

An Act of Kindness

by Mary E. Martin

In his law practice, Harry Jenkins frequently visited the elderly and infirm in their homes. Occasionally, he attended upon the wealthy in their mansions. Today, he was visiting Miss Alicia Markley and her friend of many years, Sarah Carmichael.

The Rosedale Valley road was an isolated stretch winding through a deep ravine in the centre of Toronto. Dirty slush spattered his windshield, forcing him to slow down until the wipers had cleared his view. Opening his window to clear the mist, he heard the hollow boom of traffic on the span of concrete bridge above. Forests of branches, waving against the bleak winter sky, reminded him of wild spirits fleeing the night. He checked his watch. Already, he was late.

The two women shared a stone house wedged between the mansions of Binscarth Road in Rosedale. Alicia had called to say they wanted to open some sort of business. Harry thought the inquiry unusual, since both of them were financially well off. Known for their charm and devotion to charity, the ladies were paragons of social propriety. Harry smiled as he tried to visualize them, sleeves rolled up and embroiled in the daily mess of business affairs. But he knew torrents, raging beneath a calm exterior, could silently foment major upheavals. Perhaps it was just as well that solicitors usually touched only the surface of life and remained unaware of dark currents which often guided events.

He frowned in recollection. Last year, Sarah had suddenly taken to her bed after a funeral and remained there ever since. Unless she had miraculously recovered, a business venture did seem strange. Such enquiries were often idle notions created by bored minds. Harry sighed and struggled to maintain his optimism.

He slowed down to catch the turn into Rosedale. His bleak thoughts were mirrored by the dismal February afternoon. He had seen the ladies last year at the funeral of Ronald Hobbs, city councillor. His funeral was a side-show, partially paid from the public purse. Half the city's police force had escorted the hearse and a long line of limousines. In an age of declared fiscal responsibility, Harry wondered at such profligacy. Nonetheless, the show had gone on. Since Harry was advising city council on various planning issues, he considered it politic to attend.

The funeral was held at the cavernous St. Bartholomew's Church on Sherbourne Street, south of Rosedale. The crush of media had attracted overflow crowds. Harry was relieved to squeeze into a pew near the front. He winced at low chuckles rising from behind him. The press was at its post.

"Know where they found Hobbs?" someone behind him said. Harry half-turned in his seat.

"Floating in his swimming pool."

"Really?"

"Ya." Harry could hear the reporter cracking his gum in excitement.

"Pictures will be in tonight's paper."

"He drowned?"

"Looks like. But the real story is, he was stark naked. Floating ass-up in his pool!"

More chuckles followed.

"But get this!" the voice said. "Right at his indoor pool, near the cabana, they found champagne on ice and two glasses."

"Open?"

"What?"

"Was the champagne open?"

"I don't know."

More low chuckles followed.

"Wonder who the guest was?"

Hobbs' reputation as a womanizer was legendary, but Harry wondered what city councillor could afford not only an indoor pool, but also a cabana.

Across the aisle, in the front pew, the Hobbs family sat in stony silence. The watch of the dead, thought Harry. Directly behind them, Alicia Markley and Sarah Carmichael were huddled. Sobbing steadily, Sarah crouched in the pew. With a penetrating glare, Mrs. Hobbs turned about at the sound of Sarah's sniffles. Alicia wound a consoling arm around her friend to no avail. Rarely had Harry witnessed such a public display of grief from someone unrelated. Sarah's sobs continued unabated as she rested her head against her friend's shoulder. Harry could only guess at the nature of a relationship which could bring on such sorrow. When the minister took the pulpit, Sarah's weeping diminished and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Alicia gently brushed a damp strand of hair from Sarah's cheek.

Black chunks of sludge flew up at Harry's car as he turned down into the quiet streets of Rosedale. Across the park, the frozen trees looked like pen sketches against the grey patches of snow near the rink and sullen sky. In the dim light, he squinted to read the numbers on the houses on Binscarth Road. There was the Markley house; modest in size, but constructed entirely of stone. The long driveway had not been shovelled for weeks. Among muddy patches, the drifted snow had shrunk in sculpted patterns. Careful to read the signs, Harry parked on the street. When he opened the gate of the stone fence, his spirits rose. The house was only a storey and a half, but glowing lights welcomed him inward. After he knocked, Alicia Markley answered within moments.

Catching his breath, Harry stepped back. Miss Markley was seemed different. A tall woman, her soft and slender form was silhouetted by the light. Harry remembered her as sharp-edged and angular. On past occasions, she had seemed like a gawky child, whose features were not yet fully developed; a nose too big, a mouth too wide. Not at all gawky now, he thought. Her long floral-patterned skirt and silk blouse did not square with his memory of severe tweed suits and sensible shoes. Something had changed.

