


BACK-TO-BACK

* *Special* *

* *Issue* *



Christmas at

**GULL'S -
WAY**



DJP

Christmas At Gull's-Way

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Christmas

PAST



REMEMBERING

When I remember Christmas
when I was a kid;
I think of snowmen in the schoolyard,
and snow fights with the guys on the street,
and sneaking off from school,
to see the big Christmas tree downtown.

When I remember Christmas
when I was a kid;
I think of my father's empty easy chair,
and my mother crying at night,
and my mother working two jobs,
and the gifts I never got from my run-away dad.

And now I'm all grown up,
and it's Christmas again,
and we decorate an estate fit for a king;
But presided over by a Judge,
and he grumbles about the fuss,
and the shopping,
then surprises me with a new leather jacket.

And he's an old donkey, sure,
but he's the best man I've ever known;
And he's the father mine never cared to be to me.
And he blusters and grunts,
and tries not to turn red
as I surprise him with the Celtics jacket he wanted.

Nice to grow up and be a kid again.
Nice to be with family on Christmas.

The lights on the tree
look just a little brighter
Then the ones on that big tree downtown,
When I was a kid.

By: Sue-Anne Hartwick



REMEMBERING--PART TWO

Could it have been
all those years ago,
When my son played with his new toy truck
on Christmas Day?

Could it have been
a lifetime ago,
When my wife and I would walk the beach,
then trim the tree on Christmas Eve?

How many years have passed--
How many Christmases spent alone...
When I told myself it didn't matter,
was just another day?

And now there's a curly-haired whirlwind
living in my house--
eating my food--
making me crazy--
He doesn't even know he runs my life.

He thinks I run his.

And it's a strange feeling,
to have a family again.
A grown-up child;
and I see the world through his eyes,
and I see into his heart,
and I know about all the Christmases he never had.

So I'll complain, and grouse about the season--
he expects me to--
And I'll surprise him,
and make Christmas special for him,
and try not to be too embarrassed
when he makes me feel like a father again...

Nice to have a son again,
after so many years...

Nice to be able to start
some happy memories for years to come...

All over again.

By: Sue-Anne Hartwick



*I' Was The Night Before Xmas
& , Meanwhile, at Gull's - Way,
All Through The Big House ...*

By: Judy Darnell

The courthouse would never be a cheerful building, but efforts had obviously been made to brighten its atmosphere for the holiday season. Each door was decorated with a wreath, all of them similar, and symmetrical in their arrangement with one exception. On the office designated "Judge Milton C. Hardcastle" the wreath hung at a rakish angle, clearly in danger of giving up its grip and falling to the floor. Behind the closed door, innocent victim of many slammings, the office's sole occupant was peeling out of his judicial robe after a long and tiring day.

Christmas Eve, Hardcastle reflected, was a lousy time to be sending people to jail, but Lady Justice didn't take holidays. Neither did criminals, unfortunately, and the courthouse had been filled to overflowing. From the sound drifting down the hallway, other things were beginning to flow as well. Christmas cheer; liquid variety.

"Hey, Milt." The smiling face of the court bailiff appeared in the doorway. "Aren't you going to come on down and join the party? Judge Webster's already started with his Groucho Marx imitations, and there's at least three secretaries in dire need of a rescue."

"Yeah, Sid," Hardcastle answered, breaking into a grin. "I'll be there in a minute; you go on ahead."

His smile faded as the door closed, muffling the party noise. Parties were okay, sometimes even better than okay, but he had never cared much for them at Christmas. Seemed like everyone was so damned determined to be merry and cheerful just because of the season. In happier times he had never bothered going to the parties at all beyond a token appearance, but that was far in the past. No fun in going home to a big empty house, he thought, running his fingers over the desk calendar, absently tracing the numbers. Nine years; it was hard to believe. Nine years since Nancy's smiling face had been waiting to greet him at the door on Christmas Eve. Even longer since his son's laughter had echoed through the rooms.

Shaking his head vigorously, Hardcastle tried to push the memories aside. Not now, he decided. This isn't the time or the place. Besides, there's a party waiting. Better at least try to enjoy it since this is gonna be the last one. Wonder what Christmas will be like next year after I'm retired? Hell, I'll probably be begging for a party to go to.

Raucous laughter penetrated the walls of the chamber, breaking into Hardcastle's reverie. Welcoming the intrusion, he clicked off the overhead light and went through the door, pausing momentarily to straighten his bedraggled wreath. It was time to be one of the desperately merry people.

*** *** ***

Mark McCormick chewed on a thumbnail as he occupied himself with squashing the lumps out of his mashed potatoes. Christmas in San Quentin, circa 1982, promised to be just as depressing as Christmas in San Quentin, 1981, had been.

"Same food, too," he muttered despondently. "I think they must've just freeze-dried last year's leftovers and served 'em up again this year."

"Whatsat, Skid?"

"Nothin', Joe," he said, looking over at the muscle-bound man who sat at his side. "Just bitchin' about the food, as usual."

"So... You gonna eat that?"

"Nah. You can have it," McCormick replied, switching trays and smiling slightly as his fellow inmate dug in. "I don't see how you do it, Joe," he said finally, after watching several minutes of non-stop eating. "It's like you're chowin' down on a grade A-1 steak instead of the nameless slop they pass off as food around this place."

"All what you make it," Joe said, slurping at his coffee. "If they wanna call it food, I'm not gonna argue the fine points. You just got the blues tonight, Skid. A real bad case of the Christmas Blues."

"Yeah, I know," McCormick sighed. "It's bad enough being here the rest of the year, but Christmas... That's the worst."

"Yeah. Not being with your family at Christmas is really the pits. You got any family around here, Skid?"

"Uh, no." He stood, starting to move off. "Not around here."

Feeling the eyes of the many guards glued to his back, McCormick walked out into the dirty, walled-in courtyard euphemistically labeled the 'recreation area'. Lighting a cigarette, he stood leaning against a wall and tried to concentrate on watching the half-hearted basketball game in progress.

Wish they'd turn that music off, he thought grumpily, as scratchy-sounding Christmas carols blared through the loudspeakers. Damn. Why did Joe have to ask about family? It's depressing enough just being here. The last thing he needed right now was to be reminded that nobody gave a happy damn. Well...not nobody, he carefully amended.

He had felt the grin threatening to crack his face when he had opened the Christmas card a few days earlier. A beautiful card from the equally beautiful Kate Murphy. She was something special, and the few times she had come to visit had really made a difference. Helped him hold on to his sanity as the monotonous days ran together, each day the same as the one before. But nice as she was, still...family. It was such a special word.

