husband's vigorous nudges. "I guess we got lunch enough to go round, all right; don't you say so, Mrs. McTeague?"

Thus appealed to, Trina could only concur.

"Why, of course, Cousin Mark," she said; "of course, come along with us if you want to."

"Why, you bet I will," cried Marcus, enthusiastic in an instant. "Say, this is outa sight; it is, for a fact; a picnic -- ah, sure -- and we'll meet Selina at the station."

Just as the boat was passing Goat Island, the harness-maker proposed that the men of the party should go down to the bar on the lower deck and shake for the drinks. The idea had an immediate success.

"Have to see you on that," said Ryer.

"By damn, we'll have a drink! Yes, sir, we will, for a fact."

"Sure, sure, drinks, that's the word."

At the bar Heise and Ryer ordered cocktails, Marcus called for a "creme Yvette" in order to astonish the others. The dentist spoke for a glass of beer.

"Say, look here," suddenly exclaimed Heise as they took their glasses. "Look here, you fellahs," he had turned to Marcus and the dentist. "You two fellahs have had a grouch at each other for the last year or so; now what's the matter with your shaking hands and calling quits?"

McTeague was at once overcome with a great feeling of magnanimity. He put out his great hand.

"I got nothing against Marcus," he growled.

"Well, I don't care if I shake," admitted Marcus, a little shamefacedly, as their palms touched. "I guess that's all right."

"That's the idea," exclaimed Heise, delighted at his success. "Come on, boys, now let's drink." Their elbows crooked and they drank silently.

Their picnic that day was very jolly. Nothing had changed at Schuetzen Park since the day of that other memorable Sieppe picnic four years previous. After lunch the men took themselves off to the rifle range, while Selina, Trina, and the other two women put away the dishes. An hour later the men joined them in great spirits. Ryer had won the impromptu match which they had arranged, making quite a wonderful score, which included three clean bulls' eyes, while McTeague had not been able even to hit the target itself.

Their shooting match had awakened a spirit of rivalry in the men, and the rest of the afternoon was passed in athletic exercises between them. The women sat on the slope of the grass, their hats and gloves laid aside,

watching the men as they strove together. Aroused by the little feminine cries of wonder and the clapping of their ungloved palms, these latter began to show off at once. They took off their coats and vests, even their neckties and collars, and worked themselves into a lather of perspiration for the sake of making an impression on their wives. They ran hundred-yard sprints on the cinder path and executed clumsy feats on the rings and on the parallel bars. They even found a huge round stone on the beach and "put the shot" for a while. As long as it was a question of agility, Marcus was easily the best of the four; but the dentist's enormous strength, his crude, untutored brute force, was a matter of wonder for the entire party. McTeague cracked English walnuts -- taken from the lunch baskets -- in the hollow of his arm, and tossed the round stone a full five feet beyond their best mark. Heise believed himself to be particularly strong in the wrists, but the dentist, using but one hand, twisted a cane out of Heise's two with a wrench that all but sprained the harness-maker's arm. Then the dentist raised weights and chinned himself on the rings till they thought he would never tire.

His great success quite turned his head; he strutted back and forth in front of the women, his chest thrown out, and his great mouth perpetually expanded in a triumphant grin. As he felt his strength more and more, he began to abuse it; he domineered over the others, gripping suddenly at their arms till they squirmed with pain, and slapping Marcus on the back so that he gasped and gagged for breath. The childish vanity of the great fellow was as undisguised as that of a schoolboy. He began to tell of wonderful feats of strength he had accomplished when he was a young man. Why, at one time he had knocked down a half-grown heifer with a blow of his fist between the eyes, sure, and the heifer had just stiffened out and trembled all over and died without getting up.

McTeague told this story again, and yet again. All through the afternoon he could be overheard relating the wonder to any one who would listen, exaggerating the effect of his blow, inventing terrific details. Why, the heifer had just frothed at the mouth, and his eyes had rolled up -- ah, sure, his eyes rolled up just like that -- and the butcher had said his skull was all mashed in -- just all mashed in, sure, that's the word -- just as if from a sledge-hammer.

