

THE FICTION CORNER

MESSAGE FOR THELMA

By ROBERT ARTHUR

TOM's note said that he would come at 11 for his things. By 10:30 Anne had packed all of his personal belongings into the three pigskin bags and the wardrobe trunk, which she dragged empty into the foyer of the apartment and filled there. Tom was never punctual. He might come half an hour early or half an hour late, and she wanted to have everything ready in time so that she could be out when he came.

She did not linger over the packing or allow herself to feel anything, even when she put the set of cuff links and studs which had been her wedding gift to him and the silver-mounted military brushes she had given him on their first—and only—anniversary into the last bag.

I wonder if anyone else in New York uses military brushes, she caught herself thinking. I never knew any other man who did. A brief mental picture came to her of Tom before the mirror, making a determined effort with the brushes to force his sandy hair to stay in place. Then as quickly as it had come she banished it.

Surgical operations should be neat and clean. Even if it was something you were cutting out of your heart you mustn't linger over it.

Only when the three bags were standing beside the trunk, in their scuffed sturdiness, strangely reminding her of Tom, did she have time to feel the emptiness within her. As if, in emptying the closet and bureau of his things, she had taken something from inside herself and packed it too.

To escape the curious numbness which gripped her, she turned swiftly and went for her hat and coat. In getting them from the closet beside the front door she saw the large pad which hung there where Thelma, the maid, could not help seeing it both on arriving and leaving. Thelma was a good worker, but forgetful. "Thelma—Please defrost refrigerator," said last Thursday's note, reminding her that this was Saturday, and Thelma would do no marketing for the weekend unless told. But Thelma might be gone before Anne returned, and—

Anne hesitated. Then, do everything just as always, she told herself. If you let go now, it'll just hurt worse and longer.

She slipped into her coat, forced herself to put on her hat with care. Then she took up the pencil that was tied to the pad by a red string and tried to think what she would need. Tomatoes, lettuce, oranges, bread, milk, coffee, she thought. Soup maybe. I don't know. I don't care what I eat.

Her fingers were curiously stiff as she wrote carefully, in neat capitals: NEEDED. She underscored the word, drew a line after it, then had just begun to write down the items she wanted Thelma to buy when she heard the elevator begin its humming rise.

Swift panic assailed her. It was early, but it might be Tom. He mustn't find her here. To see him again, not knowing even now what it was that had gone wrong, would be more than she could face. Her carefully maintained self-possession probably would go in a flood of tears and with it the last remnant of her pride, all that she had left, would be stripped from her. She dropped the pencil, leaving the note for Thelma barely begun, ran out the door and down the fire stairs

before the elevator could reach her floor.

It didn't stop, after all. But the fear of being caught there by Tom's arrival stayed with her until she was outside and hurrying across to Washington Square. Only when she reached the small park did she slow her pace.

She found a bench in the cool sunshine and sat down. Then, watching the placid pigeons, the screeching children on skates, the mothers pushing carriages and the old men playing checkers, she tried to keep her thoughts turned from what was happening. But it wasn't possible.

Why? The question persisted in asking itself. What went wrong? Why didn't it work out?

She'd known it wouldn't be easy. A sports writer, Tom often had to

lege and trying to be a reporter. And Tom, spending more and more of his time with her until Anne, with her own need for him so strong had, in her disappointment and inability to guess what was wrong between them, provoked that scene which could not be made up.

So now he was taking away his things...

Anne looked at her wrist watch. In the turmoil of her thoughts, more than an hour had passed. She rose and thankfully started back toward the apartment. Tom certainly would have come and gone by now. Anyway it was over. She could start rebuilding her life somehow. At least, she was thinking as she put her key into the door, she had kept her emotions in control.

Then she opened the door. And all thought fled. He had not left. His trunk and bags were still there, and he was standing beside them.

"Anne," Tom said, as woodenly she closed the door behind her, holding to the knob for support. "Anne!"

He took a step toward her. His voice was rough with urgency. She



Swift panic assailed her as she heard the elevator begin its humming rise. He mustn't find her here. She left the message unfinished and hurriedly fled.

be away for several days, sometimes even for weeks. And the time when he was gone was just a series of empty days and nights in which she missed him so much the sense of his absence was almost a physical ache.

But she'd known how it would be, and knowing, had accepted the job of making their marriage work. She had never fretted or wept when Tom had to be away. She'd kissed him goodbye lightly and welcomed him back in the same spirit. She hadn't clung to him when he left or fussed over him when he returned. Men hated that.

She had never let him guess the horrible loneliness that stayed with her when he was away on an assignment, lest it make him feel guilty for leaving her alone so much. And she'd kept her job, writing store copy, not because she liked or needed it but because it helped fill the days of waiting when he was away.

But she hadn't let the job come between her and the home she was trying to make for him. With the help of Thelma and much forethought, she had kept it running so smoothly the mechanics of housekeeping never had obtruded upon the time they did have together. And yet—

She still could not analyze it. Why Tom gradually had become dissatisfied and restless. Had taken to making excuses for staying away even when he was not on an assignment.

