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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RATTLE OK ***



RATTLE OK

By HARRY WARNER, JR.

Illustrated by FINLAY

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What better way to use a time machine than to handle department store complaints? But pleasing a customer should have its limits!

The Christmas party at the Boston branch of Hartshorne-Logan was threatening to become more legendary than usual this Christmas.

The farm machinery manager had already collapsed. When he slid under the table containing the drinks, Miss Pringle, who sold millinery, had screamed: "He'll drown!"

One out of every three dirty stories started by party attendees had remained unfinished, because each had reminded someone else of another story.

The recently developed liquors which affected the bloodstream three times faster had driven away twinges of conscience about untrimmed trees and midnight church services.

The star salesman for mankies and the gentleman who was in charge of the janitors were putting on a display of Burmese foot-wrestling in one corner of the general office. The janitor foreman weighed fifty pounds less than the Burma gentleman, who was the salesman's customary opponent. So the climax of one tactic did not simply overturn the foreman. He glided through the air, crashing with a very loud thump against the wall.

He wasn't hurt. But the impact knocked the hallowed portrait of H. H. Hartshorne, co-founder, from its nail. It tinkled imposingly as its glass splintered against the floor.

The noise caused a temporary lull in the gaiety. Several employes even felt a passing suspicion that things might be getting out of hand.

"It's all in the spirit of good, clean fun!" cried Mr. Hawkins, the assistant general manager. Since he was the highest executive present, worries vanished. Everyone felt fine. There was a scurry to shove the broken glass out of sight and to turn more attention to another type of glasses.

Mr. Hawkins himself, acting by reflex, attempted to return the portrait to its place until new glass could be obtained. But the fall had sprung the frame at one corner and it wouldn't hang straight.

"We'd better put old H. H. away for safekeeping until after the holiday," he told a small, blonde salesclerk who was beneath his attention on any working day.

With the proper mixture of respect and bonhomie, he lifted the heavy picture out of its frame. A yellowed envelope slipped to the floor as the picture came free. Hawkins rolled the picture like a scroll and put it into a desk drawer, for later attention. Then he looked around for a drink that would make him feel even better.

A sorting clerk in the mail order department wasn't used to liquor. She picked up the envelope and looked around vaguely for the mail-opening machine.

"Hell, Milly, you aren't working!" someone shouted at her. "Have another!"

Milly snapped out of it. She giggled, suppressed a ladylike belch and returned to reality. Looking at the envelope, she said: "Oh, I see. They must have stuck it in to tighten the frame. Gee, it's old."

Mr. Hawkins had refreshed himself. He decided that he liked Milly's voice. To hear more of it, he said to her: "I'll bet that's been in there ever since the picture was framed. There's a company legend that that picture was put up the day this branch opened, eighty years ago."

"I didn't know the company ever used buff envelopes like this." Milly turned it over in her hands. The ancient glue crackled as she did so. The flap popped open and an old-fashioned order blank fell out.

Mr. Hawkins' eyes widened. He bent, reached painfully over his potbelly and picked up the order form.

"This thing has never been processed!" Raising his voice, he shouted jovially, "Hey, people! You're all fired! Here's an order that Hartshorne-Logan never filled! We can't have such carelessness. This poor woman has waited eighty years for her merchandise!"

Milly was reading aloud the scrawled words on the order form:

"Best electric doorbell. Junior detective kit. Disposable sacks for vacuum cleaner. Dress for three-year-old girl." She turned to the assistant general manager, struck with an idea for the first time in her young life. "Let's fill this order right now!"

"The poor woman must be dead by now," he objected, secretly angry that he hadn't thought of such a fine party stunt himself. Then he brightened. "Unless—" he said it loud enough for the employes to scent a great proposal and the room grew quiet—"unless we broke the rules just once and used the time warp on a big mission!"

There was a silence. Finally, from an anonymous voice in one corner: "Would the warp work over eighty years? We were always told that it must be used only for complaints within three days."

"Then let's find out!" Mr. Hawkins downed the rest of his drink and pulled a batch of keys from his pocket. "Someone scoot down to the warehouse. Tell the watchman that it's on my authority. Hunt up the stuff that's on the order. Get the best of everything. Ignore the catalogue numbers—they've changed a hundred times in all these years."

