


BACK-TO-BACK

* *Special* *

* *Issue* *



Christmas at

**GULL'S -
WAY**



DJP

Christmas At Gull's-Way

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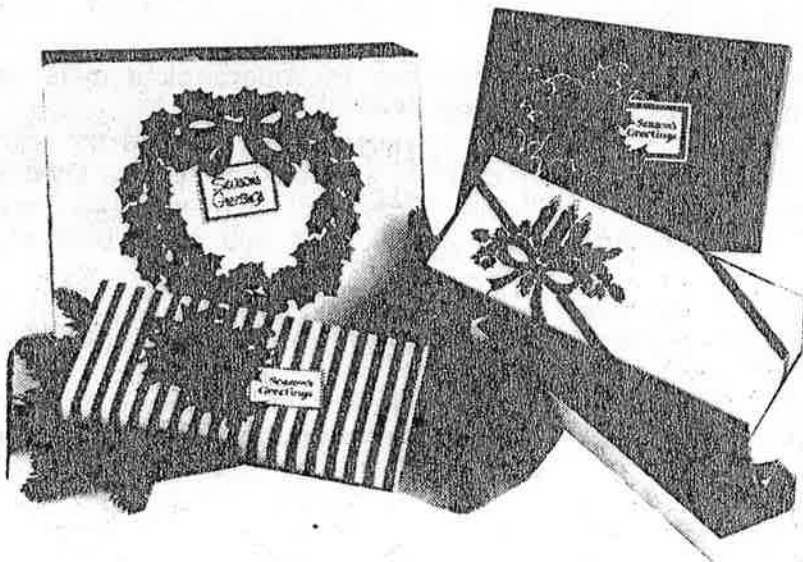
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Christmas

Present



Yesterday's Snowflakes

By: Rowena G. Warner

❄️ "I remember Christmases when I was a kid. Talk about your big trees." Hardcastle leaned back comfortably on the sofa, the eggnog and the Yuletide season giving him a feeling of warmth and contentment. "There was a clump of trees at the back of our farm," he continued, "and Thanksgiving afternoon a whole bunch of us -- aunts, uncles, neighbors and all -- would go out there and mark Christmas trees."

"Mark 'em?" McCormick asked in puzzlement. "What'd you do that for?"

"It was the way we laid claim to a tree," Hardcastle explained. "We'd pick out one and paint our initials on it in yellow paint. My daddy always got first pick because it was his farm. And no one ever sneaked back later and chopped down someone else's tree even though it might be the biggest. People just didn't do that kinda stuff then."

McCormick's eyes were wide with interest. "What'd you do after you marked the tree?"

"We went back early Christmas Eve morning, chopped it down and put the tree on a sled. That way you had a fresh one, not one of those nowadays that they cut in August and put in cold storage for four months," he grumbled. "Anyway, after we got the tree, then we'd gather up some evergreen boughs and holly, and a coupla of us kids would shinny up a tree and get some mistletoe."

Leaning back, McCormick eyed the Judge suspiciously. "Now, come on, you're pulling my leg on that one. Why would you shinny up a tree to get mistletoe? It grows on bushes, doesn't it?"

"Naaww." Hardcastle broke into a wide grin. "Anybody can tell you're a city slicker, kid. Mistletoe is a fungus, sorta like moss, only it grows in the very top of trees, usually oaks."

"Did you ever catch a girl under the mistletoe?" McCormick questioned slyly.

"More the other way around," Hardcastle admitted, his cheeks turning slightly pink at the memories he was obviously recalling. "What can I say?" he shrugged. "The girls liked me." Bristling at McCormick's soft laughter, he demanded, "What's the matter? You find that surprising?"

"Not at all, Judge." There was a look of yearning in McCormick's eyes as he urged, "Tell me more about what you did on Christmas Eve."

Taking another sip of his eggnog, Hardcastle continued, "Well, when we got the tree home, we'd pop popcorn and string it and cranberries on the tree, then make little ornaments out of construction paper and tin foil, and then we'd put candles all over the tree and light 'em up Christmas Eve night. It was a helluva sight, kid, let me tell ya."

"I bet it was," McCormick agreed wistfully.

Hardcastle studied the young man a moment, then asked quietly, "What about you? What were your Christmases like?"