Notwithstanding his reconciliation with the dentist on the boat, Marcus's gorge rose within him at McTeague's boasting swagger. When McTeague had slapped him on the back, Marcus had retired to some little distance while he recovered his breath, and glared at the dentist fiercely as he strode up and down, glorying in the admiring glances of the women.

"Ah, one-horse dentist," he muttered between his teeth. "Ah, zinc-plugger, cow-killer, I'd like to show you once, you overgrown mucker, you -- you -- COW-KILLER!"

When he rejoined the group, he found them preparing for a wrestling bout.

"I tell you what," said Heise, "we'll have a tournament. Marcus and I will rastle, and Doc and Ryer, and then the winners will rastle each other."

The women clapped their hands excitedly. This would be exciting. Trina cried:

"Better let me hold your money, Mac, and your keys, so as you won't lose them out of your pockets." The men gave their valuables into the keeping of their wives and promptly set to work.

The dentist thrust Ryer down without even changing his grip; Marcus and the harness-maker struggled together for a few moments till Heise all at once slipped on a bit of turf and fell backwards. As they toppled over together, Marcus writhed himself from under his opponent, and, as they reached the ground, forced down first one shoulder and then the other.

"All right, all right," panted the harness-maker, good-naturedly, "I'm down. It's up to you and Doc now," he added, as he got to his feet.

The match between McTeague and Marcus promised to be interesting. The dentist, of course, had an enormous advantage in point of strength, but Marcus prided himself on his wrestling, and knew something about strangle-holds and half-Nelsons. The men drew back to allow them a free space as they faced each other, while Trina and the other women rose to their feet in their excitement.

"I bet Mac will throw him, all the same," said Trina.

"All ready!" cried Ryer.

The dentist and Marcus stepped forward, eyeing each other cautiously. They circled around the impromptu ring. Marcus watching eagerly for an opening. He ground his teeth, telling himself he would throw McTeague if it killed him. Ah, he'd show him now. Suddenly the two men caught at each other; Marcus went to his knees. The dentist threw his vast bulk on his adversary's shoulders and, thrusting a huge palm against his face, pushed him backwards and downwards. It was out of the question to resist that enormous strength. Marcus wrenched himself over and fell face downward on the ground.

McTeague rose on the instant with a great laugh of exultation.

"You're down!" he exclaimed.

Marcus leaped to his feet.

"Down nothing," he vociferated, with clenched fists. "Down nothing, by damn! You got to throw me so's my shoulders touch.

McTeague was stalking about, swelling with pride.

"Hoh, you're down. I threw you. Didn't I throw him, Trina? Hoh, you can't rastle ME."

Marcus capered with rage.

"You didn't! you didn't! you didn't! and you can't! You got to give me another try."

The other men came crowding up. Everybody was talking at once.

"He's right."

"You didn't throw him."

"Both his shoulders at the same time."

Trina clapped and waved her hand at McTeague from where she stood on the little slope of lawn above the wrestlers. Marcus broke through the group, shaking all over with excitement and rage.

"I tell you that ain't the WAY to rastle. You've got to throw a man so's his shoulders touch. You got to give me another bout."

"That's straight," put in Heise, "both his shoulders down at the same time. Try it again. You and Schouler have another try."

McTeague was bewildered by so much simultaneous talk. He could not make out what it was all about. Could he have offended Marcus again?

"What? What? Huh? What is it?" he exclaimed in perplexity, looking from one to the other.

"Come on, you must rastle me again," shouted Marcus.

"Sure, sure," cried the dentist. "I'll rastle you again. I'll rastle everybody," he cried, suddenly struck with an idea. Trina looked on in some apprehension.

"Mark gets so mad," she said, half aloud.

"Yes," admitted Selina. "Mister Schouler's got an awful quick temper, but he ain't afraid of anything."