Milly was still deciphering the form. Now she let out a little squeal of excitement.

"Look, Mr. Hawkins! The name on this order—it's my great-grandmother! Isn't that wonderful? I was just a little girl when she died. I can barely remember her as a real old woman. But I remember that my grandmother never bought anything from Hartshorne-Logan because of some trouble her mother had once with the firm. My mother didn't want me to come to work here because of that."

Mr. Hawkins put his arm around Milly in a way that he intended to look fatherly. It didn't. "Well, now. Since it's your relative, let's thrill the old girl. We wouldn't have vacuum sacks any more. So we'll substitute a manky!"

Ann Hartley was returning from mailing the letter when she found the large parcel on her doorstep. She put her hands on her hips and stared pugnaciously at the bundle.

"The minute I write a letter to complain about you, you turn up!" she told the parcel. She nudged her toe peevishly against the brown paper wrappings that were tied with a half-transparent twine she had never seen before.

The label was addressed in a wandering scrawl, a sharp contrast to the impersonal typing on the customary Hartshorne-Logan bundles. But the familiar RATTLE OK sticker was pasted onto the box, indicating to the delivery man that the contents would make a rattling sound and therefore hadn't been broken in shipment.

Ann sighed and picked up her bundle. With a last look at the lovely spring afternoon and the quiet suburban landscape, she went into the house.

Two-year-old Sally heard the box rattling. She waddled up on chubby legs and grabbed her mother's skirt. "Want!" she said decisively.

"Your dress ought to be here," Ann said. She found scissors in her sewing box, tossed a cushion onto the floor, sat on it, and began to open the parcel.

"Now I'll have to write another letter to explain that they should throw away my letter of complaint," she told her daughter. "And by the time they get my second letter, they'll have answered my first letter. Then they'll write again." Out of consideration for Sally, she omitted the expletives that she wanted to add.

The translucent cord was too tough for the scissors. Ann was about to hunt for a razor blade when Sally clutched at an intersection of the cord and yanked. The twine sprang away from the carton as if it were alive. The paper wrappings flapped open.

"There!" Sally said.

Ann repressed an irrational urge to slap her daughter. Instead, she tossed the wrappings aside and removed the lid from the carton. A slightly crushed thin cardboard box lay on top. Ann pulled out the dress and shook it into a freely hanging position. Then she groaned.

It was green and she had ordered blue. It didn't remotely resemble the dress she had admired from the Hartshorne-Logan catalogue illustration. Moreover, the shoulders were lumpier than any small girl's dress should be.

But Sally was delighted. "Mine!" she shrilled, grabbing for the dress.

"It's probably the wrong size, too," Ann said, pulling off Sally's dress to try it on. "Let's find as many things to complain about as we can."

The dress fitted precisely, except for the absurd shoulder bumps. Sally was radiant for a moment. Then her small face sobered and she started to look vacantly at the distant wall.

"We'll have to send it back," Ann said, "and get the one we ordered."

She tried to take it off, but the child squawked violently. Ann grabbed her daughter's arms, held them above her head and pulled at the dress. It seemed to be stuck somewhere. When Ann released the child's arms to loosen the dress, Sally squirmed away. She took one step forward, then began to float three inches above the ground. She landed just before she collided with the far wall.



Sally looked scared until she saw her mother's face. Then she squealed in delight.

Ann's legs were rubber. She was shaking her head and wobbling uncertainly toward her daughter when the door opened behind her.

"It's me," her husband said. "Slow day at the office, so I came home early."

"Les! I'm going crazy or something. Sally just—"

Sally crouched to jump at her father. Before she could leap, he grabbed her up bodily and hugged her. Then he saw the box.

"Your order's here? Good. What's this thing?" He was looking at a small box he had pulled from the carton. Its lid contained a single word: MANKY. The box rattled when he shook it.

Les pulled off the lid and found inside a circular, shiny metal object. A triangular trio of jacks stuck out from one end.

"Is this the doorbell? I've never seen a plug like this. And there's no wire."

"I don't know," Ann said. "Les, listen. A minute ago, Sally—"

He peered into the box for an instruction sheet, uselessly. "They must have made a mistake. It looks like some kind of farm equipment."