"Nothing really memorable," McCormick sighed, then his voice became more animated. "I do remember the Christmas when I was seven. Mom and I made a special trip to visit my grandparents in the Catskills, and for the occasion my granddad gave me a sled with these sleek, steel runners on it." His eyes glowed at the memory. "We were there for four days and I was outside almost the whole time, trudging up a hill of snow, then jumping on the sled and flying down that hill like

the wind. I guess you could say that was my first race car, and even then I kept wanting to go faster and faster." His excited expression changed as if a dark curtain had suddenly been lowered on his memories. "When we-- When we went home, I had to leave the sled behind because there was no place I could use it where we lived in Jersey. Then my grandfather died the next summer, Grandma moved to an apartment in Manhattan, and I never saw the sled again."

He ended the story in a monotone, but there was haunted look in his eyes that caused Hardcastle to reach over and squeeze the young man's shoulder. "I'm sorry, kid," he sympathized in a suspiciously hoarse voice. "I guess Christmas was a pretty rough time for ya when you were growin' up."

"Yeah, I guess," McCormick admitted low. "The kids at school would talk about their dads dressin' up as Santa Claus, and I used to wonder why my dad hadn't stuck around to do that for me." He paused a moment, a sad smile on his face, then continued in a more casual tone, "You know, though, lookin' back, there's a lot more good memories than I thought."

"Like what?" Hardcastle urged him on.

Propping his heel on the edge of the sofa, McCormick wrapped his arms around his leg, and resting his chin on his knee, he gazed into the fire. "I remember... I remember we used to have this tree, you know, one of those aluminum kind with the pom-poms on the end of the branches, and you sat this color wheel thing in front of it to throw red and blue and green and yellow light on the tree. It was pretty, I guess but I hated that sucker with a passion. I never told my Mom, though, because we'd had the tree for years, and I knew she couldn't afford to get a real one, and buy lights for it. But the year I was nine, Mom got a nice Christmas bonus from the place where she worked, and I guess she should've kept it to pay the gas bills that winter, but instead she took me to the Sears parking lot downtown where they sold real trees, and she told me to pick out the biggest and best one I could find. Then we went inside and bought a small fortune worth of lights and ornaments, and we spent three or four hours decorating that tree, just my Mom and me. I don't think I ever saw her as young as she was that Christmas." Tears filled his eyes, and he rubbed them on his knee. "I-uh-I know things weren't always real good with Mom, but I really loved her a lot."

"And I'm sure she loved you, too, kid." Hardcastle slapped him on the knee. "And she would've been damn proud of way you turned out."

McCormick's cheeks turned scarlet. "Thanks, Judge," he spoke shyly. Watching the flames play catch with each other in the fireplace, he asked softly, "What about your Mom? What was she like?"

"Awww, you would've loved her, kid. She was about this big around--" Hardcastle held out his arms in a wide circle, "And almost as tall as I am now. She was strong --women had to be back then because a lot of times they had to work in the fields right next to the men. Mom could be tough as Hell if anyone got outta line, but she always had a hug ready for anyone who needed it. She loved to bake, too, and all the kids around Clarence used to hang out at our house because Momma would feed 'em sugar cookies, and, kid, if you'd walked into that kitchen, you would've thought you'd died and gone to heaven. Food everywhere: Cookies, jam cake, homemade candy, mince pie, and in the middle of the table, a whole ham, decorated with pineapple and cherries, and little sticks of cloves. And the aroma...hmmm, made your mouth water. You haven't smelled anything until you smelled a mixture of ginger and cinnamon and cloves, and all those other spices I never knew the names of."

"It must have been wonderful," McCormick remarked in a voice full of longing.

"Yeah, kid, it was." Hardcastle gazed into the fireplace as if seeing the kitchen amidst the flickering flames. Inhaling deeply, he released his breath in a heavy sigh. "I guess that's the one thing that made Christmas after Mom died so hard on Dad and Jerry and me."

"Yeah, I remember the Christmas after my Mom died, too," McCormick recalled in a voice hardly above a whisper.

Hardcastle glanced at him sharply, but when Mark offered nothing further, the Judge decided not to press. The conversation had gone in the wrong direction, and he determined to get it back on a more cheerful track. He slapped McCormick on the arm and grinned, "Hey, did I ever tell you what the kid's in my day used to get for Christmas?"