"All ready!" shouted Ryer.

This time Marcus was more careful. Twice, as McTeague rushed at him, he slipped cleverly away. But as the dentist came in a third time, with his head bowed, Marcus, raising himself to his full height, caught him with both arms around the neck. The dentist gripped at him and rent away the sleeve of his shirt. There was a great laugh.

"Keep your shirt on," cried Mrs. Ryer.

The two men were grappling at each other wildly. The party could hear them panting and grunting as they labored and struggled. Their boots tore up great clods of turf. Suddenly they came to the ground with a tremendous shock. But even as they were in the act of falling, Marcus, like a very eel, writhed in the dentist's clasp and fell upon his side. McTeague crashed down upon him like the collapse of a felled ox.

"Now, you gotta turn him on his back," shouted Heise to the dentist. "He ain't down if you don't."

With his huge salient chin digging into Marcus's shoulder, the dentist heaved and tugged. His face was flaming, his huge shock of yellow hair fell over his forehead, matted with sweat. Marcus began to yield despite his frantic efforts. One shoulder was down, now the other began to go; gradually, gradually it was forced over. The little audience held its breath in the suspense of the moment. Selina broke the silence, calling out shrilly:

"Ain't Doctor McTeague just that strong!"

Marcus heard it, and his fury came instantly to a head. Rage at his defeat at the hands of the dentist and before Selina's eyes, the hate he still bore his old-time "pal" and the impotent wrath of his own powerlessness were suddenly unleashed.

"God damn you! get off of me," he cried under his breath, spitting the words as a snake spits its venom. The little audience uttered a cry. With the oath Marcus had twisted his head and had bitten through the lobe of the dentist's ear. There was a sudden flash of bright-red blood.

Then followed a terrible scene. The brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life, monstrous, not to be resisted. He sprang to his feet with a shrill and meaningless clamor, totally unlike the ordinary bass of his speaking tones. It was the hideous yelling of a hurt beast, the squealing of a wounded elephant. He framed no words; in the rush of high-pitched sound that issued from his wide-open mouth there was nothing articulate. It was something no longer human; it was rather an echo from the jungle.

Sluggish enough and slow to anger on ordinary occasions, McTeague when finally aroused became another man. His rage was a kind of

obsession, an evil mania, the drunkenness of passion, the exalted and perverted fury of the Berserker, blind and deaf, a thing insensate.

As he rose he caught Marcus's wrist in both his hands. He did not strike, he did not know what he was doing. His only idea was to batter the life out of the man before him, to crush and annihilate him upon the instant. Gripping his enemy in his enormous hands, hard and knotted, and covered with a stiff fell of yellow hair -- the hands of the old-time car-boy -- he swung him wide, as a hammer-thrower swings his hammer. Marcus's feet flipped from the ground, he spun through the air about McTeague as helpless as a bundle of clothes. All at once there was a sharp snap, almost like the report of a small pistol. Then Marcus rolled over and over upon the ground as McTeague released his grip; his arm, the one the dentist had seized, bending suddenly, as though a third joint had formed between wrist and elbow. The arm was broken.

But by this time every one was crying out at once. Heise and Ryan ran in between the two men. Selina turned her head away. Trina was wringing her hands and crying in an agony of dread:

"Oh, stop them, stop them! Don't let them fight. Oh, it's too awful."

"Here, here, Doc, quit. Don't make a fool of yourself," cried Heise, clinging to the dentist. "That's enough now. LISTEN to me, will you?"

"Oh, Mac, Mac," cried Trina, running to her husband. "Mac, dear, listen; it's me, it's Trina, look at me, you -- -- "

"Get hold of his other arm, will you, Ryer?" panted Heise. "Quick!"

"Mac, Mac," cried Trina, her arms about his neck.

"For God's sake, hold up, Doc, will you?" shouted the harness-maker. "You don't want to kill him, do you?"

