And they didn’t waste any time after they got in. Dan fired his pistol a couple of times, shootin’ two holes in the ceiling and one of ’em yelled out above the clamor, “Look out, Isaac, hyere we come!”

Of course the shoutin’ and prayin’ stopped as soon as the pistol was fired an’ the boys had Isaac and was already draggin’ him out before he, ’er anybody else, knowed what was happenin’. But when Isaac did realize what was goin’ on he began to kick and struggle fer all he was worth. It just looked like he was fightin’ against the Devil and didn’t figger to give in to him. Then some of the men who had been shoutin’ and prayin’ just a minute before got a different kind ‘a light in their eyes and they grabbed them boys, and I tell you, you never seen such a fight in all yore life as they fit right there. All the women and children got back out of the way, up in front of the buildin’.

Well, finally, you could tell that the men was gittin’ the best of the ruckass. Isaac was on his feet now and joinin’ in the fight. One by one the boys was forced outside. The fightin’ went on out there fer a minute ‘er two, but the boys purty soon gave up when they seen that they was outnumbered. Purty soon the men started comin’ back in and I could hyear Isaac sayin’ somethin’ out on the steps, about gettin’ the sheriff after ’em. Then he come back in, went up in front and kinda pantin’ a little, said, “Somebody start a good ole song. How ‘about you, Sister Mary.”

An Afternoon

MARY CHAPPELL

Now the cab was leaving the downtown area and was entering the residential district. I sat forward in my seat and looked out the window. Apparently this was not a fashionable neighborhood, but middle class and decaying. I had never been there before and looked at the big, dirty frame houses, old, stone churches with dead ivy clinging to them, and maples, bare of their leaves and dripping in the rain.

The afternoon, the dreary neighborhood, the strangeness of the whole situation both depressed and frightened me. I had spent the morning and night before on a dirty day coach crowded with soldiers. I had twisted the wedding rings on my finger. Why couldn’t I think about how happy we’d be together tonight? The weather, the neighborhood wouldn’t matter when we were together, and we had been apart so long! But it was useless to try to think of him. Somehow he didn’t exist now for me; he wasn’t a reality. I was in a strange city, alone, and I was frightened. The cab stopped in front of a tall narrow house, once painted white, but now gray and wet in the rain.

Stephen had reserved for us. And I was so utterly alone. The houses I saw from the cab window became great living things, hunched together and aching in the November rain. The maples, too, were living things; didn’t they look like human beings standing sad and resigned in an indifferent world?

Why couldn’t I think of Stephen? I twisted the wedding rings on my finger. Why couldn’t I think about how happy we’d be together tonight? The weather, the neighborhood wouldn’t matter when we were together, and we had been apart so long! But it was useless to try to think of him. Somehow he didn’t exist now for me; he wasn’t a reality. I was in a strange city, alone, and I was frightened. The cab stopped in front of a tall narrow house, once painted white, but now gray and wet in the rain,
"1807 Fenton street. This is it, lady," the cab driver said.

I looked out. Yes, this must be the place Stephen had got for us. Disappointment was fast making me ache harder inside. Couldn't Stephen have got a better place? I knew we couldn't afford much, but ... The place was so unlike what I had hoped to find! I knew rooms were hard to get, but . . .

I pressed the doorbell. A thin boy, about eighteen, answered. He was wearing corduroy trousers and a dark red sweater. Blond, uncombed hair fell over his forehead. His face was pimply and greasy. In his hand he held a detective magazine he had apparently been reading.

Surely this can't be the place, I thought, not with this kind of boy . . . Surely Stephen could have found a better place . . . My throat was aching.

"I'm Mrs. Stephen Campbell," I heard myself say slowly. "I think my husband has arranged with a Mrs. Hoffmann for a room here for us over the weekend."

The boy replied, "Uh, yes. Just a minute, I'll call her." He turned and almost yelled, "Hey, Aunt Clara, the woman's here."

I stood awkwardly in the doorway while the boy fingered the magazine. Now I was annoyed. To be referred to as "the woman"! Why didn't he offer to let me into the house and take my bag?

When his Aunt Clara came from the back of the house, the boy withdrew to a chair, sat down, began reading, and paid no attention to either of us.

I heard the woman approaching before I saw her. Her footsteps were heavy; then I saw that she was enormously fat. Her weight made her walk awkwardly pointing her feet outward. She was much taller than I. Her nose and mouth were prominent in her fat face, and short permanented gray hair made her almost ridiculous.

What impressed me most were her eyes, large, blue, and staring emptily at me.

"I'm Mrs. Stephen Camp—"

"Uhuh, I know. Been expecting you. Come on in, and I'll show you your room."

She sounded indifferent, and yet not uncordial. I followed her through the living room and into a corridor where she opened a door and indicated a room as mine. The house, I had noticed, was poorly furnished and hot. I could smell the heat and smoke of a furnace.

"I guess you'll be all right. You must be tired." She stood in the doorway and watched me as I took off my wraps.

I placed my bag on a chair and began to open it. I was grateful to have some one to talk to.

"Oh, yes, I'll be fine. I'm tired after that ride on the train, but I'll take a nap before my husband comes. It's only three now." I was getting out my green wool dress and shaking wrinkles out of it.

"That's a pretty dress."

"Oh, I'm glad you like it. My husband likes it, too. I'm going to wear it tonight."

I found hangers in the closet and hung the dress there, along with my coat.