Catching the abrupt change in subject matter, McCormick responded readily with a smile, "No, but I bet you were spoiled rotten."

"HA! It's kids today who are spoiled," Hardcastle grumbled. "Back when I was young we'd hang stockings over the fireplace, and Christmas morning we'd find all kinds of goodies: An apple, an orange, a handful of hickory nuts and candy, and a muffler or a pair of gloves that our Mom's had knitted. If our Dads were good at whittlin', we'd get a wooden horse or something like that, too. Then after we'd gloated over all our goodies, we'd put on our best clothes and go to church, then that afternoon, we'd go into Clarence and see all the decorations and sing Christmas carols, and work up an appetite for the big Christmas dinner."

McCormick smiled at the memory. "I remember going downtown at Christmastime, too. You might not believe it, Judge, but it was really pretty in the city. We always visited the Sears store there, and they had this great big toy department in a huge room separate from the rest of the store, and they had these trains set up, and I could've stood there for hours if Mom had let me, watchin' them go round and round, just like the big trains. There were even little houses and trees, and the tracks intersected, and I always wondered how one train knew to stop while another one was passing. I used to try and see if there was a little tiny engineer in the trains." He laughed softly, then continued with a sigh of contentment. "And then there was Santa Claus. He was just outside the toy department on this great big throne that I was just sure was made of solid gold. I remember sitting in his lap and feeling his whiskers tickling my cheek, and then I'd be enveloped in all that fur when he'd hug me, and just for a few seconds I'd feel like nothing was ever gonna hurt me again."

Hardcastle looked away quickly, surprised by the sudden urge to hug the young man now, and try to convince him that nothing would ever hurt him again, at least not if he could help it. Settling for a hand on McCormick's shoulder, he spoke quietly, "Those are good memories, kid, and I hope someday you'll be able to look back on these Christmases as good memories, too."

McCormick's eyes rose to meet his, and a smile erased the pain on the youthful features. "This year, Judge, but not last."

"Aw, last year wasn't so bad," Hardcastle protested.

"Yes, it was," McCormick argued. "It was the worst Christmas I'd ever had in my entire life."

"Worse than the ones you spent in prison?"

"Yes," McCormick agreed immediately. "That's because in prison I wasn't expecting a nice Christmas, so I didn't get my hopes dashed. Last year, though, we got that big tree and decorated it, and I was really excited about what you had gotten me for Christmas, and then you had to go get arrested and thrown in jail. You got any idea how it feels to spend Christmas Eve in this big ol' house all alone?"

Remembering the years between Nancy's death and McCormick's arrival, Hardcastle nodded sadly. "Yeah, kid, I know exactly how it feels."

Realizing what he was referring to, McCormick groaned, "Aww, damn, Judge, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you remember that."

"It's okay, kid," Hardcastle assured him. "Speaking of being excited about Christmas presents, I sure as hell didn't use very good judgement on what I bought ya last year. Second time out on the road, a drunk runs a red light and you end up with a busted leg and a totalled motorcycle."

"That wasn't your fault," McCormick protested softly. "That bike was the best Christmas present I've ever gotten."

"Maybe so," Hardcastle grumbled, "But I'd like to see ya get hurt with what I bought ya this year."

"What'd you get me?" McCormick asked excitedly.

"That's only the hundredth time you've asked that in the last three days. Just wait and see."

"Wait? How much longer?" Holding his watch under the Judge's nose, McCormick pointed, "Look, it's only thirty-five minutes until Christmas Day. When do I get my present?"

"After Santa comes," Hardcastle grinned mischievously.

"Okay, when's that?"

"When good little boys go to bed."

"Forget good little boys," McCormick complained. "Bad little boys are gonna stay up till they get their present. Where'd you hide it?"

"In the basement..." Hardcastle paused, and his eyes twinkled as he continued in a casual tone, "And in the closet in the guest bedroom, and under the bed in my room, and... oh, yeah, out in the garage."

McCormick's eyes grew wide with wonder. "You mean the present comes in four different parts?"

"Five - I forgot the linen closet. And, no, it's not different parts, dummy; they're five separate presents."

"Five! You're kidding!"

"Well, actually six. I got tired of wrappin', and put the last two in the same box." Seeing the look of amazement on McCormick's face, he shrugged. "I had a little extra money this year, so I thought, what the hell. You've been a pretty good kid about eight months out of the year."