He tossed the manky onto the hassock and delved into the carton again. Sally was still in his arms.

"That's the doorbell, I think," he said, looking at the next object. It had a lovely, tubular shape, a half-dozen connecting rods and a plug for a wall socket.

"That's funny," Ann mused, her mind distracted from Sally for a moment. "It looks terribly expensive. Maybe they sent door chimes instead of the doorbell."

The bottom of the carton contained the detective outfit that they had ordered for their son. Ann glanced at its glaringly lithographed cover and said: "Les, about Sally. Put her down a minute and watch what she does."

Les stared at his wife and put the child onto the rug. Sally began to walk, then rose and again floated, this time toward the hassock on which the manky lay.

His jaw dropped. "My God! Ann, what—"

Ann was staring, too, but not at her daughter. "Les! The hassock! It used to be brown!"

The hassock was a livid shade of green. A neon, demanding, screaming green that clashed horribly with the soft browns and reds in which Ann had furnished the room.

"That round thing must be leaking," Les said. "But did you see Sally when she—"

Ann's frazzled nerves carried a frantic order to her muscles. She jumped up, strode to the hassock and picked up the manky with two fingers. She tossed it to Les. Immediately, she regretted her action.

"Drop it!" she yelled. "Maybe it'll turn you green, too!"

Les kicked the hassock into the hall closet, tossed the manky in after it and shut the door firmly. As the door closed, he saw the entire interior of the dark closet brighten into a wet-lettuce green.

When he turned back to Ann, she was staring at her left hand. The wedding band that Les had put there a dozen years ago was a brilliant green, shedding its soft glow over the finger up to the first knuckle.

Ann felt the scream building up inside her. She opened her mouth to let it out, then put her hand in front of her mouth to keep it in, finally jerked the hand away to prevent the glowing ring from turning her front teeth green.

She collapsed into Les's arms, babbling incomprehensibly.

He said: "It's all right. There must be balloons or something in the shoulders of that dress. I'll tie a paperweight to Sally's dress and that'll hold her down until we undress her. Don't worry. And that green dye or whatever it is will wash off."

Ann immediately felt better. She put her hands behind her back, pulled off her ring and slipped it into her apron pocket. Les was sentimental about her removing it.

"I'll get dinner," she said, trying to keep her voice on an even keel. "Maybe you'd better start a letter to Hartshorne-Logan. Let's go into the kitchen, Sally."

Ann strode resolutely toward the rear of the house. She kept her eyes determinedly off the tinge of green that was showing through the apron pocket and didn't dare look back at her daughter's unsettling means of propulsion.

A half-hour later, when the meal was almost ready, two things happened: Bob came home from school through the back door and a strange voice said from the front of the house, "Don't answer the front door."

Ann stared at her son. He stared back at her, the detective outfit under his arm.

She went into the front room. Her husband was standing with fists on hips, looking at the front door, chuckling. "Neatest trick I've seen in a long time. That voice you heard was the new doorbell. I put it up while you were in the kitchen. Did you hear what happened when old lady Burnett out there pushed the button?"

"Oh. Something like those name cards with something funny printed on them, like 'Another hour shot.' Well, if there's a little tape in there repeating that message, you'd better shut that part off. It might get boring after a while. And it might insult someone."

Ann went to the door and turned the knob. The door didn't open. The figure of Mrs. Burnett, half-visible through the heavy curtain, shifted impatiently on the porch.

Les yanked at the doorknob. It didn't yield for him, either. He looked up at the doorbell, which he had installed just above the upper part of the door frame.

"Queer," he said. "That isn't in contact with the door itself. I don't see how it can keep the door from opening."

Ann put her mouth close to the glass, shouting: "Won't you come to the back door, Mrs. Burnett? This one is stuck."

"I just wanted to borrow some sugar," the woman cried from the porch. "I realize that I'm a terrible bother." But she walked down the front steps and disappeared around the side of the house.

"Don't open the back door." The well-modulated voice from the small doorbell box threatened to penetrate every corner of the house. Ann looked doubtfully at her husband's lips. They weren't moving.

"If this is ventriloquism—" she began icily.

"I'll have to order another doorbell just like this one, for the office," Les said. "But you'd better let the old girl in. No use letting her get peeved."