"We're going out to dinner when he gets in town, he told me in his letter. He thinks he can make it at six-thirty, if the busses aren't crowded and late," I added somewhat inconsequentially.

As I turned I saw that she was watching me, no longer with that empty expression, but with an actively interested, greedy look in her eyes. Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes had a brightness that frightened me. I winced.

"Young to be married, aren't you?" She had stopped staring, for she must have seen my discomfort. She meant the question kindly, I supposed.

"We've not been married long," I said a little embarrassed. I began taking cosmetics out of my bag and placing them on
the dresser top.

"Well, looks as if you got a nice enough young fella from what I saw of him when he came here to get this room for you. You say he's in that camp outside the city?"

Her crudity didn't offend me; I brightened at talk of Stephen.

"Yes, he's stationed there in the Quartermaster Corps. I think he's going to be made a sergeant—"

I was becoming enthusiastic when she said dully, "Uhuh, I see." I could tell by her tone and again vacant expression she understood nothing of quartermasters and sergeants. She turned and left me alone in the room and walked heavily towards her kitchen.

I finished unpacking and walked towards the window to draw the shade. All I could see outside was a dripping shrub or two and the side of the house next door, with gray paint peeling off. What was I doing in such a place? But I refused to think, pulled the shade down, and stretched myself out on the bed.

I couldn't have been asleep long when I was awakened by a loud masculine voice:

"Aunt Clara, where'd yuh put my lunch box? Fergit it, I found it. Goodbye." Then lower: "I ain't world'n' this damn' swing shift again next month, I bet."

The voice, I recognized as belonging to the pimply boy. The front door slammed. He was gone. Only the fat woman and I were here.

I had difficulty getting to sleep again. The room was too hot; the bedclothes had a clean but scorched smell, and again bits of my journey kept recurring meaningless: the blond soldier on the train became confused with the pimply boy in the red sweater; Mrs. Hoffmann's stares were like the big, stupid, phlegmatic houses, and Stephen didn't exist at all. There was no Stephen, and I was there alone, and there never had been a Stephen. I slept uneasily at last.

When I awoke the second time it was at the sound of noisy conversation. It broke in painfully on my sleepy brain. Why did people have to talk so loud when I wanted to sleep? Who on earth would Mrs. Hoffmann be talking to like that anyway? Weren't we two the only ones here? I forced myself into wakefulness and lay on my back and tried to listen.

Whoever they were, they were in the kitchen, I concluded. But I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. Mrs. Hoffmann did all of the talking, of that I was sure. But her words ran together and said nothing I could comprehend. She was almost shouting. But to whom? I couldn't hear a second person say anything.

Slowly I came to realize that there was no one else in the kitchen. Mrs. Hoffmann was talking — arguing — raging — all to herself. And only insane people did that ... I understood then those blank stares, the sudden greedy, interested look, the smile ... I was alone with an insane woman!

I grew stiff. She didn't like me; I could feel that. Maybe she'd bother me. She was so big, so much bigger than I. I knew — she was jealous of Stephen and me; we were young and happy, and she was fat, ugly, and middle aged. She still was shouting. I knew I couldn't lie forever on the bed, but I was afraid to move. Oh, silly, she couldn't hear you in this room. Perhaps she wouldn't molest you if you're quiet and keep out of sight.

She was quieting. I crept cautiously off the bed and stood up. Now she was merely humming as she rattled dishes and pans in preparation of her supper. I reflected whatever was the matter with her couldn't be serious or she wouldn't live here as she did. Just a poor woman who probably had had a bad time of it in her
for a while. I couldn't let myself worry about it.

Later when I was fully dressed and
combing my hair, I overheard Mrs. Hoff-
mann again. She was alternately whisper-
ing and half screaming. This time I could
catch some of the words.

"A quartermaster coming to my house,
a girl, too. In my house! They haven't
got any business in my house, sneaking
around and spying on me! I won't let 'em,"
she finished screaming.

Then she began mumbling almost wist-
fully: "She has a pretty dress. He's going
to be a sergeant. A green dress." Her
thoughts returned to the idea that we were
spies; her voice became louder, and she
screamed again about being watched in
her own home.

She was pacing down the corridor —
to my room, where the door was half open.
I couldn't move; a power held me fixed be-
fore the dressing table. She was at my
door. I clenched my comb in my hand
until its teeth dug into my palm. I caught
the words "quartermaster," "green dress,"
"my house" when she whispered loud
enough for me to hear. She stood outside
my door. I could hear her breathing.

It seemed an eternity that we stood,

Mrs. Hoffmann in the corridor, I in my
room. Mind and body I was numb. I
waited. I think I must have expected her
to enter and either choke or stab me. Un-
believingly, then, I heard her turn slowly
and go back to the kitchen. At intervals
she mumbled something.

Quavering with relief, I dared to move
enough to look at my watch. Six twenty-
five. Almost time for Stephen. But there
was no Stephen. No Stephen had a part in
this hideous jumble of a train full of sol-
diers, the pimply boy, the black maples in
the rain, this hot smelly house of crazy
Mrs. Hoffmann!

I felt dizzy and sick. Stephen, hurry,
please hurry! But there was no Stephen.
I clenched the comb in my hand tighter.
I felt as though I were about to fall.
Stephen! But I knew there was no Stephen,
and Mrs. Hoffmann was screaming, and
there never had been a Stephen ....

The doorbell rang. My thoughts sped
crazily through my mind and then were
suddenly ordered. He was real. I burst
through the corridor, through the living
room, opened the door, and fell against
him.