A smile teased McCormick's lips as he apologized. "Well, I didn't have any extra money, so I'm afraid you're only gettin' three presents from me."

"Yeah, I know," Hardcastle grinned. "The two that are under your bed and the one in the closet."

McCormick straightened quickly. "Judge! You didn't touch those did you?"

"Aw, now, would I do a thing like that?" Hardcastle censored in a hurt tone, then reluctantly amended, "At least, not the two under the bed." He leaned towards McCormick, his eyes glowing with anticipation. "What the hell've you got in that box in the closet, anyway? I could barely lift it with both hands."

"That's for me to know and for you to keep your hands off of," McCormick shot back. "Geez, I don't believe you, Judge! Going into my Gatehouse, and rummaging around getting your mitts all over my Christmas presents!"

"They're my Christmas presents!" Hardcastle retorted.

"Not until I give 'em to ya."

"Look who's tryin' to act like the soul of innocence, here," Hardcastle complained. "Who'd I catch throwing things around in my closet the other day?"

"I've already explained that - I was lookin' for my sneakers," McCormick returned in an aggrieved tone.

"yeah, sure, kid, and just what would your sneakers be doin' in my closet?"

"Probably getting kicked around by your boots," McCormick grinned. An idea suddenly struck him and leaning forward eagerly, he exclaimed, "Judge, I know what we can do! You've got six presents for me, and I've got three for you. Can't Santa come a little early and leave just one apiece for each of us?"

"Welll, I don't know..." Hardcastle hesitated.

"Aw, c'mon, Judge - please, please, please?"

"Oh, all right," Hardcastle grumbled good-naturedly, "Go pick out one, and I'll get mine."

In a matter of seconds they were back in the den, each with a gaily, but not so-perfectly-wrapped present, and McCormick nodded towards the tree. "Let's put 'em under the tree for awhile and just look at 'em."

"You got it, kid." Hardcastle knelt to place his carefully on the tree skirt.

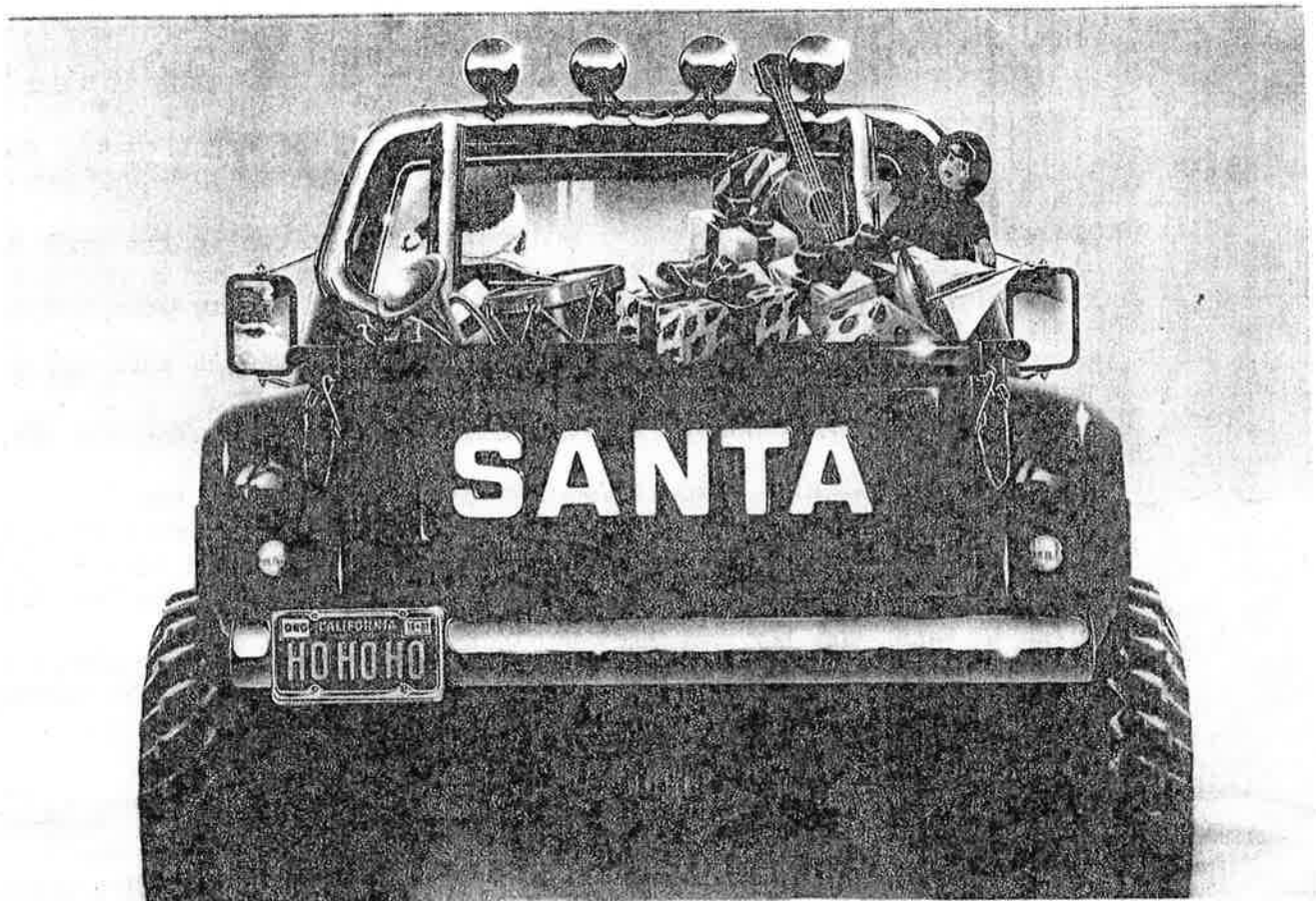
McCormick placed his next to the Judge's and straightened. "They look nice under there, don't they?"