"Bet ol' Hardcastle's enjoying his Christmas Eve," he mumbled, squatting down and sitting back on his heels. "Probably got a wife and kids...grandkids, maybe. A big tree with a pile of presents underneath. Turkey and dressing with all the trimmings. Old bastard. It's not fair. Bet he never even thinks about the guys he sent up. Never even thinks of us at all..."

"Hey, Mac! Let's move it," came the guard's voice.

McCormick looked up, surprised to see that the ballgame had ended without his noticing; that the other inmates were heading back inside to their cells.

'Losing my mind,' he thought morosely as he joined the others. 'And it's all your fault, Hardcastle. God, I hope I never have to lay eyes on you when I get out of here. Once was enough in this lifetime. In fact,' he smiled ruefully as the doors clanged shut behind him, 'Once was one time too many.'

*** *** ***

Hardcastle switched off the lights of his ancient pickup as he pulled into the drive at Gull's-Way. The sight of the dark house was depressing after all the bright holiday lights he had passed on his way home.

"Gonna start saying 'Bah! Humbug!' if I don't snap outta this," he lectured himself as he went inside. Shuffling through the day's mail, he set aside several envelopes that obviously contained Christmas cards, adding them to the small collection carelessly strewn across his desk. The package from Aunt May and Aunt Zora lay to one side where he had carefully placed it, waiting to be opened on Christmas Day.

Passing through the den, he turned on the television before continuing on into the kitchen where he began to prepare a turkey sandwich. One thing he had plenty of at Christmas was turkey; courtesy of the world's most devoted housekeeper. Sara always

felt badly about his being alone during the holidays, but as usual he had overridden her protests and insisted that she be with her own family. Besides...as much as he enjoyed Sara's presence, he didn't really want her there at Christmas. It wasn't her fault, and he couldn't begin to explain it to her, but somehow, having her there would make it worse. It rekindled too many remembrances of past Christmas days when she and Nancy had taken over the kitchen to such an extent that he had christened it 'Hardcastle's Bakery and Deli'. Oh, those were the days, alright. Gone now...and growing ever more faint, though he was loathe to admit it. A man couldn't live on memories, precious though they were.

He frowned at the television as he walked back into the den with his sandwich. Christmas with Perry Como. Big deal.

Sitting down at his desk, he considered for a moment, then reached for his aunts' gift. "Ah, what the hell. Close enough to Christmas, and I'll probably want to sleep in, anyway." He tore through the outer wrapping paper, cursing under his breath at all the tape. Aunt Zora had always known how to keep him out of his presents until it was time.

"Hah!" He snorted appreciatively as he looked at the box's contents. His aunts dispised his taste in clothes, but they both catered to it since they knew he wouldn't wear their gift otherwise. The bright red sweatsuit was perfect, and he could only guess that the cookie tin full of crumbs had originally been some of Aunt May's famous homemade chocolate chip cookies. Smiling, he sampled a large crumb. Delicious. He would definitely call them tomorrow to say thanks.

"Sooo..." He idly tapped his fingers on the desk. What to do now, he wondered. It was too early for bed, and there sure wasn't anything on television worth watching if you're over the mental age of twelve. His eyes drifted down to the bottom right-hand drawer where a very special set of files had been placed. Six names. Six men he had sent to prison for varying reasons. They would all be getting out within the next year, and one of them was going to be his 'Tonto'. He hoped. Sometimes the plan seemed too far-fetched for words, but, dammit, he couldn't just retire and do nothing. He'd go crazy with boredom in no time. A little 'Lone Rangering' on the side. Just nose around a bit on some of the ones that shouldn't have got away. Absolutely by the book and legal. But he couldn't do it alone...being truthful, he wouldn't want to. That, plus the fact that whoever he chose as his assistant, you could bet he'd get that sonofagun straightened out.

Pulling the files out, he glanced through them quickly, setting some aside and focusing his attention on the ones he had narrowed his choice down to: J.J. Beal, or Mark McCormick. The two men were so similar in some ways, yet total opposites in others. Both good-looking, sharp talking con-men, and both of them two-time losers. One more conviction, and they'd be down for the count. How the hell to choose between them, though, because his head was saying one, and his gut was saying the other.

"Beal..." he muttered, rubbing at his chin, "is definitely smarter. At least, better educated. And a lot more sophisticated than McCormick. Could be dangerous, no denying that. Might be a real criminal mentality lurking behind that Pretty Boy face. Hard to tell with old J.J. Just lets you see what he wants you to see. Get him on the straight and narrow, though, and he could really amount to something. He's got the brains; he just needs to use 'em the right way."

He sighed as he closed Beal's folder and replaced it with McCormick's. "You, on the other hand," he addressed the file, "are an uneducated, wise-ass pain in the butt. Definitely not a criminal mentality. Question with you, kiddo... Is there any mentality? You can't be very smart, 'cause you wouldn't be in prison for such a stupid reason if you were. And, goin' by what I saw in my courtroom, you're about as sophisticated as the average twelve-year-old. So why am I still considering you!?"

Hardcastle crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair, laughing quietly to him-

self. Hell. There was no getting around it, he just plain liked McCormick better than he liked Beal. There was something about that kid... But, he thought, bringing himself back down to earth and matters practical, 'liking' shouldn't have anything to do with it. Who could do the job better - That was what his decision would have to be based on. None of this emotional hoo-hah. After all, it wasn't like he was looking for a friend; what he was going to need was a capable, hard-working assistant. Somebody that'll be constantly on the ball, able to cope with whatever difficult situations that might come up.

Tightening his lips, Hardcastle sat forward and stared intently at the two folders. Using the guidelines he had just set, the choice was simple. With a pang of regret he closed McCormick's folder and filed it away. Beal. That was it. The decision was made.

He wished, as he turned to watch the flickering television, that he could feel happier about it.

*** *** ***

McCormick was entering his cell for lock-up when he felt the guard's hand clamp down on his shoulder.

"Hey, McCormick, don't you ever pick up your mail?"

"Mail?" He looked down at the slender envelope that the guard held out to him, taking it and breaking into a broad smile as he noticed the return address. "Oh...thanks," he added belatedly to the man's retreating back.

"Whatcha got, Skid?" His cellmate, Teddy Hollins, hopped up from his bunk to lean curiously over McCormick's shoulder.

"Give me time to open it, Ted, okay?"

"Yeah, man. Just wondering. Florida, huh?"

McCormick turned away, sinking down on his bunk and seeking a little privacy from his cellmate's incessant questioning. He liked Teddy, the guy was easy to get along with as cellmates went, but sometimes his enthusiasm could be a bit overwhelming.