"Mr. Jenkins! How delightful to see you again." She smiled graciously and drew him inward.

Again, Harry was surprised. Except when it came to Sarah, Alicia was usually surly. Close in the narrow hall, she helped him remove his coat. After she hung it in the closet, Harry followed her inward to the living room.

A log blazed in the fireplace and sherry glasses were set on a silver tray. The scene was one of comfort and pleasure. Setting his case beside the coffee table, he sank into a chair.

"How kind of you to come on such a dismal day, Mr. Jenkins." She beamed at him.

"Not at all. You have a very pleasant home." Harry relaxed in the quiet peace surrounding him and took out a pen and paper.

"You'll have a sherry once we've discussed business?"

The intensity of her request made him look up from his legal pad. He smiled and nodded. "Of course, I'd like that."

Her gaze was somewhat distracting. In the flickering light, her face had, once again, acquired the sharp angles of his recollection of her. But when she smiled, warmth and softness radiated from her. He sat back.

"Mr. Jenkins, I have a business proposal to discuss with you."

"Certainly. What is it?" He picked up his pen.

"My friend, Sarah, and I have been considering opening an artist studio." She paused to study the heavy silver rings on her fingers.

Harry was surprised. "For yourselves?"

Alicia shook her head wearily and said, "No. Sarah's never been very creative. Too timid for her own good. However, we've shared a love of art throughout our lives." Alicia stopped, as if lost in recollection. Then she said, "In fact, we've shared a great deal together, Mr. Jenkins."

Harry had made only one note. 'Artist studio'. He looked up. "And?" he prompted. "I'm very concerned about her. I think she needs a project to bring her back to life." "She's been ill for some time?"

"She's lost her passion for life. She needs an interest to revive her." Alicia rose swiftly to the mantelpiece. Her motions reminded Harry of an awkward bird alighting a branch. "And so, I've decided," she said, fiddling with the clock, "we should open a studio where young artists can work." Pouring from the sherry decanter, she spilled several drops.

Harry waited as she dabbed at the tiny pool of liquid. "They'd pay a fee for the use of the space?" he asked.

"I suppose." Alicia shrugged. "Something like that." She handed Harry his glass. "The money's not important. I just want her back."

Reflecting upon her words, Harry said, "It's a charitable enterprise, which is good for tax purposes." He knew clients always liked to hear of tax savings. "You should incorporate the business as a non-profit company. So, anything you earn above expenses and your salaries, gets paid out tax free." Easily enough done, he thought.

Alicia nodded absently. "Then do it, Mr. Jenkins. Please." Obviously she had no interest in detailed legal advice. Harry knew he was missing something.

Alicia began to pace slowly about the coffee table. "You've heard of Ronald Hobbs?" "Yes, the City Councillor who died last year."

Alicia nodded. "After his funeral, Sarah took to her bed and simply, for no physical reason, became an invalid." Alicia's face grew pinched in thought. Suddenly she turned away from Harry and rushed to the foot of the stairs. She cocked her head and motioned him to remain silent. After a moment, she shook her head. "I thought I heard her upstairs. I did so hope she'd come down." She returned to stand behind his chair and rested her hand on his shoulder. He glanced up at her.

"Mr. Jenkins," she began quietly.

With her closeness, Harry contemplated the loneliness of spinsters. "I want to show you something, so you'll understand the problem."

She moved to the sideboard. Opening a drawer, she lifted out a heavy package wrapped up in brown paper. Carefully she untied the string and drew out two frames. In them were two photographs, which she handed to him.

Harry searched for his reading glasses. The room seemed to darken as he examined the first one, a photograph of a man in a business suit. Harry's mouth dropped open. He could think of no words. He handed the photograph back to her and said at last, "But why?"

With great precision, the head of the man in the photograph had been neatly clipped out and then crudely pasted at the bottom. No doubt, it was the City Councillor, Ronald Hobbs.

She handed him the second photograph. Again, Hobbs, dressed in a casual shirt had been beheaded. Again, his face was pasted at the bottom, this time, upside down.

"After the funeral," Alicia began quietly, "we returned to the house. Sarah was inconsolable. I took her upstairs and put her to bed." Alicia's voice was devoid of emotion as if she were reporting a distant and mildly curious event. "I went down stairs to make her some tea and, when I got back, she was sitting up in bed snipping out the heads with a pair of nail scissors."

Alicia smoothed her skirt and then continued, "She had such a strange look on her face, Mr. Jenkins, and

she hummed a little tune. She wasn't herself at all, you see."