"They sure do," Hardcastle smiled.

"Okay, that's long enough." McCormick made a dive for his own present, but anticipating the move, Hardcastle beat him to it, and grabbing up the box, waved it under his nose. "Uh, uh, uh, you don't get it until I give it to ya," he censored.

Bending to retrieve the other present, McCormick held it out with a smile. "Merry Christmas, Judge."

A wide grin caused Hardcastle's face to beam with happiness as he offered his own gift. "Merry Christmas, kid."





EARLY ONE CHRISTMAS MORNING...

By: Shirley D. Sipe

Mark McCormick suppressed a yawn and settled for a heavy sigh. He and Judge Milton C. Hardcastle were sitting in Lt. Frank Harper's office listening to some information about the criminals they were currently trying to catch. Mark was sprawled out in a chair, one long leg stretched out in front of him, the other slung over the arm. He looked practically asleep. Frank had never seen anyone who could look as relaxed as McCormick. Sometimes he wished he could relax like that. He shook his head and brought his mind back to the business at hand.

"These guys are not real sophisticated, Milt. People are out of the house at Christmas and they take advantage of that. It happens all the time."

"Yeah, but this is my neighborhood and just because it happens all the time doesn't mean they ought to get away with it. And sit up and pay attention!"

This last line was directed at McCormick along with a well-aimed shove at the ex-con's arm. Since Mark was resting his head against it at the time, it was a rather rude awakening. He blinked and sat up, directing a glare Hardcastle's way. "Geeze Hardcase, can't you give it a rest? It's four days to Christmas. Don't we get time off for the holidays?"

"Crime doesn't take a vacation."

"Did you get that off a poster or something? I mean, come on. I bet even Frank here takes a vacation. Don't you, Frank?"

Harper looked thoughtful. The last thing he wanted to do was get between these guys. "Well, I take Christmas Day off, but I'm the boss. We've got to have somebody on duty during the holidays."

"Yeah, but they get paid."

"Listen, Hotshot. I pay you!" Hardcastle and McCormick were squaring off, forgetting Frank for the moment.

"You pay me to keep the yard, wash the cars, vacuum the floors -- you get all this Tonto stuff for free."

"If I paid you for the work you actually did, you wouldn't have enough money for a phone call. I don't give charity, McCormick."

"Charity!" Mark turned to Frank. "Did you hear him?"

The Lieutenant rubbed his eyes wearily. "I can hear both of you."

"McCormick, why don't you calm down and stop complaining. We're trying to get some work done here."

"Well, far be it from me to clog the wheels of justice. Go right ahead."