The letter was from Johnny 'Flip' Johnson, and the news it contained brought McCormick back to his feet with a whoop of glee.

"I don't believe it!" He shouted, staring wide-eyed, first at the letter, then at Teddy. He began to re-read the scrawling message, mumbling aloud as he went along.

"Well, I can see it's not a Christmas card, so what the hell is it? You gonna get sprung early, or something?" Teddy asked, clearly unable to curb his inquisitive nature.

"No, no," McCormick said, waving the letter about energetically. "This is from Flip Johnson down in Daytona. You've heard me talk about him, Ted. He's the greatest. Closest thing to a father I ever had. Now, listen to this," he went on, thumping Teddy on the knee in his excitement, "He's gonna be moving out here to California! He's not sure yet how soon he'll be makin' the move, but this new car design he's been workin' on shows a lot of promise and some of the big industrial guys out here on the West Coast are showing some real interest. And listen to this part, are you ready?"

"Of course I'm ready," Hollins said. "C'mon, Mark, you're beatin' my leg black and blue while you stand there grinin' like some kind of demented leprechaun. What gives?"

"Okay," McCormick motioned for Teddy to be quiet so he could savor the words as he read them, "'I'm going to want your help, Mark. More than that, I'm going to need your help. The Coyote's a real dream machine, but it still has some flaws that I know you'll be able to help me out with. And of course I'm hoping that you'll want to drive it. It'll be just like the old days...only better.'" McCormick stopped, carefully refolding the letter. "And then there's a bunch more, all personal stuff." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "My God, Teddy. Can you believe it?"

"Now, let me get this straight. This buddy of yours from Florida is gonna move out here. And he's got some kind of super-car? And you're gonna get to drive it for him?"

McCormick nodded, realization of how much the letter meant sinking in, silencing him into a stunned muteness.

"Well, Christ, Skid. That's great! I mean...you really weren't expecting this, were you? Man, what a Christmas present."

"Christmas present?" McCormick echoed, having, temporarily, forgotten all about the season and his earlier depression. "Yeah... I guess you could call it that, couldn't you?"

"You see?" Hollins grinned cheerfully as he flopped down onto his bunk. "I told you not to let yourself get so down in the dumps. You never know what's gonna happen. What's waitin' around that next corner."

McCormick smiled as he looked at his ever-optimistic, though not very often realistic, cellmate. For once in his life, Teddy was absolutely right. Expect the unexpected, and hope for the best. If a miracle like this could happen, then anything was possible.

Anything at all...

*** *** ***

Hardcastle hummed an off-key version of "Silent Night" as he brushed his teeth and prepared for bed. Catching himself, he sighed as he put the toothbrush away in its holder. It was silent, all right; he stood quietly and listened. No outside noise penetrated the thick walls and closed windows of Gull's-Way, and the only inner noise was the occasional creak or groan that all houses gave as they aged.

Turning off the lights and sitting on the edge of his bed, the memories he had pushed aside all evening came flooding in, and he finally allowed them free rein. He wasn't ashamed of the tear that trickled down his cheek a few moments later.

"Remembrance of things past," he whispered into the darkness as the echoes of earlier Christmas Eve's played themselves out in his mind. Laughter and shouts of glee as he had played Santa Claus for a wide-eyed and wonder-struck little boy. Nancy's quiet grace as she had descended the stairway, smiling down on her husband and son, looking for all the world like an angel who had taken earthly form.

Memories, though, were a bittersweet pleasure and he took a ragged breath as he wiped his face dry.

Standing, he walked over to the bedroom window and looked out at the starlit sky. It seemed that a long buried need was beginning to surface; a need to come to some sort of decision, though he wasn't sure what, and he stood motionless for a long while.

A bridge began to form in his mind's eye, with himself standing on one side, clinging to the past and the happiness he had known. But the bridge was beckoning, urging him to begin a new journey towards a future that was yet unknown; an uncharted path full of obstacles and dangers, yet with the promise of untold joy if he but dared to take the first step.

He smiled, bemused at the metaphysical thoughts. They weren't usually his style. But there was something special about this night, and whether it was a gentle prod from those he had loved the most, or his own subconscious thoughts, it didn't matter. The message was clear.

//It's time to start looking forward. Get on with your life.//

He laughed softly as he remembered Nancy's oft-used words; a phrase that had never seemed more appropriate. "Move it or lose it, Milt," he said, smiling out the window at a particularly bright star in the northern sky. "Move it or lose it..."

*** *** ***

McCormick lay in his bunk, eyes wide open as he turned over on his stomach and pillowed his head in his forearms, seeking a comfortable position. Too excited to sleep, he reached out to touch the comforting reality of Flip's letter. A small part of him,

he knew, was afraid to go to sleep. Afraid that he would wake up to find there was no letter...that it had all been a dream.

"Awww, Flip," he whispered as his thumb stroked back and forth over the envelope, "You can't know, buddy. You can't know how much this means."

Smiling into the darkness, he let his thoughts wander as he wove the pattern of his suddenly hopeful and bright new future. Less than three months until he would be out, and now the prospect of being able to race again. So much more than he had dared to hope for. And to be with Flip again. The one person who, without a doubt, would have been a regular visitor if he hadn't been living on the other side of the country. Flip had never doubted his innocence, and it felt so good to know that. That was going to be the best part, to have someone' around again who cared. It had been so long since anyone had cared.

He chuckled as the image of Judge Hardcastle's face imposed itself into his imaginings, all thoughts of never wanting to see the man again now blasted away.

'Damned old donkey,' he thought, 'I'm gonna show you, you just watch. Don't know why it's so important that I show you, but it is. Gonna prove to you how wrong you were about me. Rub your judgemental nose in it. Nope, Hardcase. We're not finished yet, you and me. Not by a long shot.'

His eyes closed and he twitched slightly as the vision of his nemesis smiled before it faded away. "What're you grinnin' at?" He whispered drowsily as he gave in to much needed sleep. "Gonna show you... 's not over yet... you and me... you'll see..."