The back door was already open, because it was a warm day. The screen door had no latch, held closed by a simple spring. Ann pushed it open when Mrs. Burnett waddled up the three back steps, and smiled at her neighbor.

"I'm so sorry you had to walk around the house. It's been a rather hectic day in an awful lot of ways."

Something seemed to impede Mrs. Burnett as she came to the threshold. She frowned and shoved her portly frame against something invisible. It apparently yielded abruptly, because she staggered forward into the kitchen, nearly falling. She stared grimly at Ann and looked suspiciously behind her.

"The children have some new toys," Ann improvised hastily. "Sally is so excited over a new dress that she's positively feverish. Let's see now—it was sugar that you want, wasn't it?"

"I already have it," Bob said, handing a filled cup to his mother. The boy turned back to the detective set which he had spread over the kitchen table.

"Excitement isn't good for me," Mrs. Burnett said testily. "I've had a lot of troubles in my life. I like peace and quiet."

"Your husband is better?"

"Worse. I'm sure I don't know why everything happens to me." Mrs. Burnett edged toward the hall, trying to peer into the front of the house. Ann stood squarely in front of the door leading to the hall. Defeated, Mrs. Burnett left. A muffled volley of handclapping, mixed with a few faint cheers, came from the doorbell-box when she crossed the threshold.

Ann went into the hall to order Les to disconnect the doorbell. She nearly collided with him, coming in the other direction.

"Where did this come from?" Les held a small object in the palm of his hand, keeping it away from his body. A few drops of something unpleasant were dripping from his fingers. The object looked remarkably like a human eyeball. It was human-size, complete with pupil, iris and rather bloodshot veins.

"Hey, that's mine," Bob said. "You know, this is a funny detective kit. That was in it. But there aren't instructions on how it works."

"Well, put it away," Ann told Bob sharply. "It's slimy."

Les laid the eyeball on the table and walked away. The eyeball rolled from the smooth, level table, bounced twice when it hit the floor, then rolled along, six inches behind him. He turned and kicked at it. The eyeball rolled nimbly out of the path of the kick.

"Les, I think we've made poor Mrs. Burnett angry," Ann said. "She's so upset over her poor husband's health and she thinks we're insulting her."

Les didn't hear her. He strode to the detective set, followed at a safe distance by the eyeball, and picked up the box.

"Hey, watch out!" Bob cried. A small flashlight fell from the box, landed on its side and its bulb flashed on, throwing a pencil of light across Les's hands.

Bob retrieved the flashlight and turned it off while Les glanced through an instruction booklet, frowning.

"This toy is too complicated for a ten-year-old boy," Les told his wife. "I don't know why you ordered such a thing." He tossed the booklet into the empty box.

"I'm going to return it, if you don't smudge it up," she replied. "Look at the marks you made on the instructions." The black finger-marks stood out clearly against the shiny, coated paper.

Les looked at his hands. "I didn't do it," he said, pressing his clean fingertips against the kitchen table.

Black fingerprints, a full set of them, stood out against the sparkling polished table's surface.

"I think the Detectolite did it," Bob said. "The instructions say you've got to be very careful with it, because its effects last for a long time."

Les began scrubbing his hands vigorously at the sink. Ann watched him silently, until she saw his fingerprints appear on the faucet, the soap and the towel. She began to yell at him for making such a mess, when Sally floated into the kitchen. The girl was wearing a nightgown.

"My God!" Ann forgot her tongue before the children. "She got out of that dress herself. Where did she get that nightgown?"

Ann fingered the garment. She didn't recognize it as a nightgown. But in cut and fold, it was suspiciously like the dress that had arrived in the parcel. Her heart sank.

She picked up the child, felt the hot forehead, and said: "Les, I think it's the same dress. It must change color or something when it's time for a nap. It seems impossible, but—" She shrugged mutely. "And I think Sally's running a temperature. I'm going to put her to bed."

She looked worriedly into the reddened eyes of the small girl, who whimpered on the way to the bedroom. Ann carried her up the stairs, keeping her balance with difficulty, as Sally threatened to pop upward out of her arms.