"That's about it." Frank said a little desperately. "They're just punks who have targeted some of the richer neighborhoods -- including yours. I don't know what you can do about this one, Milt. It happens every year. In fact, only part of these cases are related. This is a popular crime."

Hardcastle spread his hands. "Okay, okay. But there's this one group of guys that keep using the same MO. They break in and take mostly electronic equipment -- no jewelry or art objects. Hasn't there been more of this stuff showing up on the streets?"

"We're doing everything we can, Milt. When we uncover something, I'll let you in on it. I promise. Why don't you just enjoy the season and let us work on this one?"

McCormick nodded his head vigorously. "Yeah."

Hardcastle grimaced, but otherwise ignored the comment. "Okay. Let me know what you turn up. But I'm going to stay on top of this one, Frank."

"Whatever." McCormick thought Harper looked relieved. He couldn't blame him.

"Glad you could stop by, Milt," the Lieutenant continued, looking anything but. Hardcastle grinned broadly. "We'll keep in touch."

* § *

"Do you ever worry about being a nuisance, Hardcase?"

"What nuisance? I'm just a private citizen helping out. Besides, being a nuisance doesn't seem to worry you, and that's one of things you're best at."

McCormick sighed and turned his attention to the highway. At least Hardcastle had agreed to stop at the Burger Man so the day wasn't a total loss. He had to get him off this burglary kick, though. McCormick still had some shopping to do, and he couldn't get anything done with Hardcastle jumping his case every five minutes. The Judge started messing with the radio station, and Mark slapped his hand away. "I'm listening to that. Do you mind?"

"You know I can't stand that stuff. The least we can do is listen to some Christmas music."

"When we're in your truck, we can listen to the sounds of the season."

Hardcastle sighed theatrically and tried to block out the noise McCormick insisted was music. After a few moments, he noticed Mark was muttering under his breath - it sounded like he said "number two", or something like that. Hardcastle was just about to ask about it when he had to grab the dashboard of the Coyote as the car slid to a screeching halt.

"Wha--?" The Judge began, but McCormick had already scrambled out of the car and had run into a nearby phone booth. The Judge took a few seconds to regroup--this was, after all, McCormick, and one had to expect the unexpected. Still, this was bizarre behavior even for him. He got out of the car and to the phone booth just as Mark slammed the receiver back on the hook with a muttered, "Damn!"

"Do you mind telling me what the hell you think you're doing, McCormick?"

Mark leaned against the phone booth, looking dejected. "KWDFH is giving away twelve CD players for Christmas - you know, the Twelve Days of Christmas? Every time they play these three songs in a certain order, you call in; whatever day it is, you have to be that caller. Like the fourth day of Christmas, you have to be the fourth caller. Today, you had to be the ninth caller, and of course I wasn't it. Stupid contest."

Hardcastle was frowning. "What's a CD player?"

"Where've you been, Hardcase? It's a compact laser disc player. It plays laser discs--you know, like records, only different."

"Clear as mud so far, McCormick. Go on."

"It's a component for your stereo player, like a cassette deck."

"Why is this better than records or cassettes?"

"The sound is perfect. And the discs last practically forever."

"Music like you listen to should definitely be preserved forever."

"Well, mine's not gonna be preserved forever 'cause I can't win one. Happy?" McCormick stalked to the car.

Hardcastle shrugged and followed. As they pulled out on the highway again, the Judge glanced over at McCormick. "You know hardly anybody wins that stuff. What do you get all excited about it for?"

"Well, somebody wins it. I don't see why it can't be me."

"It's all right to try, McCormick, as long as you don't get us both killed in traffic. But it's no use to get wound up like this. And besides, it's the twelve days after Christmas."

"Look, I didn't make the rules, okay? Let's just forget it."

"Love to. Don't get crazy on me, McComrick."

*

Hardcastle had to grab onto the dash again when they slid to a halt in the driveway at Gull's-Way. "McCORMICK!"

"Listen, Judge, I'm gonna let you out, okay? I've still got some stuff to do."

"What have you got to do? You've mailed presents to everybody, and the tree is full. You don't have that much money."

"I've got a couple of things to do yet."

"What?"

"Hardcastle!"

"ALL RIGHT!" The Judge got out, then leaned his head back into the window. "Don't forget we have to go see that children's choir tonight at 8:00."

"Judge..."