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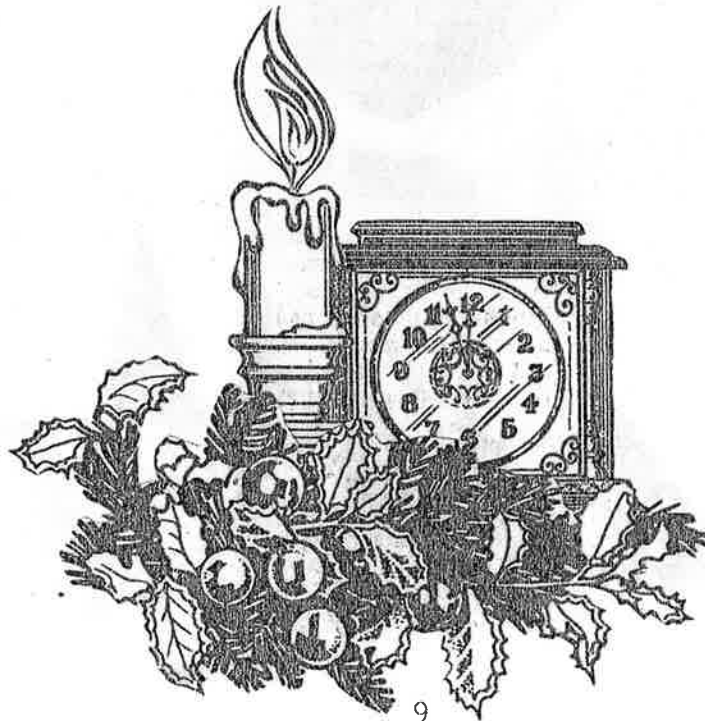
NEW YEAR'S EVE -- 1982-83

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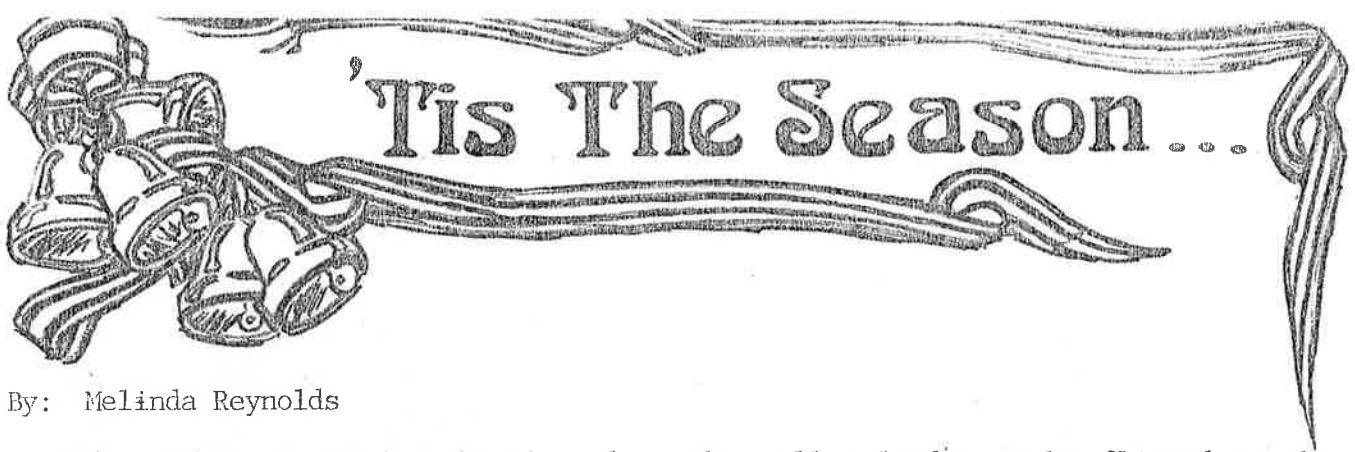
Hardcastle picked up the champagne glass, smiling at the other party goer's who had gathered around for his turn at making the toast.

Raising the glass high, he felt a sense of happy anticipation as he spoke:

"To the New Year. To the future. May it be full of surprises... and may they bring us joy."







By: Melinda Reynolds

Judge Milton C. Hardcastle glanced at the wall calendar as he flipped on the coffee maker. Two more weeks. And already the now familiar and expected sense of dread was stealing in. It would be so much easier, he thought ruefully, if friends and neighbors didn't try to make things "so much easier" for him. This year, he knew, would be no exception; in a way, it would be worse -- last year, he had spent the change-over from 1982 to 1983 chasing J. J. Beale across three states. But he had accepted Judge Williams' offer, when she visited Gulls-Way only one day after he'd returned with Beale. Never again would he make plans a year in advance; and as the invitation had been intended for him alone, he still had plans for his resident ex-con.

Smiling to himself, he took a large envelope from between the pages of the Betty Crocker Cookbook, the one place he'd been sure it would be safe from curious eyes. After all, the Christmas holidays were a time to spend with family and friends -- and everyone should visit their family at least once a year, and Christmas was as good a time as any. Just because he was miserable, didn't mean everyone else had to be . . .

*** *** ***

Mark McCormick yawned loudly and stretched prodigiously, warning Hardcastle of his approach. The early morning sun beat warmly on the patio, the ocean breeze cool and refreshing; hard to believe it was already two weeks into December. Life had been somewhat calm lately, or as calm as it was ever likely to get around Hardcase, and he wondered, with a certain amount of anticipation, how the Judge would celebrate the upcoming Christmas holiday - in grand style, no doubt, as befitted an estate like this. Well, he certainly wouldn't complain; anything would be better than the last two Christmases in prison. Christmas at San Quentin wasn't likely to make K-Tel's Top Ten. Grinning, he decided to be on his best behavior; not only to give Ol' Hardcase reason to wonder what he was up to now, but maybe make things a little easier for himself. He'd wait until January to restore Hardcastle's faith in people, and start the New Year off right . . .

*** *** ***

"Morning, kiddo." Hardcastle didn't look up from the file folder, absently thumbing through it as he munched on toast.

"Humm, I think it's still yesterday, Judge," McCormick said as he poured them both some coffee; he frowned at the manila folder. "What's that?"

"Our next target."

"You're kiddin'."

"No, I'm not. Why do you think you're here? Lots of work to do, and not much time to do it."

McCormick relaxed, the grin returning; Hardcase no doubt wanted to wrap it up (so to speak) before the 24th. "Who, or what, is it this time?" He helped himself to half of everything on the table.

"Nothing that should prove too taxing for you either mentally or physically. I need this guy followed for a few weeks; just report where he goes and who he sees.

If he makes one certain contact, I'll have him. Think you can do that?"

"Yeah, Judge, I think so. Who's he gonna see that he's not supposed to?" McCormick studied the photo of the darkly handsome, mid-40's or so businessman-type that Hardcastle had tossed to him.

"Guy you probably heard of - he's been in jail a lot, too." Ignoring McCormick's offended glare, he continued, "Jackson Wilson, drug kingpin; all I need is a photo of the two of them in the same room, and it's 'Case closed'. Thing is, Wilson's leaving the country on the 20th, so that doesn't give us much time."