The whole family decided that bed might be a good idea, soon after dinner. When the lights went out, the house seemed to be nearly normal. Les put on a pair of gloves and threw a pillowcase over the eyeball. Bob rigged up trestles to warn visitors from the front porch. Ann put small wads of cotton into her ears, because she didn't like the rhythmic rattle, soft but persistent, that emerged from the hall closet where the manky sat. Sally was whining occasionally in her sleep.

When daylight entered her room, Sally's nightgown had turned back into the new dress. But the little girl was too sick to get out of bed. She wasn't hungry, her nose was running, and she had a dry cough. Les called the doctor before going to work.

The only good thing about the morning for Ann was the fact that the manky had quieted down

some time in the night. After she got Bob to school, she gingerly opened the closet door. The manky was now glowing a bright pink and seemed slightly larger. Deep violet lettering stood out on its side:

"Today is Wednesday. For obvious reasons, the manky will not operate today."

The mailman brought a letter from Hartshorne-Logan. Ann stared stupidly at the envelope, until she realized that this wasn't an impossibly quick answer to the letter she had written yesterday. It must have crossed in the mail her complaint about the non-arrival of the order. She tore open the envelope and read:

"We regret to inform you that your order cannot be filled until the balance you owe us has been reduced. From the attached form, you will readily ascertain that the payment of \$87.56 will enable you to resume the purchasing of merchandise on credit. We shall fill your recent order as soon...."

Ann crumpled the letter and threw it into the imitation fireplace, knowing perfectly well that it would need to be retrieved for Les after work tonight. She had just decided to call Hartshorne-Logan's complaint department when the phone rang.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to come down to the school, Mrs. Morris," a voice said. "Your son is in trouble. He claims that it's connected with something that his parents gave him."

"My son?" Ann asked incredulously. "Bob?"

"Yes. It's a little gadget that looks like a water pistol. Your son insists that he didn't know it would make clothing transparent. He claims it was just accident that he tried it out when he was walking by the gym during calisthenics. We've had to call upon every family in the neighborhood for blankets. Bob has always been a good boy and we believe that we can expel him quietly without newspaper publicity involving his name, if you'll—"

"I'll be right down," Ann said. "I mean I won't be right down. I've got a sick baby here. Don't do anything till I telephone my husband. And I'm sorry for Bob. I mean I'm sorry for the girls, and for the boys, too. I'm sorry for—for everything. Good-by."

Just as she hung up the telephone, the doorbell rang. It rang with a normal buzz, then began to play soft music. Ann opened the door without difficulty, to admit Dr. Schwartz.

"You aren't going to believe me, Doctor," Ann said while he took the child's temperature, "but we can't get that dress off Sally."

"Kids are stubborn sometimes." Dr. Schwartz whistled softly when he looked at the thermometer. "She's pretty sick. I want a blood count before I try to move her. Let me undress her."

Sally had been mumbling half-deliriously. She made no effort to resist as the doctor picked her up. But when he raised a fold of the dress and began to pull it back, she screamed.

The doctor dropped the dress and looked in perplexity at the point where it touched Sally's skin.

"It's apparently an allergy to some new kind of material. But I don't understand why the dress won't come off. It's not stuck tight."

"Don't bother trying," Ann said miserably. "Just cut it off."

Dr. Schwartz pulled scissors from his bag and clipped at a sleeve. When he had cut it to the shoulder, he gently began to peel back the edges of the cloth. Sally writhed and kicked, then collapsed in a faint. The physician smoothed the folds hastily back into place.

He looked helpless as he said to Ann: "I don't know quite what to do. The flesh starts to hemorrhage when I pull at the cloth. She'd bleed to death if I yanked it off. But it's such an extreme allergy that it may kill her, if we leave it in contact with the skin."

The manky's rattle suddenly began rhythmically from the lower part of the house. Ann clutched the side of the chair, trying to keep herself under control. A siren wailed somewhere down the street, grew louder rapidly, suddenly going silent at the peak of its crescendo.

Dr. Schwartz glanced outside the window. "An ambulance. Looks as if they're stopping here."

"Oh, no," Ann breathed. "Something's happened to Les."

"It sure will," Les said grimly, walking into the bedroom. "I won't have a job if I can't get this stuff off my fingers. Big black fingerprints on everything I touch. I can't handle correspondence or shake hands with customers. How's the kid? What's the ambulance doing out front?"

