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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KNOW THY NEIGHBOR ***



Know Thy Neighbor

By **ELISABETH R. LEWIS**

Illustrated by **Tom Beecham**

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It began with the dead cat on the fire escape and ended with the green monster in the incinerator chute, but still, it wouldn't be quite fair to blame it all on the neighborhood....

The terrors that inhabit the night may be even more awful in deceitful broad daylight!

The apartment house was in the heart of the district that is known as "The Tenderloin"—that section of San Francisco from Ellis to Market and east from Leavenworth to Mason Street. Not the best section.

To Ellen's mind, it was an unsavory neighborhood, but with apartments so hard to get and this one only \$38.00 a month and in a regular apartment building with an elevator and all—well, as she often told the girls at the office, you can't be too particular these days.

Nevertheless, it was an ordeal to walk up the two blocks from Market Street, particularly at night when the noise of juke boxes dinned from the garish bars, when the sidewalks spilled over with soldiers and sailors, with peroxided, blowsy-looking women and the furtive gamblers who haunted the back rooms of the innocent-appearing cigar stores that lined the street. She walked very fast then, never looking to left or right, and her heart would pound when a passing male whistled.

But once inside the apartment house lobby, she relaxed. In spite of its location, the place seemed very respectable. She seldom met anyone in the lobby or the elevator and, except on rare occasions like last night, the halls were as silent as those in the swanky apartment houses on Nob Hill.

She knew by sight only two of her neighbors—the short, stocky young man who lived in 410, and Mrs. Moffatt, in 404. Mrs. Moffatt was the essence of lavender and old lace, and the young man—he was all right, really; you couldn't honestly say he was shady-looking.

On this particular morning, the man from 410 was waiting for the elevator when Ellen came out to get her paper. He glanced up at the sound of the door and stared. Quickly, she shut the door again. She didn't like the way he looked at her. She was wearing a housecoat over her nightgown, and a scarf wrapped around her head to cover the bobbypins—a costume as unrevealing as a nun's—but she felt as though he had invaded her privacy with his stare, like surprising her in the bathtub.

She waited until she heard the elevator start down before opening her door again. The boy must have aimed from the stairs; her paper was several yards down the hall, almost in front of 404. She went down to get it.

Mrs. Moffatt must have heard Ellen's footsteps in the hall. An old lady with a small income (from her late husband, as she had explained to Ellen) and little to do, she was intensely interested in

her neighbors. She opened the door of her apartment and peered out. Her thin white hair was done up in tight kid curlers. With her round faded-blue eyes and round wrinkled-apple cheeks, she looked like an inquisitive aged baby.

"Good morning," said Ellen pleasantly.

"Good morning, my dear," the old lady answered. "You're up early for a Saturday."

"Well, I thought I might as well get up and start my house-cleaning. I didn't sleep a wink after four o'clock this morning anyway. Did you hear all that racket in the hall?"

"Why, no, I didn't." The old lady sounded disappointed. "I don't see how I missed it. I guess because I went to bed so late. My nephews—you've seen them, haven't you?—They're such nice boys. They took me to a movie last night."

"Well, I'm surprised you didn't hear it," said Ellen. "Thumping and scratching, like somebody was dragging a rake along the floor. I just couldn't get back to sleep."

The old lady clicked her tongue. "I'll bet somebody came home drunk. Isn't that terrible? I wonder who it was."

"I don't know," said Ellen, "but it was certainly a disgrace. I was going to call Mrs. Anderson."

With the door open, the hall seemed filled with the very odd odor of Mrs. Moffatt's apartment—not really unpleasant, but musty, with the smell of antiques. The apartment itself was like a museum. Ellen had been inside once when the old lady invited her in for a cup of tea. Its two rooms were crammed with a bizarre assortment of furniture, bric-a-brac and souvenirs.

"Oh, how's your bird this morning?" Ellen asked.

In addition to being a collector, Mrs. Moffatt was an animal fancier. She owned three cats, a pair of love-birds, goldfish, and even a cage of white mice. One of the love-birds, she had informed Ellen yesterday, was ailing.

"Oh, Buzzy's much better today," she beamed. "The doctor told me to feed him whisky every three hours—with an eyedropper, you know—and you'd be surprised how it helped the little fellow. He even ate some bird-seed this morning."

"I'm so glad," said Ellen. She picked up her paper and smiled at Mrs. Moffatt. "I'll see you later."

The old woman closed her door, shutting off the musty smell, and Ellen walked back to her own apartment. She filled the coffee pot with water and four tablespoons of coffee, then dressed herself while the coffee percolated. Standing in front of the medicine cabinet mirror, she took the bobbypins out of her hair. Her reflection looked back at her from the mirror, and she felt that unaccountable depression again. I'm not bad-looking, she thought, and young, and not too dumb. What have other women got that I haven't? She thought of the days and years passing, the meals all alone, and nothing ever happening.