"Contrary to popular belief, Hardcase, I do not know every friggin' crook on or off the street, in or out of prison. Give me a picture of this guy Wilson, and I'll get the evidence for you."

Grinning, Hardcastle pulled another photo from the folder, held it out. "Didn't think you did, kid."

*** *** ***

"Well?"

"Well', what?" Hardcastle watched with carefully concealed amusement as McCormick fell into the armchair, juggling a plate of sandwiches, a bowl of popcorn, and a glass of iced tea. By some miracle, he managed all three without mishap.

"Com'on, Hardcase, it's been almost four days since you took the pics down to Carlton -- and you haven't yelled at me once since, so it must've worked, huh?"

Hardcastle helped himself to a roast beef and Swiss, took the chair across from McCormick. "Yeah, it worked. And if you ever do anything like that again..."

"What? I can't be in danger unless you put me there?"

"Right. I'm an expert; I know what I'm doin'. While you, on the other hand..."

"If it's any consolation, I wasn't planning on anything heroic. How was I to know Wilson would bring a guard dog? At least they didn't suspect my real purpose. My 'drunk' routine is infallible."

"Yeah, well, you did okay." He studied the remaining half of the sandwich, suddenly uneasy and unwilling to broach the subject that had been nagging at him for days. "Uhh, look... I've been meanin' to tell ya... I sorta have a previous engagement for the Christmas holiday - this was before I brought you here... and, well, uh, they didn't know about you at the time I accepted, and--"

"Hey, Judge, that's okay; you don't have to explain anything to me." A cold emptiness settled in the pit of his stomach, and he looked away, disguising his disappointment - something he'd grown quite adept at over the years. Now he understood why his earlier comments about "decking the halls" had been brushed aside so abruptly. Well, he considered, staying at Gull's-Way for a day or so wouldn't be unbearable. There were certainly worse places.

"Don't look like a kid standing in line for the circus getting to the ticket counter just as they sell out." Hardcastle tossed the envelope to him, "Here, this should cheer you up a bit."

McCormick sat the sandwiches and popcorn on the side table, picked up the envelope and shook it. "It will, huh? I don't know, Judge, it's too small to hold a blonde." Pulling out the contents, his smile wavered, then faded. "Plane tickets?" He read the destination. "Atlantic City?"

"Yeah, well, I figured you could find your way home from there, since that info's not in my files. There's another envelope in there with a couple hundred in it," Hardcastle added gruffly, waiting for the expression of gratitude, wanting to get it over with, and somewhat surprised when it never came. He glanced over at McCormick, who was still staring, tight-lipped, at the tickets. "It's enough, isn't it? If not, I can--"

"No." McCormick interrupted sharply, "No, it's more than enough." He rose from the armchair, heading for the door. "You've done more than enough, Judge."

Hardcastle was too surprised to say or do anything as McCormick left the den. He

went over to the window, watched as the younger man went to the Gatehouse. He had meant for the trip home to be a pleasant surprise, and it obviously wasn't...either that, or McCormick had been expecting something different. He had brushed aside the hints and suggestions to prepare for the Christmas holidays; understandable on McCormick's part, he was probably used to getting together with friends and relatives for the holidays. Christmas didn't hold the kind of empty despair for McCormick that he inevitably experienced, no matter how many people were around.

But...oddly enough...he wished he could cancel out on Judge Williams' Christmas weekend.. Not because it would just be a way of 'getting through the holidays', but because... well, damn it, he preferred to stay at Gull's-Way with McCormick, with his childlike enthusiasm, Christmas cheer, and all.

*** *** ***

McCormick made no acknowledgement of Hardcastle's presence as the Judge entered the Gatehouse. Pausing at the foot of the stairs, he waited until McCormick came down them, battered suitcase in hand. He caught the ex-con's upper arm, halting him. "McCormick, wait--"

The eyes that looked steadily into his held the same closed, shuttered look that had been there the first few weeks after he had arrived at Gull's-Way. "For what? Don't put yourself out on my account, Judge; you didn't have to lie, or bribe me. I mean, I can see where I'd be an embarrassment to you... Kinda hard to explain to your rich and important friends about the ex-con hanging around." He placed the envelope in Hardcastle's jacket pocket. "Tell ya what, Hardcase, you take these and go to New Jersey; and while you're there, use the extra money to get yourself a new heart." With that, he headed for the front door.

"Where're you goin'? You're still in my custody, you know."

"Out. See ya in a coupla days, Judge."

As the door shut behind McCormick, Hardcastle realized he had just taken a giant step backward where McCormick was concerned.

*** *** ***

A few hours of steady driving, slightly above the speed limit, brought McCormick to the southern outskirts of L.A. Several minutes were spent searching side streets, until he finally located the service station/garage that belonged to an old racing buddy. As he hadn't seen him for nearly six years, he hoped the guy still remembered him. He turned off the narrow street, parked among other aged vehicles awaiting a multitude of repairs.

Sauntering into the garage area, hands in his jeans pockets, he drawled, "I hear you-all could use a highly proficient and experienced mechanic around here."

There was a low chuckle, and the sole mechanic raised up from under the hood of an eight-year-old sedan. The voice that answered was straight from the Tennessee hills. "Shore could. Know of anybody?"

"Off-hand, no; guess you're stuck with me." McCormick matched the other's broad grin as they shook hands, "How've you been, you old Tennessee stump-kicker?"

"Not bad. Could never figure out, though, why the folks around these parts never come around lessen' they need somethin'." The warm smile softened the angular features. "What'cha need, Skid?"

"A job. Just for a coupla days."

Pale grey eyes lit up, and he asked, both anxious and hopeful, "You're not kidding around, are you? None of my employees will work over the Christmas holidays; and Gloria threatened to take the kids and go back to Nashville if I worked another Christmas. I'd pay you top dollar if you'd fill in. I know I can trust you to do a good job and look after the place."

"I'd be glad to do it, Harry. Uh, do you mind paying by the day...and in cash?"

"Hell, no; in fact, I'll give ya a day's pay in advance." He led the way into the

office, unlocked a cash box. "Where are ya stayin'?"

"Nowhere at the moment. Got any suggestions?"

"Well, all of the nice places are booked up; but there's a rooming house a few blocks from here. It's...not too fancy, but cheap."

"It'll be fine."

"Okay, then go get settled. Then get back here - there's enough work here for three men. Believe me, you'll more than earn what I'm payin' ya."

*** *** ***

Hardcastle glanced at the desk clock; he was over an hour late. Even before getting dressed, he knew he wouldn't be going. Picking up the phone, he called Judge Williams. It took a considerable amount of apologizing, and firmness, to convince her that nothing was wrong, but he had just changed his mind. Thanking her for her thoughtfulness, he replaced the receiver, leaned back in the chair.