Then had come the blonde girl. Marion something, fresh out of col-

tried to turn, tried to open the door to flee, but his hands caught her. "Anne, we've been fools. Or at least I have. I need you. I know it. I never stopped knowing it. It was just that—you didn't seem to need me."

"Didn't need you, Tom?" In surprise she ceased her blind efforts to release herself, to look up at him in astonishment. "But I do. I've always needed you. The times when you were away—"

And then, without warning, the tears came. It was the first time she ever had let him see her cry. Men hated weepy women, but when the tears were over, something cold and dead inside her had been washed away.

She dried her eyes on Tom's handkerchief and held her lips up for his kiss. And she knew then, somehow, what he meant. She had made their marriage a thing light and gay—and it had been too light, too gay. With her casual goodbyes and her bright welcomes she had hid her emotions too well. That men hate emotion had been her guiding principle.

But a good marriage has depths. A woman must feel needed; but so must a man, too. In avoiding one extreme she had gone to another.

Tom tried, in awkward sentences, to explain. Tried to tell her about the blonde Marion, whose need for his help and advice had almost made him think that he—But he didn't have to explain. She understood all he said, and more. Only when he finished was she bewildered.

"If you hadn't let me know, though," Tom said then, his square, nicely ugly features twisted in a grin that was tight with the knowledge of how close their escape had been, "if you hadn't put it where I couldn't miss it—"

But she was able to still the question on her lips before it was spoken. For she saw the direction of his look, and followed it to see the message for Thelma which she had begun, directing her to buy tomatoes and other items, but had not stayed to finish. And what the abruptly broken-off message said now, instead was: "NEEDED—TOM."

Tricks for Teens

By NANCY PEPPER

OLD STUFF We know what you did with last year's coat—you cut it off into a shortie. We know what you did with last year's sack dress—you converted it into a new long length skirt with elastic around the top. But we don't know what you did with last year's jabberwocky. How's about cutting it up for this year's small talk? You can start on these: KILROY WAS HERE — But he hasn't been around lately. OPEN THE DOOR, RICHARD — You don't care whether he does or not.

THAT'S A JOKE, SON—It's not any more. HUBBA, HUBBA.—If all the Hubbas used today were laid end to end, they wouldn't make even one whistle at the Corner Casbah.



Special Delivery Letter:

Dear Eric Johnston: You could have knocked me over with a gangster scenario when I read in the paper that you were not only chairman of the National Conference on Family Life in America but that at its Washington meeting you made an impassioned speech calling on everybody to rally and fight for the protection of American family life and to keep the young on the right paths. This was because I was under the impression you were also the top man in the movie industry, the one fellow in the country in a swell position to protect the home and to keep the kids from getting too many films blurring murder and crime techniques. But this must be some other Johnston and I am glad I realized the mistake. I hate to go off half-cocked.

Well, your fine speech certainly roused me and when you told the delegates from all over the country in a straight from the shoulder talk that the protection of the American home was a paramount issue of the day I felt like cheering.

You appealed to the National Conference on American Family Life to find ways to help the family strengthen itself and you stirred fathers and mothers everywhere by your deep interest.

There is no greater threat to the American home and to the future of this nation than the present alarming crime trend among children. In one day the papers carried the story of three 12-year-olds who waylaid and shot a citizen in the back; of a half dozen school children who riddled a teacher's home with bullets from Winchester, and of an 11-year-old child "shot by six boys who mistook him for a member of a rival gang."

Where do the kids get such ideas? The idea of getting armed to the teeth and doing some bumping off is not natural to any child and it is not taught in any home, Mr. Johnston. Everybody is with you in your realization of the despair and sorrow felt around American firesides as such things go on and we are so glad you see the situation so clearly.

Will you forward a copy of your speech to the Eric Johnston who has that big job in Hollywood and who could do so much so easily to protect the fireside and keep the kids from learning criminal ways?

Yours truly Elmer.

P.S.—Where do you speak next and could you arrange to get the other Eric on the same platform?

Real Estate Opportunities

ARE YOU A VET?—Did you fight for your country? Come to Larceny Heights and fight for an unwaged door. These homes offered at \$10,000 are worth every other dollar of it. All ready to step into if you have a fast eye for weak floors and open trapdoors. Bring your own plumbing and have fun.

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WANTED — Experienced combination laboratory-X-ray technician (female), private physician's office—6 day week. Credentials first letter. Address Box 195, Silverton, Ore.

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Thirty-Three Years

Grace Noll Crowell

HOW young he was, how short his time on earth! A pulse-beat through the centuries, a breath between the Barbit hour of his birth And that strange darkened hour of his death.

Yet had those years not gone their swift sure way, Had their significance been left to men, There would be darkness in the land today. No faith would lift, no heart could hope again.

Thank God, thank God for those years' precious steel!

Thank God for spacing Him to you, to me, "Out of the glory that was theirs before The world was..." and the glory yet to be.

The darkened years for Him, that brought us light, The weary years for Him, that gave us rest; The clamorous years, that we might know the white High silence of peace within the breast.

For thirty-three brief years that His feet trod The earthly roads for us, we thank Thee, God.