Mrs. Ryer and Heise's lame wife were filling the air with their outcries. Selina was giggling with hysteria. Marcus, terrified, but too brave to run, had picked up a jagged stone with his left hand and stood on the defensive. His swollen right arm, from which the shirt sleeve had been torn, dangled at his side, the back of the hand twisted where the palm should have been. The shirt itself was a mass of grass stains and was spotted with the dentist's blood.

But McTeague, in the centre of the group that struggled to hold him, was nigh to madness. The side of his face, his neck, and all the shoulder and breast of his shirt were covered with blood. He had ceased to cry out, but kept muttering between his gripped jaws, as he labored to tear himself free of the retaining hands:

"Ah, I'll kill him! Ah, I'll kill him! I'll kill him! Damn you, Heise," he exclaimed suddenly, trying to strike the harness-maker, "let go of me, will you!"

Little by little they pacified him, or rather (for he paid but little attention to what was said to him) his bestial fury lapsed by degrees. He turned away and let fall his arms, drawing long breaths, and looking stupidly about him, now searching helplessly upon the ground, now gazing vaguely into the circle of faces about him. His ear bled as though it would never stop.

"Say, Doctor," asked Heise, "what's the best thing to do?"

"Huh?" answered McTeague. "What -- what do you mean? What is it?"

"What'll we do to stop this bleeding here?"

McTeague did not answer, but looked intently at the blood-stained bosom of his shirt.

"Mac," cried Trina, her face close to his, "tell us something -- the best thing we can do to stop your ear bleeding."

"Collodium," said the dentist.

"But we can't get to that right away; we -- "

"There's some ice in our lunch basket," broke in Heise. "We brought it for the beer; and take the napkins and make a bandage."

"Ice," muttered the dentist, "sure, ice, that's the word."

Mrs. Heise and the Ryers were looking after Marcus's broken arm. Selina sat on the slope of the grass, gasping and sobbing. Trina tore the napkins into strips, and, crushing some of the ice, made a bandage for her husband's head.'

The party resolved itself into two groups; the Ryers and Mrs. Heise bending over Marcus, while the harness-maker and Trina came and went about McTeague, sitting on the ground, his shirt, a mere blur of red and white, detaching itself violently from the background of pale-green grass. Between the two groups was the torn and trampled bit of turf, the wrestling ring; the picnic baskets, together with empty beer bottles, broken egg-shells, and discarded sardine tins, were scattered here and there. In the middle of the improvised wrestling ring the sleeve of Marcus's shirt fluttered occasionally in the sea breeze.

Nobody was paying any attention to Selina. All at once she began to giggle hysterically again, then cried out with a peal of laughter:

"Oh, what a way for our picnic to end!"

TO BE CONTINUED

This story is in the public domain

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The Back Alley is a webzine devoted to the hardboiled and noir genres of popular fiction. We welcome submissions of stories which fall within the guidelines of these genres, and historical/critical/analytical nonfiction related to these genres.

The discussion, even among those who are well-read in these literary forms, surrounding just what constitutes hardboiled or noir fiction is ongoing, often confrontational, and seldom results in anything resembling agreement.

Basically, hardboiled crime fiction involves a stronger description of violence, sex, and contains harsher language than you might find in traditional crime fiction. The protagonist more often than not is a private investigator. This investigator may fall under the tradition of Chandler's Marlowe and his successors such as Lew Archer and Spenser, in which the crimes are vicious but the detectives are not. They may more closely resemble the work of Carroll John Daly or Mickey Spillane, where the detective is as likely to engage in violence as the criminals are.

Noir stories often defy description, except that you are aware from the beginning that the protagonist and those around him are probably doomed no matter what they do to prevent it. The source of their damnation is their own personal weaknesses and frailties. They give in to temptation and, as in the story of Adam and Eve, their own choices condemn them. Greed, avarice, lust, and envy figure heavily in noir stories. Often, the noir protagonist believes him(her)self to be virtuous or to be acting correctly. It is only later that they discover that their decisions - well-meaning or not - have led to their undoing.