He hadn't heard a word from McCormick since he'd left two days ago, and it was already the 24th. The quickest way to find McCormick would probably make the ex-con even angrier, but he decided to risk it.

Carlton's response was incredulous, "You want me to do what?"

"Find McCormick."

There was a heavy sigh. "What's he done? What's the charge?"

"Nothing, and nothing."

Several seconds of heavier silence followed, then, "Milton, go bother someone else; I'm not in the mood for this."

"Look, Kel, I'm not askin' for a lot, here. Just have your patrol cars keep an eye out for the Coyotote. How hard can it be to locate?"

"All right, all right. I know I'm not getting rid of you until I agree. But I'm not bringing him in, not without a charge. If anyone sights the car, I'll give you a call. And that's all I'm going to do."

"I really appreciate this, Lieutenant; and I won't forget it."

"Do me a favor, Judge: Forget it."

*** *** ***

Christmas Day came and went, and the next; still there was no word from either McCormick or Carlton. He should have known that if McCormick didn't want to be found he wouldn't be, not for a few days, anyway; he had had too much practice hiding out. He called off the police search, taking McCormick at his word that he'd return.

On the morning of the third day after Christmas, Hardcastle heard the familiar, and welcome, roar of the Coyote flying down the long driveway. It halted outside the garage, the thrumming engine switched off, the ensuing silence nearly deafening. Getting up from the poolside chair, Hardcastle went into the den; he had just seated himself behind the desk when the front door slammed. That was par for the course. McCormick always let the door swing shut on its own, and it invariably slammed. Scattering papers across the desktop, he was looking over a few when McCormick appeared in the doorway.

"Morning, Judge. Breakfast ready?"

He hadn't been sure what McCormick's attitude would be after five days' absence, but this wasn't it. He looked up to see the ex-con leaning against the door jamb, as if he had just returned from an errand. The uncertainty he had felt was fast becoming anger, and he was about to blast away when McCormick, with a wry smile, entered the den, crossed to his desk, and placed a package on it.

Switching mental tracks, Hardcastle grumbled, "What's this? A belated Christmas present?"

McCormick sat sideways in the leather chair opposite the desk. "More of a peace offering."

"Yours would have been early, if you hadn't taken off so quickly. And," he added with a sharp look, "Didn't bother to let me know where you were. I could send you

back for that, you know."

"Shit. If you were gonna do that, you'd've done it long before this. You gonna open it?"

"Pretty sure of yourself, ain't ya?" Hardcastle yanked the bow-tied ribbon, tore off the gold foil wrapping. Inside the box was a briefcase, and he ran his hand over the fine-grained leather, the brass fittings glinting in the light. "Where'd you get this?"

"I didn't steal it, okay?"

"Where did you get the money for this?"

McCormick grinned, knowing Hardcastle was still upset at his practically throwing his own gift back in his face. The best way to defuse Hardcastle's temper was to keep him off balance. "That is the result of 'four days' labor, plus a bonus. Which, by the way, was, total, almost three times what you pay me for a month of slaving."

"You were gone five days. What did you do the extra day?"

McCormick shrugged. "Paid some bills, took it easy, came back ho--, back to Gull's-Way. Like I said I would."

"Hmmm," Hardcastle nodded, smiling to himself; he'd caught the near-admission that McCormick thought of Gull's-Way as "home". A warm, comfortable feeling was flowing over him, one he hadn't felt in years, didn't expect to feel again. "This is nice; appreciate it."

The grin broadened. "You're welcome."

"As I mentioned earlier, you took off before I could give you your other present!"

McCormick sat up. "What other present?"

"On the couch." He nodded past McCormick's shoulder.

"Hardcase, the blonde! You shouldn't have--" McCormick's feet hit the floor.

"Well, I didn't, so don't get too excited. God, you're impossible."

"But lovable," McCormick offered, going to the matching leather sofa. A good-sized box was waiting there. He had it unwrapped in seconds. Inside was an olive-green, fur-trimmed parka, designed for sub-zero temperatures. McCormick pulled it out, held it up, and looked at Hardcastle questioningly, seeming to doubt his sanity.

"Well, I thought you'd be in the wilds of New Jersey. And since your California wardrobe didn't include cold weather gear..." Hardcastle shrugged, trailing off. "You can exchange it."

"Not for the world." McCormick tried it on, the fit perfect. "How'd you know the size?"

"I do the laundry, remember?"

"Oh." McCormick draped the coat on the sofa arm, sat down next to it; his manner became serious, and he spoke quietly. "It was a nice thought, Judge. And with anyone else, it wouldn't have backfired on you. It's...not your fault, nothing you've done - it's just... Well, the last place on Earth I want to go to is New Jersey."

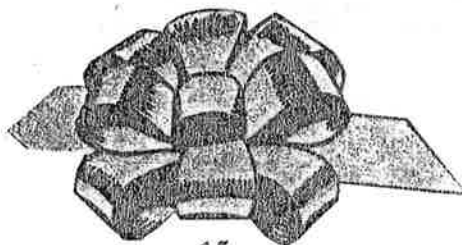
"I see," Hardcastle said, though he didn't, not really.

"And I'm sorry I acted the way I did, instead of explaining. But...I was really looking forward to a 'normal' Christmas. After spending the last two in a dump like Quentin, I figured being here would be nothing less than fantastic. Then I end up spending this Christmas in a dump also, a step above a jail cell."

"It'll be different next year, kid. Ya got the Hardcastle Guarantee!"

"Yeah." The gentle smile turned to quiet laughter, "But with my luck, next year you'll be in jail..."

Hardcastle grinned, "Never happen, kiddo; never happen."





The Descent Of Christmas Past...

By: Cynthia Shannon

The worst misfortune that can happen to an ordinary man is to have an extraordinary father.

Austin O'Malley

Christmas had descended on Gulls-Way. Garland twisted around the porch railing while tiny white lights illuminated shrubs and trees on the grounds. Inside the house, the signs of the holiday season were rapidly threatening to choke off all life. A nine foot tree with countless lights and ornaments thrown on in a decidedly haphazard manner dominated the study. An eclectic combination of decorations had found themselves tacked and hung from every available overhang and door frame. Candles flickered from tables and mantel pieces and the scents of bayberry and cinnamon fought for superiority. Mark McCormick, the self-appointed purveyor of Christmas spirit, had worked his magic on Gulls-Way and Milton Hardcastle was starting to regret the day he gave his permission.