Harry could picture the scene with clarity. "But who pasted them back in?" he asked. Alicia shrugged as if the question were unimportant. "Oh, she did, several days later."

Harry rose from his chair and went to the bay window. The significance of legal issues surrounding taxation of charitable corporations was paling. The snow had started. Huge soft flakes drifted down, swiftly covering the walk and muddy patches on the lawn. The world was coated in silence.

The story fascinated him. He could almost hear Sarah's sing song voice and see her vacant smile. Apparently normal minds could turn themselves inside out. He turned and spoke to Alicia. "So she took to her bed and never got up?"

Alicia nodded. "Perhaps I was wrong, but then I thought she must hear the truth about Mr. Hobbs." "Which was?"

Alicia's voice became bitter. "He was a philanderer, Mr. Jenkins."

Harry almost smiled at the old fashioned word. Surely everyone knew of Hobbs' exploits. He asked, "Sarah and he were lovers?"

"Yes. Sarah was less than faithful."

Harry was confused. "You mean he was unfaithful?"

Anger flashed in Alicia's eyes as she rushed on. "What could anyone expect? After all, he was a man."

Harry ignored the slight. "What did you tell her?" he asked.

Alicia sighed deeply. Her dark eyes bore into him. Harry sank into his chair. Her intensity compelled him to listen.

"I saw Mr. Hobbs with another woman. Not his wife." Alicia stiffened in her chair. "I thought Sarah should know."

Harry waited in silence. The room once warm and inviting was growing hot and oppressive. He was drawn to hear the story.

"You know the arcade downtown?" she began.

Harry knew it well. He nodded.

"One day, I was shopping there. Just picking up a few things."

Harry instantly pictured her marching through the narrow passages of shops in her severe tweed suit and heavy shoes.

"When I finished, I stopped for coffee at a table on the mews.

Harry visualize her, eyes darting suspiciously about nearby tables.

"While I was waiting, I looked inside through the glass." Alicia pursed her lips in distaste. "There he sat at a table with a woman."

Harry could well imagine Alicia's ill-disguised attempt at nonchalance.

Disgust mounted in Alicia's voice. "There was no mistaking him." She shook her head. "Leering over her with his hand on her knee." Alicia's face was suffused with anger. "She was a common slut!"

Harry was shocked. He could easily envision the groping city councillor and the woman, but he could not comprehend Alicia's mounting fury. White faced, she stood in front of the fire. Glaring, she pointed at him. "He was a licentious and immoral fraud, Mr. Jenkins!" Harry felt accused of aeons of male perfidy.

At last she continued. "When he saw me, he got the waiter, paid the bill and slunk out with his woman."

"He knew you?" Harry asked in surprise.

"We had met once or twice before," she said carefully. Then she added darkly, "I followed them, Mr. Jenkins."

So powerful was the story, Harry had the odd sensation of voyeurism. He saw poor Hobbs rushing from the cafe. His woman stumbled after him in her stiletto heels and tight skirt. He saw Alicia in her sensible shoes

striding mercilessly after them. He saw them hurrying down tiled hallways surrounded by brass and marble. He heard the muted rush of the noontime crowds underneath the opaque skylight. In the distance, he saw the couple hand in hand, desperately seeking sanctuary in the twisting passages.

Harry closed his eyes and asked weakly, "Did you see anything more?"

Alicia shook her head. "No. They escaped."

Harry felt strangely frustrated at the inconclusiveness of the story.

"I had to tell her, Mr. Jenkins." Crouched in her chair, Alicia bit her lip.

"What was Sarah's reaction?"

"She said she wanted to die," said Alicia weakly. "She's said almost nothing since. Not even 'thank you' for all the nursing, bathing and meals I cook her." Alicia looked up helplessly. Her eyes were rimmed with red. "Was I wrong, Mr. Jenkins?" she asked.

Harry squirmed in the role of moral arbiter. He had no idea what to say. But he had an uncanny ability to picture scenes vividly. The images of Alicia, the avenging angel, and Sarah, the determined decapitator, were emblazoned on his memory.

At last Alicia spoke. "So, you see, I thought I might divert her with a project."

Harry was relieved to return to legal matters. "Then you want to proceed with the incorporation?" His pen was poised over his pad.

"First, I want you to talk to Sarah. Perhaps she'll listen to you." With determination, Alicia stood up. "Let's go upstairs, Mr. Jenkins."

Harry had no idea why the uncommunicative Sarah would want his advice. Alicia led the way up the stairs, the walls of which were lined with photographs of ancient relatives. Fortunately, he observed, all the heads were intact.