"They're going to the next house down the street," the physician said. "Has there been sickness there?"

Les held up his hands, palms toward the doctor. "What's wrong with me? My fingers look all right. But they leave black marks on everything I touch."

The doctor looked closely at the fingertips. "Every human has natural oil on the skin. That's how detectives get results with their fingerprint powder. But I've never heard of nigrification, in this sense. Better not try to commit any crimes until you've seen a skin specialist."

Ann was peering through the window, curious about the ambulance despite her own troubles. She saw two attendants carry Mr. Burnett, motionless and white, on a stretcher from the house next door into the ambulance. A third member of the crew was struggling with a disheveled Mrs. Burnett at the door. Shrieks that sounded like "Murder!" came sharply through the window.

"I know those bearers," Dr. Schwartz said. He yanked the window open. "Hey, Pete! What's wrong?"

The front man with the stretcher looked up. "I don't know. This guy's awful sick. I think his wife is nuts."

Mrs. Burnett had broken free. She dashed halfway down the sidewalk, gesticulating wildly to nobody in particular.

"It's murder!" she screamed. "Murder again! He's been poisoned! He's going to die! It means the electric chair!"

The orderly grabbed her again. This time he stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth to quiet her.

"Come back to this house as soon as you deliver him," Dr. Schwartz shouted to the men. "We've got a very sick child up here."

"I was afraid this would happen," Les said. "The poor woman already has lost three husbands. If this one is sick, it's no wonder she thinks that somebody is poisoning him."

Bob stuck his head around the bedroom door. His mother stared unbelievably for a moment, then advanced on him threateningly. Something in his face restrained her, just as she was about to start shaking him.

"I got something important to tell you," Bob said rapidly, ready to duck. "I snuck out of the principal's office and came home. I got to tell you what I did."

"I heard all about what you did," Ann said, advancing again. "And you're not going to slip away from me."

"Give me a chance to explain something. Downstairs. So he won't hear," Bob ended in a whisper, nodding toward the doctor.

Ann looked doubtfully at Les, then followed Bob down the stairs. The doorbell was monotonously saying in a monotone: "Don't answer me, don't answer me, don't go to the door."

"Why did you do it?" Ann asked Bob, her anger suddenly slumping into weary sadness. "People will suspect you of being a sex maniac for the rest of your life. You can't possibly explain—"

"Don't bother about the girls' clothing," Bob said, "because it was only an accident. The really important thing is something else I did before I left the house."

Les, cursing softly, hurried past them on the way to answer the knocking. He ignored the doorbell's pleas.

"I forgot about it," Bob continued, "when that ray gun accidentally went off. Then when they put me in the principal's office, I had time to think, and I remembered. I put some white stuff from the detective kit into that sugar we lent Mrs. Burnett last night. I just wanted to see what would happen. I don't know exactly what effect—"

"He put stuff in the sugar?" A deep, booming voice came from the front of the house. Mother and son looked through the hall. A policeman stood on the threshold of the front door. "I heard that! The woman next door claims that her husband is poisoned. Young man, I'm going to put you under arrest."

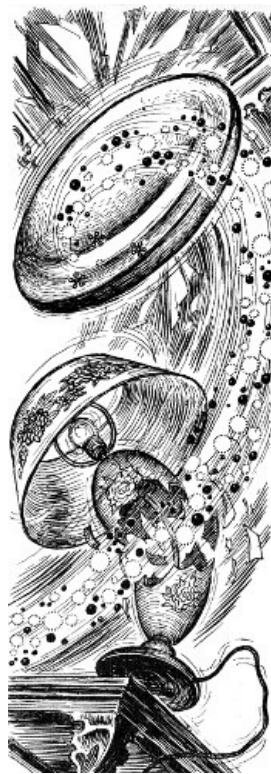
The policeman stepped over the threshold. A blue flash darted from the doorbell box, striking him squarely on the chest. The policeman staggered back, sitting down abruptly on the porch. A scent of ozone drifted through the house.

"Close the door, close the door," the doorbell was chanting urgently.

"Where's that ambulance?" Dr. Schwartz yelled from the top of the steps. "The child's getting worse."