"McCormick! Where are you?" Hardcastle yelled from the study, the last room of the house he had searched for the suddenly elusive young man. "For someone who's always underfoot, he sure can disappear when I want something done." he muttered under his breath. But the study was empty, of anything human, of course. There was barely room to walk around as Hardcastle found out when he tripped over the wooden reindeer near his desk.

"Damn you, McCormick, this place looks like the store room at Macy's," he said, heading for the gatehouse. Whenever McCormick wanted to avoid work, he could always be found in the gatehouse, engaged in something that was guaranteed to keep him occupied for hours, like cleaning the closet or cataloging his albums.

In this case, Hardcastle was only half right. Mark was in the gatehouse, but not for the reasons that Hardcastle thought. He was hard at work at his desk, head bent and shoulders hunched down, his right hand moving across a page deliberately. Hearing the door downstairs from the loft open and Hardcastle's voice bellow from below, Mark's head jerked up and after only a moment's indecision, he started to scoop things off the desk and shove them into a drawer. His heart was thumping in his chest and he tried to calm down before the Judge reached the top step. Recovering somewhat from almost being caught doing something he definitely didn't want Hardcastle seeing, he tried to adopt the expected put upon air that was his signature.

"Gee, Hardcase, didn't you ever hear of knocking?"

"Why should I knock in my own house?" he answered, reaching the top step. "What are you doing in here anyway, couldn't you hear me yelling?"

Mark had now totally regained his composure. "Oh, that. I thought a lovesick moose had roamed onto the grounds."

"Cute, McCormick, real cute. Listen, you're supposed to be cleaning up all that mess in the study from when you decorated the tree ... the place looks like Santa's workshop blew up in there."

Mark stood up and started to move towards the stairs. "Okay, okay, I'll clean up. All you had to do was ask."

"I did ask! What did you think I was doing, singing opera?"

But there was no retort, since Mark was already down the stairs and opening the door to leave. Hardcastle turned to leave, but something about McCormick's behavior made him look at the drawer that the younger man had so hastily closed. The Judge hadn't missed the nervousness, as he never missed much, and McCormick's attempted recovery was seen as just that: a cover up. //So, the kid is hiding something, uh? Probably my present...// Suppressing an urge not to ruin his surprise before Christmas and giving in to an intense curiosity, Hardcastle reached over and opened the drawer.....

|| * || * ||

"Mark, honey, can you help me with the tinsel?" asked Donna McCormick as she reached for the box from the Five & Dime. It wasn't the best tinsel, but then again, it wasn't going to adorn the best of trees. She and her young son couldn't afford much more than a small tree and even then, she had saved for weeks to buy the decorations. Some were left over from her own childhood; pieces she had managed to take with her when she had left home so many years ago, but most of them were Woolworth specials. The first Christmas since Sonny had decided that he wasn't cut out to be a family man didn't promise to be the best, but Donna was determined to at least make it happy for Mark. After all, five-year-olds were supposed to enjoy Christmas, not sit and stare, which was exactly what Mark was doing now.

"Mark, did you hear me?" she persisted. Mark was sitting on the floor in the small living room. He was absently playing with one of his toys. He didn't look up when she spoke for the second time. Donna gave up on the tinsel for the time being, and went over to sit next to him on the floor.

"Come on, honey, don't you want to help me decorate the tree for Santa?"

"No," he answered.

Donna put her arm around his shoulders, only to have it shrugged off suddenly. Trying not to lose her temper, Donna moved away from him slightly. Mark had been almost unbearable the last few weeks, talking back to her for no reason, disobeying, and generally being a brat. At first she was relieved; this, at least, was better than the near-trance he'd been in since Sonny had left a few months ago. But her relief had turned to anger and disappointment a few weeks ago when Mark had turned into an angry, bitter child. It was time for the mother to lay down the law.

"Look, Mark, I know you don't feel very happy right now; but Santa is going to visit in a few days, and he's going to bring you new toys, but only if you've been a good boy. Don't you want Santa to visit you?"

"Santy Claus isn't gonna come here," he answered with a firm shake of his head.

Mark's words hit Donna like a physical blow. The empty place inside her threatened to overtake her whole being, but she bit back tears to answer him. "Sweetheart, look at me," she asked softly.

Mark raised his head to look at her, a determined set to his chin.

"Why did you say Santa isn't going to come here?"

Mark pursed his lips together and furrowed his brow before answering, seriously pondering the question. It would have been funny to see a five-year-old looking so thoughtful had the situation not been so sad.

"Because he only brings toys to houses with Mommies and Daddies."

"Who told you that?" Donna asked, a little too sharply. That's all she needed, some little friend telling Mark these terrible things just to be mean.

He shrugged and looked down at the toy truck he'd been playing with. Donna knew her son well enough to know that he wasn't going to say anymore, and she had to admit to herself that she really didn't want to hear the answer. She reached over and pulled him into a hug, squeezing so tightly he started to squirm after a few seconds. She relaxed her grip and instead of letting him go, she lifted him up and placed him in her lap, where she proceeded to rock him gently. They sat like that for a long time, the tree and Christmas forgotten for the time being.

*

Christmas morning arrived without much fanfare in the small apartment. Outside, the weather was equally dismal, offering up a grey sky that could only produce a slight drizzle. Donna had managed to buy a few toys for Mark, and he sat now in the middle of the floor, opening up the last one. He had cheered up a bit, but he wasn't exactly acting like a normal five-year-old on Christmas morning. Watching him as he opened up the coloring book and crayons, Donna had a strong sense of *deja vu*. Was it such a short time ago that Sonny walked out on the day of Mark's fifth birthday? It seemed like a lifetime ago to Donna, but to Mark's sense of time, it could have happened only yesterday.

"Mark, do you like what Santa brought you?"

Mark got up from the floor and walked over to where Donna was sitting on the couch. He hopped up next to her, coloring book in one hand, crayons in the other. The result was half the crayons on the floor and a coloring book squashed between them. Donna rescued the book before any further damage could be done. "It's okay, honey, you can pick up the crayons later," she said when Mark started to get down from the couch. He settled in next to her, still not answering her question.

"Well, do you like your toys?" She asked again, putting her arm around him. She looked down at the top of his head, waiting for an answer. In a moment, the light brown curls she had been looking at were replaced with two large hazel eyes filled with tears.

"Honey, what's wrong?" She was surprised to see him crying, having hoped that she had pulled it off, had made Mark forget Sonny's absence and have a happy Christmas. He had opened his gifts with reckless abandon and for a few precious hours, Donna felt like this Christmas wouldn't be a disaster after all. Now, she found herself looking into two watery eyes and a rapidly quivering lower lip. "Oh, honey, what's wrong?" She pleaded, holding him to her chest.

