

"Please don't be. . ."

"I'm sorry Dave. I lost my temper. I better go. . . Anne's probably wondering where I am," he said as he whisked out of the room.

Dave sat there staring at his cluttered desk and the overflowing ashtray. Outside Paul's window he saw the familiar skyline. The light bulb flickered wildly in Paul's lamp and then burnt out. Dave sat alone in the dark, enveloped by depression.

Charley's whistle could be heard outside the door.

"Everythin' okay, Mr. Saffran? I saw Mr. Denton rush out'a here. Hope there's no trouble?"

"No trouble, Charley. . . just another burned out bulb."

"They shore don't make 'em like they used to, do they Mr. Saffran? I's always replacin' these things with new ones, all the time. . ."

OFFICE PARTY

by Laura Wesley

He slid between the guests delicately, making profound apologies whenever he happened to interrupt a conversation or disturb anyone's drink. He possessed the very polished mien of a gracious lord; he carried himself erect, almost to the point of seeming uncomfortably stiff, he bowed ceremoniously to all his old acquaintances, and every now and then he responded to someone's joke with a lusty chuckle which was quite audible from anywhere in the room. Finally he reached the new secretary who was standing against the wall like a lost kitten, wondering if she should approach the young man in the armchair.

"A-a-ah, LINDa!" He seemed to have just noticed her. His voice was resonant but hollow, as if he were shouting into a deep, dry well. She only nodded. He impressed her as a jovial, paternal type, and she was confident that he would soon put her at ease. She tried to appease her anxiety by imagining him as Santa Claus. The fantasy wasn't hard to conjure; he had

smile wrinkles around his eyes, and plenty of rosy color on his high cheeks, and a head full of smooth, silver-grey hair. She imagined that he smiled congenially behind his full mustache, although she couldn't be sure. His stomach bulged as if it had enjoyed fifty years of hearty Christmas dinners.

"Will you be starting work to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir, at eight." Her picture disintegrated. Santa Claus would have winked; this man only cleared his throat while allowing her answer to register. Perhaps a distinguished Englishman—in fact, he seemed to be deliberately creating such an impression. He wore a grey suit and carried a gold watch in his pocket, with a long chain which hung down for show. He was holding a pipe, and had been holding it for half an hour, although he apparently hadn't thought to light it. His tweed hat, which he had for some time been holding like a prop, was perched on top of the pile of coats by the door.

"Ah-HA! Yes! We are always eager to hire another healthy youth in this office. Healthy people are so contented and reliable, you know. None of my employees ever miss a day of work."

"Yes, sir, I understand."

His speech lacked any accent which could give it warmth. His vowels were meticulous, and he never slurred a syllable. He might have been a student of Henry Higgins'. Most startling, though, were his eyes. True, they were shaped as if they should twinkle with easy good will, but they twitched faintly at the corners, and now they looked as if they were studying her, struggling to perceive even her most minute reactions. They appeared to be suppressing some enormous tension. She envisioned him at the point of a gun, afraid to move and yet speculating wildly . . . then she imagined him behind the gun, waiting to pull the trigger if she should flinch. Something about him terrified her.

"Well, I am certain that I will be able to expect only superb work from you. Enjoy yourself—mingle! These guests are your new friends and associates." He turned abruptly to slide toward the punch bowl. Suddenly she felt like a fly among spiders. Instead of approaching the man in the armchair, she slipped out of the room through the back door and headed home.