Something splintered in the hall closet door. The manky zoomed through the hole it had broken and began ricocheting wildly through the house like a crazed living creature, smashing ornaments, cracking the plaster.



Les rushed through the front door to try to pick up the policeman. The officer drew his gun. An unearthly scream of "Help!" shrieked out of the doorbell.

Ann put her hands over her eyes, as if that would make the unbelievable scene vanish.

Three days after the Christmas party, in the middle of inventory, when her headache had completely vanished, Milly began to worry.

She talked the situation over for one whole afternoon with her best friend at Hartshorne-Logan, a girl in the complaint department. That same evening, after work, Milly went to the public library for the first time in her life. She borrowed a thick tome on the theory of time travel. But only three sentences in the first ten pages were comprehensible to her. She turned to her manky for comfort before going to bed.

The next morning, she braved the protective screen of secretaries, receptionists and sub-officials who ordinarily protected Mr. Hawkins from minor annoyances, and penetrated to his office.

Mr. Hawkins didn't recognize her when she walked in. His attitude became much more formal when she reminded him of their actions on Christmas Eve.

"So you see, Mr. Hawkins," Milly concluded earnestly, "I'm worried. We had so much fun at that party that we didn't think about what we might do to those folks in the past."

"You should understand," Mr. Hawkins firmly replied, "that I was not enjoying myself at the party. Definitely not. I must engage in the painful duty of assuming a pose of gaiety on special occasions, such as the annual office party."

Milly shot him a withering look, but didn't argue that particular point. She continued: "So I've been thinking. We might have done a terrible thing. Sending that dress to a kid without the right underclothing could be real dangerous. Maybe even fatal."

"We cannot harm people in the long ago, any more than the past could conceivably harm us."

"But don't you see?" Milly fought to restrain tears of fright and frustration. "I'm not *sure!* And it's the most important thing in the world to me. That little girl who got the dress is my grandmother. If she died while she was a little girl, there wouldn't be any me. I can't be born, if my grandmother died before she was three years old."

"The paradoxes of time travel have been greatly exaggerated," Mr. Hawkins said. "Perhaps a genealogist would be able to clear up the question."

Milly rose to her full five-foot height, suddenly furious. "You don't care if I just vanish all of a sudden! All that you care about is keeping yourself out of a lot of bother!" She turned on her heel, walked to the door, and added: "After I've helped to fill forty orders every working day for the past three years!"

Milly stalked out and slammed the door behind her. Then she stopped, just outside the door, waiting for a chain reaction to occur. It did, about five seconds later.

Mr. Hawkins popped through the door with a shout: "Where's that girl?" He was through the reception room and halfway down the hall when Milly called him back.

"Here I am," she said sweetly.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her into his office.

"You know," he said, "I've been thinking about those poor, unfortunate people in the past, too. Now that you mention it, I believe we should do something for them." He wiped his forehead.

"You've been thinking about a poor, unfortunate manager right here in the present," Milly retorted, sure of her position now. "All of a sudden, you've figured out what it will mean if I vanish because my grandmother never had any children. You realize that if I've never existed, all of a sudden Hartshorne-Logan will have thousands of complaint letters, lawsuits about orders over the past three years. You're thinking about what's going to happen to your position, if you're to blame for all those customers not getting their merchandise."

Mr. Hawkins turned away until he got his face under control. "We'll talk about that later," he said mildly at last. "Let's agree that everyone will be happier if we straighten up matters. And don't you think that *just we two* should do the straightening up ourselves? It'll be simpler if—uh—other officials don't hear about this."

When Ann took her hands away from her eyes the mess was still more complicated. The new factor was a short young girl who was walking up to the house. She was looking about, like a country girl suddenly whisked to Times Square.

The policeman whirled when he heard footsteps behind him. "What do you want?"

"I'm afraid that I'm to blame for the whole thing," Milly told the officer. "I represent Hartshorne-Logan. We've just discovered that we made several mistakes when we filled an order for this family. I've come to pick up the wrong merchandise."

The doorbell made ominous clucking sounds, as Milly reached the threshold.

She looked up at the box and told Ann: "I'm afraid that I can't get in while that defective doorbell is working. Will you cut off the house current for a minute, while I disconnect it?"