There is an ongoing discussion on the Rara Avis list (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rara-avis-l/>) regarding the nature of hardboiled versus noir literature. Jim Doherty has stated that "...*hard-boiled describes an attitude that's tough and colloquial, while noir describes an atmosphere that's dark and gloomy*".

In response, Jack Bludis, in an attempt to take the two genres down to their bare essentials, has asserted that "*hardboiled = tough; noir = screwed*".

More often than not, the discussion comes down to an uneasy truce based on a statement something like, "Well, I know it when I see it."

Which, when all is said and done, will also be the reasoning we will employ when deciding whether to accept a story for *The Back Alley*.

Since I have failed so miserably at describing exactly what hardboiled and noir fiction is, I would like to take a moment to describe exactly what it is not.

We do not want to see any story involving a cat, talking or otherwise, unless the cat is dead by the end of the story. We love cats, have a bunch of them ourselves. They have no place in hardboiled stories, especially if they talk, think, reason, or engage in any other behavior than eating, sleeping, and licking their butts. Don't submit cat mysteries. We will reject them and then post ugly comments about your mama.

If there is an 'Inspector' in your story, there had also better damned well be some rats, roaches or other vermin. We will consider making an exception for building inspectors, but only if they are brutally victimized. If you have ever built a house, you know why.

If Aunt Lucy is solving the crime, she had better also have some prison tats, drink like Foster Brooks, and spray the bad guys with an Uzi. The only tea I want to read about in these stories is Mexican pot.

We are open to foul language, substance abuse, graphic and frequent violence, and sex. If you don't know how to write sex, don't submit any. Most people don't know how to write it. If your early writing career was spent typing with one hand, feel free to toss in a little of the ol' wokka-wokka. If it's embarrassing, we'll ask you to cut it.

We don't want to read international thrillers, gaslight armchair detectives, kung-fu adventures, serial killer stories, forensic procedurals, police procedurals, courtroom procedurals, or medical mysteries. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than ten years in the future. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than one hundred years in the past.

If you are still in doubt, query.

Okay, as to the mechanics: We are looking for stories up to 10,000 words. We will entertain submissions that are longer, up to novella length, but query first. We are only accepting electronic submissions, because we are tree huggers and we don't like dealing with all that SASE crap.

Here is the procedure for submitting your story.

Format it in the standard method (one inch margins, double spaced, yada yada yada. If you don't know, consult Writers Digest or google it.). Save your story in RTF format. Close it to strip out all the weird but cool formatting like em dashes and smart quotes, and reopen it to assure yourself that you are not going to offend us. Close it and attach it to an email. In the body of the email, write your query. Impress us. We like that.

Send the email to: BarHallCom@aol.com Slug your email ***Back Alley Submission***.

The Back Alley Webzine, Volume II, Issue 2

Make some microwave popcorn. Pop open a cold one. Wait a while. Weeks, maybe. Sometimes months. We have day jobs.

Eventually, we will let you know what we think. Seems pretentious, considering that we're only paying twenty-five bucks or so a story, but we do care about the quality of the material we will publish in our webzine. We may ask you to edit your story, and if we do we will tell you what we would like changed. If you don't want to edit it, we're cool with that, but we won't publish it.

If we decide to publish your work, you lucky dog, we will send you two copies of the contract and an SASE. Sign them, and send BOTH back. We will countersign them and send you one for your records. Sounds convoluted, but it works for us.

We will be buying first periodical rights ONLY. Should we decide at some point in the future to publish a print anthology of stories originally published in *The Back Alley*, and to use your story in that anthology, we will contact you to offer to buy those rights separately. Please be aware that first periodical rights will include the right to include your stories in our archived editions of *The Back Alley* which will be available in each issue. However, our contract will state that you are free to sell reprint rights to your story elsewhere six months after initial publication.

Any other questions, query.

We're looking forward to reading the fruits of your genius.