That kind of thinking gets you nowhere; forget it. She combed her hair back, pinned it securely behind her ears, ran a lipstick over her mouth. Then she went into the kitchenette, turned off the gas flame under the coffee pot, and raised the window shade to let in the sun that was just beginning to show through morning fog.

A dead cat lay on the fire escape under the window.

She stared at it, feeling sick to her stomach. It was an ordinary gray cat, the kind you see in every alley, but its head was twisted back so that its open eyes and open mouth leered at her.

She pulled the blind down, fast.

Sit down, light a cigarette. It's nothing, just a dead cat, that's all. But how did it get on the fire escape? Fell, maybe, from the roof? And how did it get on the roof? Besides, I thought cats never got hurt falling. Isn't there something about landing on your feet like a cat? Maybe that's just a legend, like the nonsense about nine lives.

Well, what do I do, she thought. I can't sit here and drink coffee with *that* under the window. And God knows I can't take it away myself. She shuddered at the thought. Call the manager.

She got up and went to the telephone in the foyer. She found the number scribbled on the back of the phone book. Her hand was shaking when she dialed.

"This is Ellen Tighe in 402. Mrs. Anderson, there's a dead cat on the fire escape outside my window. You'll have to do something about it."

Mrs. Anderson sounded half-asleep. "What do you mean, a dead cat? Are you sure it's dead? Maybe it's sleeping."

"Of course I'm sure it's dead! Can't you send Pete up to take it away? It's a horrible thing to have under my window."

"All right, I'll tell Pete to go up. He's washing down the lobby now. As soon as he's finished, I'll

send him up."

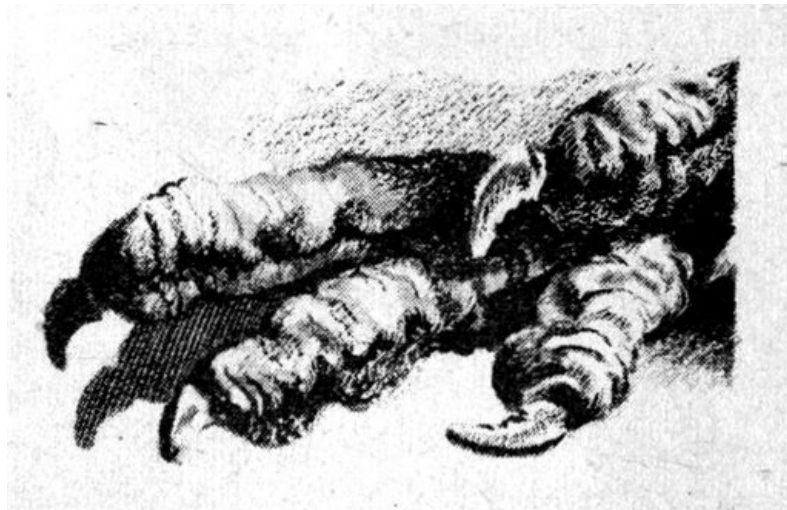
Ellen set the phone back on its stand. She felt a little silly. What a fuss to make over a dead cat. But really, outside one's window—and before breakfast—who could blame me?

She went back into the kitchenette, carefully not looking toward the window, even though the shade was drawn, and poured herself a cup of coffee. Then she sat at the table in the little nook, drinking coffee, smoking a cigarette and leafing through the paper.

The front page was all about a flying saucer scare in Marin County. She read the headline, then thumbed on through the paper, stopping to read the movie reviews and the comic page.

At the back section, she was attracted by a headline that read: "Liquor Strong These Days—Customer Turns Green, Says Bartender." It was a brief item, consciously cute. "John Martin, 38, a bartender of 152 Mason Street, was arrested early this morning, charged with drunkenness and disturbing the peace, after firing several shots from a .38 revolver on the sidewalk in front of his address. No one was injured. Martin's defense, according to police records, was that he was attempting to apprehend a 'pale-green, claw-handed' customer who fled after eating a live mouse and threatening Martin.

"Upon questioning, Martin admitted that the unidentified customer had been in the bar for several hours and appeared perfectly normal. But he insisted, 'When I refused to serve him after he ate the mouse, he turned green and threatened to claw me to death.' Martin has a permit to carry the gun and was dismissed with a fifty dollar fine and a warning by Judge Greely against sampling his own stock too freely."



Drunken fool, thought Ellen. With fresh indignation, she remembered the disturbance in her own hall this morning. Nothing but drunks and gangsters in this neighborhood. She thought vaguely of looking at the "For Rent" section of the want ads.

