

The Old Fool

CARL HENN

FOUR rose bushes bloomed in the casual garden that spread in the back yard of the Lascelle home. Old Mrs. Lascelle did not care much about the other things that grew there; all other flowers seemed to lack something when she saw them next to the rich, red roses that had the most beautiful smell on earth; all other flowers looked a little faded compared to her roses.

Her neighbors envied her those roses. Mrs. Norton, who lived on the corner, had tried to raise some with slips from the best bush, but they never came up the same. Mrs. Malletti, who lived next door, envied her too, although she never tried to raise any of her own. Lascelle guessed that most of the neighborhood women considered her to be a little foolish about the roses, always working with them, boasting about them as a woman would about her children.

What if they happened to be like the Malletti children next door, who worried Mrs. Lascelle nearly to death. They got wilder all the time, screaming and yelling and dashing across her yard and garden. They had no respect for an old woman or for property. It was their parents' fault, and no wonder, with Mrs. Malletti so untidy and gossipy and snoopy, and not having any pride in her yard at all. And that Mr. Malletti, whose working clothes were always greasy and soiled. No factory could be that dirty. He was not what she would call a good father, anyone who talked so rough. When she and Mr. Lascelle sat on the back porch of an evening, they could hear his voice through the door that was always open in

the summer. Ever so often he came home drunk, and when he did, the evening was spoiled for the Lascelles, who had to go inside and close the doors and windows to escape the noise.

As she sat on the back porch mending, Mrs. Lascelle could hear the Malletti children playing one of their senseless games next door. They were running like crazy, and, likely enough, they'd be across her yard in a minute. She wished her husband were back from lodge meeting; she'd have him speak to Mr. Malletti about keeping his children quiet. Sure enough, here they came, straight across her garden, and the oldest boy had run right into her rose bush!

Mrs. Lascelle called out to them. "Here, you children, you get away. Go on over in your own yard where you belong. And you, Tony, don't you dare touch my roses again, do you hear?"

He turned, yelled back, "Aw, fooley," and ran back to the bush and deliberately kicked it. Another shout of defiance, and he was safely back in his own yard.

Mrs. Lascelle put down her mending and marched across the yard to the back of the Malletti home. She knocked on the door; it was opened by Mr. Malletti.

She began, without preamble. "I won't have those children running across my yard. That nasty Tony deliberately kicked my rose bush. You keep them in your own yard, do you hear, or I'll have Mr. Lascelle paddle them good."

Mr. Malletti's swarthy face, surprised at first, grew darker as she finished, and he practically shouted his answer. "Them kids ain't hurtin' you or your precious

roses, and they can play where they want to. If old man Lascelle lays a hand on any one of 'em, he better watch out, and you, too!"

Her mouth drew tight, and she drew herself up as she prepared a crushing rejoinder, but the door slammed in her face. As she whirled to go home, she found herself within reach of Tony, a highly interested spectator. With a surprisingly quick movement, she slapped his face, and his dismayed howls provided a bagpipe march for her triumphal return. As she settled down to her mending again, she heard Mr. Malletti call his children into the house.

Suddenly, the Malletti door flew open and all the children came dashing across to her garden, screaming and waving weapons. They spread as they reached the four rose bushes, attacking them simultaneously with kitchen knives, a

hand sickle, even one with scissors. Mrs. Lascelle gasped helplessly for a moment before she dropped her mending and ran to the rescue.

The confusion was awful. In futile rage she ran at them, grasped at them, but they gave way before her and closed in behind her, yelling and screaming and hacking at her rose bushes. And through her anger and through the noise she heard Mr. Malletti's voice shouting, "You and your roses. I'll teach you to slap my kid. We ain't got no roses, and you won't have 'em either. Go ahead and cry, you old fool!"

For she had stopped running and was standing still in the midst of desolation, crying and sobbing, with the ruins of her roses around her. And about her danced the ecstatic children, waving their weapons and shouting, at her, at one another, at the sky, "You old fool, you old fool, you old fool!"

FOURTEEN LINES RIMED IN QUIET DESPERATION

GEORGE COFFIN

Return and love you once again, you say!
Does this year's winter night recall the gleam
Of moon-fire flash on mica coated stream
In last year's snow hushed forest? Does the way
From Boston to the Inn out on the Bay
Still call you from the city in your dream
On restless nights? And do you ever scheme
To go again—go back to yesterday?
Return and love you? I have never ceased
To love nor left your side since we first met
In mystic moment charmed from time's fast flow
Through coldly measured space. My love's increased
With each repeating memory, and yet
No further meeting time is set, I know.