Les blinked at her, then began to curse, loudly and bitterly. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Les dodged the manky's careening and headed for the fuse box.

Milly called after him: "Maybe there are bananas in the refrigerator. Take them out right away, if there are. The manky will quiet down then."

Ann rushed to the kitchen, yanked out the three bananas and threw them through the open window. She heard the dull thud from the front room as the manky fell to the carpet and lay motionless.

"I've pulled the switch!" Les yelled.

The policeman warily stepped through the door, looking at Les. Dr. Schwartz intercepted the policeman.

"Officer," Dr. Schwartz said, "there's a very sick little girl upstairs. I think you'll do your duty best by trying to hurry up an ambulance."

"But there's a murder charge floating around and I practically heard a confession," the policeman protested, slightly dazed.

Milly had pulled down the doorbell assembly. She put it beside the manky, then scooped up the remaining sections of Bob's detective kit and put them on the pile. She headed for the stairs, calling over her shoulder: "Don't worry about your detective set troubles. Those things wear off in twenty-four hours."

Staggering slightly under the load of merchandise, Milly tiptoed into her grandmother's room. When she heard Dr. Schwartz trailing her curiously, she turned to him, whispering: "I'll watch over the little girl. You go down and explain to that policeman that there wasn't anything harmful in the chemicals in the detective set, and there was a short circuit in the doorbell, and that the child must be allergic to the dress. It was all Hartshorne-Logan's fault, not this family's."

"But what about that thing?" Dr. Schwartz said, pointing to the manky.

Milly tried frantically to think of a believable explanation and changed the subject: "The policeman said something about a murder confession. There was genuine truth-talk in the detective set. If someone swallowed any of it, it might be a genuine confession."

"My goodness!" Dr. Schwartz raced downstairs.

Milly bent over the child who would become her grandmother. Sally lay flushed and feverish on the big bed, sunk into a deep coma. Milly bent and kissed her grandmother, then quickly deactivated the anti-grav pads in the shoulders. After that, it took only a moment to decamouflage the zippers which held the crush force. The dress then slipped right off.

Sally sighed the instant the dress fell free. Her skin was already returning to its normal hue by the time Milly had taken another dress from a bureau drawer. Milly slipped it onto Sally and covered her up to prevent a chill.

Milly kissed the child again and looked at the ancestor whom she had known only as a tiny old lady. Then she gathered up her pile of merchandise, tossing on top the dress, with its shoulder pads again activated.

The commotion downstairs was still loud, but it no longer sounded hysterical. Milly ticked off the order list on her fingers, to make sure she had collected everything. Then she opened the bedroom window. Buoyed by the anti-grav force, she floated to the ground, landing with only a slight jar.



She darted through the back-yard, away from the house, attracting no attention. Everyone in the block had convened at the front of the house, where Mrs. Burnett was screaming out a full confession and the policeman was sweatingly scribbling it down.

Mrs. Burnett was explaining in trying detail the exact manner in which she had poisoned her four husbands in the past seven years, to collect their insurance.

When Milly returned to Hartshorne-Logan of the future, she sank wearily into a chair. She held her hand out and watched it quiver.

"Golly, I didn't realize how scared I was, until I got back," she told Mr. Hawkins. "But I think I did only one thing wrong. I forgot to figure out some alibi for my great-uncle to use for his accident with the clothes penetration ray."

"Your ancestors will forget all about that in their excitement over the insurance company rewards," Mr. Hawkins assured her. "I checked way back on the old records. I see that your great-grandmother paid her bill, right after the date when all this trouble came up. But she never bought another thing from Hartshorne-Logan."

"Well, it's a good thing that time travel can't cause trouble both ways," Milly reflected. "I don't think I'll even go to next year's Christmas party."

"No danger of time travel bothering us. Nothing could come from the past into the present that could possibly hurt us."

"Gee, I'm glad," Milly said, and sneezed. It frightened her because sneezes were unknown in this world from which the cold virus had been eradicated. Then she sneezed again.

A little later, Mr. Hawkins began to sneeze.

Three billion sniffing, coughing, nose-blowing persons throughout the world were soon proof that Mr. Hawkins had blundered again.

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