There was a noise on the fire escape. Ellen reached over and lifted up the shade. The janitor was standing there with a big paper sack in his hand.

Ellen opened the window and asked, "How do you think it got there, Pete?"

"I dunno. Maybe fall offa the roof. Musta been in a fight."

"What makes you think so?"

"Neck's all torn. Big teeth marks. Maybe dog get him."

"Up here?"

"Somebody find, maybe throw here—I dunno." Pete scratched his head. "You don't worry any more, though. I take away now. No smell, even."

He grinned at her and scuttled to the other end of the fire escape where he climbed through the window to the fourth floor corridor.

Ellen poured herself a second cup of coffee and lighted another cigarette, then turned to the woman's page in the paper. She read the Advice Column and the Psychology and glanced through the "Help Wanted—Women" in the classifieds. That finished the morning's reading. She looked at her watch. Almost ten.

She carried her coffee cup to the sink, rinsed it out and set it on the drainboard. There was still a cup or more coffee left in the pot. That could be warmed over later, but she took out the filler and dumped the grounds into the paper bag that held garbage. The bag was almost full.

I'll throw it in the incinerator now, she thought, before I straighten the apartment.

She emptied the ashtrays—the one beside her bed and the other on the breakfast table—then started down the hall with the garbage bag in her hand.

The incinerator chute was at the rear of the hall, next to the service stairs. Ellen could see the door standing slightly open. She hesitated. 410 might be there. It was bad enough to ride in the elevator with him, feeling his eyes on her, but there was something unbearably intimate about standing beside him, emptying garbage.

The door seemed to move a little, but nobody came out. She waited another minute. Oh, well, maybe the last person out there just forgot to shut the door tight. She opened it wider, stepped out on the stair landing. No one was there.

The chute was wide, almost three feet around. Ellen opened the top and started to throw the bag down. Something was stuck in there. Her eyes saw it, but her brain refused to believe.

What was there, blocking the chute, looked like—looked like—a chicken's foot, gnarled, clawed, but as large as a human foot—and an ugly, sickly green!

Automatically, she reached in and clutched it. Her stomach turned at the cold feel of the thing, but still she tugged at it, trying to work it loose. It was heavy. She pulled with all her strength, felt it start to slide back up the chute. Then it was free!

She gaped in sick horror at the thing she held. Her hand opened weakly and she sat down on the floor, her head swimming and her throat muscles retching. Dimly, she heard the thing rattle and bump down to the incinerator in the basement.

The full horror of it gradually hit home. Ellen stood up, swaying, and ran blindly down the hall. Her feet thudded on the carpeted floor. As she passed 404, she was vaguely conscious of Mrs. Moffatt's concerned face poking around the door.

"Is there something wrong, Miss Tighe?"

"No," Ellen managed to gasp "It's all right—really—all right."

She kept on running, burst through the apartment door, slammed it behind her, fell on her knees in the bathroom and became thoroughly, violently ill.

She continued to kneel, unable to think, her head against the cool porcelain bowl. Finally, she stood up weakly, ran cold water, washed her face and streaming eyes. Thank God the wall bed was still down! She fell on it, shaking.

What was that unbelievable ghastly, impossible thing? It was the size of a man, but thin, skeleton thin, and the color of brackish water. It had two legs, two arms, like a man ... but ending with those huge, birdlike claws. Heaven alone knew what its face was like. She had let go before it was that far clear of the chute.

She thought of the story in the paper. So that was what the bartender saw! He wasn't drunk at all, and what happened when he told the police? They laughed at him. They'd laugh at me, too, she thought. The proof is gone, burned up in the incinerator. Why did this happen to me? Dead cats on the fire escape, dead monsters in the incinerator chute ... it's this terrible neighborhood!

She tried to think coherently. Maybe the cat had something to do with it. The bartender said the thing ate a mouse—maybe it had tried to eat the cat, too. A monster like that might eat anything. Her stomach started churning again at the thought.

But what was it doing in the incinerator chute? Someone in the building must have put it there, thinking it would slide all the way down and be burned up. Who? One of *them*, probably. But there couldn't be any more green monsters around. They can't live in an apartment house, walk the streets like anyone else, not even in this neighborhood.

She remembered something else in the bartender's story. He said it looked perfectly normal at first. That meant they could look like humans if they wanted to. Hypnotism? Then any man could be....

Suddenly another thought struck her. Supposing they find out I saw—what will they do to me?

She jumped up from the bed, white with fear, her faintness forgotten in the urge to escape. She snatched her bag from the dresser, threw on her brown coat.

At the door, she hesitated, afraid to venture into the hall, yet afraid to stay inside. Finally, she eased open the door, peered out into the corridor. It was deserted. She ran to the elevator,

punched the bell, heard the car begin its creaky, protesting ascent.