Sarah's bedroom was down the hall at the back of the house. A grey light seeped from her door which was slightly ajar. Harry's chest constricted. He hated unannounced bedside visits. No sound could be heard from within.

Suddenly, he became aware of a faint, yet foul odour. Alicia stepped inside the room and closed the door behind her. With bile rising in his throat, Harry hung back and stared at the ceiling.

"Darling?" said Alicia. There was no reply.

"Sarah, you must sit up and look at me," Harry heard Alicia say. There was rustling of curtains and a sigh, but Sarah had not yet answered. Alicia's voice grew insistent. "Mr. Jenkins is here. I want you to discuss our plan with him."

Harry stared at his shoes. The room was silent. "If you won't co-operate," Alicia hissed, "there'll be no dinner for you!" Harry frowned. "Now sit up at once and stop this nonsense." Harry could hear the mounting desperation in Alicia's voice.

Suddenly, the door flew open. Alicia's gaunt form swayed in the doorway. Harry was almost knocked over by the stench emanating from the bedroom.

"Mr. Jenkins!" Alicia's face was white and strained. "Something is terribly wrong with Sarah!"

Harry stepped into the room. His eyes bounced wildly back and forth between the women. Sarah's head lolled awkwardly to one side of the pillow. Her unseeing eyes stared at the far wall.

Alicia clenched her hands and cried in desperation, "She refuses to speak to me after all I've done for her. She won't eat, although I've begged her." In her misery, she clutched at Harry's hands and dragged him toward the bed.

Harry could scarcely get his breath. At last he spoke, "Alicia, she's dead. She's been dead for days."

Alicia's expression was uncomprehending. "No, Mr. Jenkins!" Violently she shook her head. "That cannot

be. I've given my life for her. She cannot die."

Staggered by the rancid air, Harry grasped Alicia's shoulders and marched her into the next bedroom. Immediately, he opened the window and took deep, greedy breaths of the cold night air. He was amazed to find the steady breeze fanned his anger.

He turned on her. "How in God's name could you not know she's been dead for days?"

He was prepared for anger, but not her sweet and patient smile. "That isn't true, Mr. Jenkins. Last night, we toasted our new venture with a glass of champagne and had a lovely chat before bedtime." She glanced down at her rings. "Granted, she hasn't eaten much today. I was going to bring her dinner after you'd gone."

Her smile of innocence and fond gaze made Harry understand. In that moment, he realized she was completely mad. Why had he been so slow to understand? He sat on the bed and gently took her hand. "We'll have to call for help, Alicia."

"Help?" she laughed. "I don't need any help. I'll start her dinner as soon as I've had a little rest." She slumped back on the pillow and shut her eyes.

Harry walked down the hall to the bathroom and shut the door. On the ledge above the sink sat two champagne glasses. Beside them were three bottles of pills. His head was beginning to throb. He gripped the sink. Then he saw the empty capsules strewn on the ledge. He straightened up. How easy, he thought, to give an overdose with champagne.

Wearily he returned to the bedroom. "Alicia," he said quietly. Her eyes flew open. "How many capsules did you give her?"

"Quite a few," Alicia replied. "She wanted to leave. So I let her. It was an act of kindness." A tiny sob escaped Alicia. "But, I miss her so."

If he tried hard, Harry could imagine the circumstances leading up to so called mercy killing. Had Sarah begged her friend to put an end to suffering? Had Sarah been driven to death by the unfaithfulness of men? Regardless, such an act of kindness was definitely against the law.

"She tortured me so," said Alicia angrily. "She never could decide between the two of us."

Harry turned sharply to face her. "What? Between whom?"

"Between me and that horrid man, Mr. Hobbs."

At last Harry understood. He remembered the champagne glasses beside Mr. Hobbs' cabana. Death with champagne. "You were jealous of him?" Harry prodded. "You gave him the capsules with champagne." Despite his pity for the woman weeping before him, Harry felt his anger mount. Poor unsuspecting Hobbs. What a price for his dalliance.

"I devoted my life to her! What did I get in return?" Fury flashed in Alicia's eyes. "Nothing but heartache waiting for her to decide." She drew herself up. "No matter what I had to offer, she wanted him even in death." Pride rang in her voice. "But it was I who loved her enough to let her go."

Harry was saddened beyond further comprehension. He left her sitting on the bed. As he passed through the downstairs hallway to the kitchen, he marvelled at the normality of the scene. The fire still blazed and the sherry glasses sat on the coffee table. Not thirty minutes ago, he had sat by in the living room enjoying the company of a charming woman. In the kitchen he picked up the telephone and dialled the police.