"Mommy, Santy Claus came to our house..."

"That's right, sweetheart, he did; and he brought you all these wonderful toys, so why are you crying?"

Mark sniffed and wiped his sleeve across his nose. "He didnt bring what I asked for."

"What was that, sweetie," Donna asked, voice trembling. "Tell Mommy. What didn't Santa bring that you asked for?"

Mark blinked, causing more tears to run down his cheeks, "Daddy."

One word, that's all it was, one crummy little word, yet to Donna, it was enough to tear her world apart. She had no answer for her son, and Mark must have sensed that because he got down off the couch and ran to the bedroom, leaving behind spilled crayons and an open coloring book.

"Damn you, Sonny, damn you to Hell," she spat out bitterly. Her eyes were dry, something that didn't surprise her. She was quite certain

there weren't any tears left to flow...

□ * □ * □

.....Hardcastle reached into the drawer and pulled out a tacky Christmas postcard from Las Vegas. There was a picture of showgirl all decked out in an abbreviated version of a Santa suit, blowing a kiss. The lettering said "MERRY KISSMAS FROM LAS VEGAS".

"Has to be from Sonny," Hardcastle said as he turned it over. He felt funny about reading the kid's mail, but it wasn't like McCormick to hide something like this. It was definitely worth a laugh or two, and McCormick was always quick to point out how tacky Sonny could be.

"Merry Christmas, Mark! Vegas is a great place to spend the holidays. You sure you won't change your mind and come out for a few days? Think about it; I got you lined up with a tasty tidbit who's a twin for the one on this card! You know your old man, always lookin' after his kid. Merry Christmas to you and the Judge. Ho Ho Ho! Sonny."

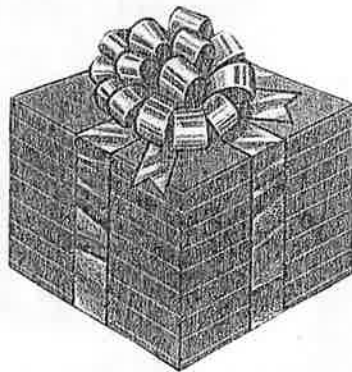
Hardcastle put the postcard back in the drawer and was about to close it when something else caught his eye. When he had walked in on McCormick, it had looked like Mark was writing something, so the postcard couldn't have been what he had been working on so diligently. But there was something else in the drawer, and Hardcastle reached in to take it out. It was greeting card size, but it was made of red construction paper with green lettering on the front. "What the..." Hardcastle read the front of the homemade card, not quite understanding, "Merry Christmas Mom".

"The kid's really lost it," he muttered as he slowly opened the card, looking around guiltily. He was instantly sorry he had said it when read the inside. Feeling like he had unforgivingly intruded on McCormick's privacy, Hardcastle hastily stuffed the card back in the drawer.

He walked over to the window in the loft and looked out. McCormick was outside the front door, hanging a wreath with a hammer and nail. It was a wreath that had been in Nancy's family for years, and Hardcastle had all but forgotten it. But McCormick had found it in the attic yesterday and had insisted that they hang it on the front door. The Judge had argued that the house already had more decorations than a department store, but, as usual, McCormick had won out. The wreath was going up, in the place of honor that it had occupied for countless years before.

Now, as the Judge looked at McCormick alternately hammering the nail and his finger, he knew that he would let Mark hang up a hundred wreaths; just as he was sure he would never forget those words written in the childlike Christmas card:

"I love you, Mom, and I'm sorry. Merry Christmas."



The Twelve Trials of Xmas...

By: Melinda Reynolds



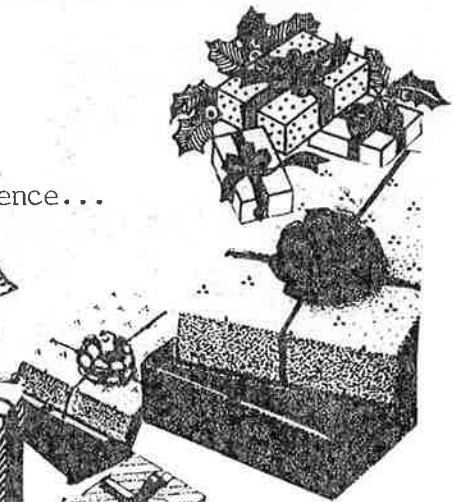
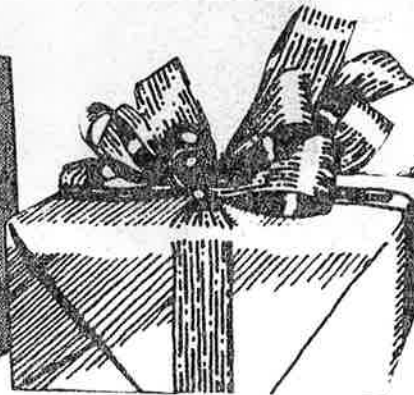
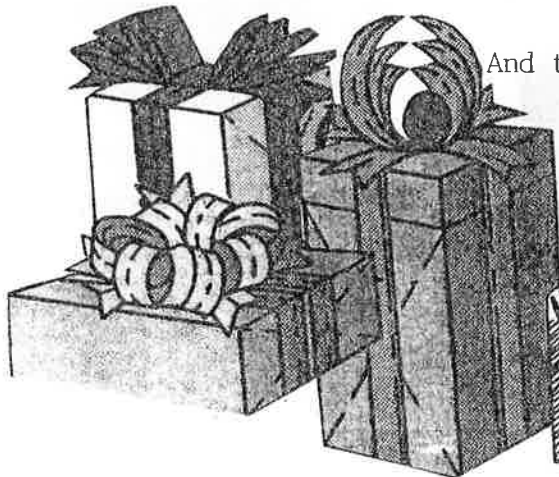
On the Twelfth Day of Christmas, McCormick gave to me:

Twelve bills a owing,
Eleven tickets (speeding),
Ten citations (peace disturbing),
Nine violations (moving),
Eight misdemeanors,
Seven counts of burglary,
Six car repair bills,
Five wrecked cop cars...
Four loads of laundry,
Three busted flower pots,
Two skid marks,
And an empty refrigerator...

On the Twelfth Day of Christmas, the Judge he gave to me:

Twelve chores a waitin',
Eleven gutters cleanin',
Ten dishes washin',
Nine hedges trimmin',
Eight pipes a leakin',
Seven cloths a dustin',
Six rosebeds tendin',
Five acres to mow...
Four 'new' retreads,
Three old T-shirts,
Two baseball caps,

And the Jazzmasters in residence...



--12/12/86