The elevator door had an automatic spring closing. The first time she tried it, her hands shook and the door sprang closed before she got in. She tried it again. This time she managed to hold it open long enough to get inside. She pushed the button, felt the elevator shake and grind and move slowly down.

Out into the lobby.

Out into the street.

The fog was completely gone now. The sun shone on the still-damp street. There were very few people around—The Tenderloin sleeps late. She went into the restaurant next door, sat down at the white-tiled counter. She was the only customer. A sleepy-eyed waitress, her black hair untidily caught into a net, waited, pad in hand.

"Just coffee," Ellen mumbled.

She drank it black and it scalded her throat going down. The waitress put a nickel in the juke box and then Bing Crosby was singing "Easter Parade." Everything was so normal. Listening to Bing Crosby, how could you believe in things like green monsters? In this sane, prosaic atmosphere, Ellen thought, I must be batty.

She said to herself, "I'm Ellen Tighe, bookkeeper, and I just saw the body of a green man with claws on his feet..." No, that didn't help a bit. Put it this way: "I'm Ellen Tighe and I'm 27 years old and I'm not married. Let's face it, any psychiatrist will tell you that's enough cause for neurosis. So I'm having delusions."

It made more sense that way. I read that story in the paper, Ellen thought, and it must have registered way down in my subconscious. That had to be it. Any other way, it was too horrible, too impossible to be borne.

I'll go back to the apartment and call Dr. Clive, thought Ellen. She had the feeling, no doubt held over from the days of measles and mumps, that a doctor could cure anything, even green monsters on the brain.

She drank the last of the coffee and fished in her coin purse for change. Picking up the check, she walked over to the cash register at the end of the counter, facing the street. The untidy waitress came from the back of the restaurant to take the money.

Ellen looked out at the street through the glass front. The man from 410 was standing out there, smoking a cigarette, watching her. When their eyes met, he abruptly threw away the cigarette and started walking toward the apartment house. Again she felt that faint dread she had experienced in the hall earlier.

The waitress picked up her quarter, gave her back a nickel and a dime. Ellen put the change into her purse, got out her key chain and held it in her hand while she walked quickly next door. 410 was just ahead of her in the lobby; he held the front door open for her.

She kept her head down, not looking at his face, and they walked, Indian file, across the lobby to the elevator. He opened the elevator doors, too, and she stepped in ahead of him.

When the doors clanged shut, she had a feeling of panic. Alone with him ... cut off from help. He didn't pretend not to know her floor, but silently pressed the proper button. While the car moved slowly upward, her heart was beating wildly.

I'm not convinced, she thought, I'm not convinced. I saw it so plainly ... I felt it, cold in my hands.

The elevator stopped. The man held the door open and for a moment she thought he was going to say something. His free hand made a swift, involuntary movement as though he were going to catch her arm. She shrank away, but he stepped back and let her through.

Ellen almost ran down the hall. Behind her, she heard his footsteps going in the opposite direction toward his apartment. She was panting when she reached her door. She fumbled for the right key—front door, office—and then she froze. There was a scratching sound in the apartment.

She put her ear close to the door, listened. There was a rasping noise, like somebody dragging a rake ... or like claws, great heavy claws, moving over the hardwood floors!

Ellen backed away from the door. It was true, then. She retreated, inch by inch, silently. Get away, leave before it catches you! She turned, ready to make a dash for the elevator ... and faced the man from 410.

Down at the end of the hall, in front of his apartment, he was watching her. The way he lingered outside the restaurant, the way he looked at her. One of *them* ... maybe underneath that homely, ordinary face, his skin was green and clammy. Maybe there were long, sharp claws on his feet.

She was breathing unevenly now. Trapped! The thing in the apartment, the man in the hall. Her eyes darted to the elevator, then back, down the hall, past the door marked 404 ... the door marked 404! She covered the few yards in a mad dash, flung herself at the door, pounding wildly.

"Please, please!" she sobbed. "Mrs. Moffatt, open, please!"

The door opened at once. Mrs. Moffatt's round, wrinkled face beamed at her.

"Come in, my dear, come in."

She almost fell over the landing. The door closed behind her.

She stumbled to the davenport, sank down, gasping. Two cats rubbed against her legs, purring. Two cats?

She heard herself say stupidly, "Mrs. Moffatt, where's the other cat?" and wondered why she said it.

Then she understood.

The old lady's face quivered, altered, melted into something ... something green.

Outside in the hall, the man from 410 slowly returned to his apartment. Pushing open the door, he thought, I'll never get the nerve to ask her out.

Well, probably wasn't a chance, anyhow. What would a girl like her have to do with a lousy cop like me?

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KNOW THY NEIGHBOR ***

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