"Now, I don't wanna go any more than you do, but it's a benefit, and Judge Crater sold me the tickets, and if I have to go, you have to go. So get your butt back here in time to get ready. Got it?"

McCormick rolled his eyes and saluted.

"And don't drive like a maniac out there!" Hardcastle yelled, but his words were drowned out by the sound of squealing tires. The Judge grabbed the paper on the way in. He would never figure out how McCormick could drive like he was at Indy, and yet manage to be ten minutes late everywhere he went.

* § *

McCormick did turn the radio to Christmas music when he pulled out on the highway. KWDH had given away their CD for the day, and he needed a little spirit. In between Hardcastle's single-minded pursuit of crooks and all the Christmas stuff, he was beginning to feel a little ragged around the edges. Actually, for all practical purposes, he was finished - and on the edge of being broke. He had bought Hardcastle a cassette player that had the appearance of an old-time table radio. The speakers were pretty good, the front looked authentic, and the cassettes were loaded in the back. He had also bought some old-time radio shows on tape (mostly the "Lone Ranger", of course), and some big band selections. It wasn't incredibly expensive but it had really put a dent in the money McCormick had managed to save. Now he was down to thirty dollars, and he hoped he could find the one last item he wanted to get the Judge, and that he could afford it. Unfortunately, it didn't look like it was going to be easy.

* § *

It was 7:28 when Hardcastle heard the Coyote outside. He had already gotten past the mad-enough-to-chew-iron stage, so he just looked up when McCormick popped his curly head in the door, looking sheepish. "I'll be ready in ten minutes, I promise. Guess you're all ready, huh?"

Hardcastle just looked at him.

"Yeah, right." The door slammed shut again.

Hardcastle sighed heavily and got up. He would get the truck cranked and pull up in front of the Gatehouse. There was still a chance they could make it in time, so he wasn't going to waste time yelling...yet. If the kid made him late, he'd just make him walk home - or something else equally appropriate.

Taking his time, it was only a few minutes after he had halted outside the Gatehouse that McCormick came stumbling out, pulling his suit coat on. As Hardcastle headed for the main gate, McCormick turned the overhead light on and re-adjusted the rearview mirror so he could put on his tie. He glanced at his watch, grinning at Hardcastle, "Seventeen minutes till eight. We can make it."

Hardcastle grunted. "You better hope so."

Mark leaned over suddenly and began retying Hardcastle's tie. "You know, there's

something ironic about a guy who can make important legal decisions, but can't get his tie on straight. Were you dropped on your head as a child?"

Hardcastle couldn't handle it. He grinned and glanced over at McCormick. He had to admit that even when the kid threw his clothes on, he still managed to look like he'd stepped out of a cologne ad. Hardcastle had never mastered the art of "dressing up"--not that he'd ever wanted to, but he sure couldn't figure out where this street-wise kid had picked it up.

"Did you get your 'stuff' done?"

McCormick grinned broadly and sent him a knowing look. "Oh, yeah. Yeah."

"Secret, huh?"

McCormick looked out at the highway. "Yep."

*

They both actually enjoyed the concert. The group was professional and the music beautiful. Hardcastle happened to glance over at McCormick at one point, and saw the ex-con listening with rapt attention. It was at times like these that the Judge found himself surprised and pleased by the depth of McCormick's emotions - his ability to feel. He had watched a lot of people come and go before his bench and in some cases, it was obvious. Either because of prison, or because of the life they'd led, they were dead inside. They simply stopped caring about themselves or anyone else. McCormick had had some hard edges, but the Judge had been pretty sure that the smart mouth was just a form of self protection. And he'd been right. The kid had been so angry and hurt over a friend's death, he'd been ready to go to the wall. Loyalty and friendship were qualities Hardcastle could appreciate and understand, even if McCormick himself didn't seem to be much more than a smart-mouthed car thief. At least it had seemed that way at first. McCormick, however, was full of surprises, some of them annoying, but most of them pleasant. And one of the most pleasant was his ability to be captivated or pleased by the simplest things. It touched Hardcastle in the oddest moments, making him thankful that he had chosen McCormick and not one of the other "candidates". Mark was annoying, exasperating, hard to keep up with, and often difficult to understand, but the Judge knew that bringing him home was one of the best things he'd ever done. Maybe for both of them. He smiled and turned back to the music. It wasn't like having Christmas with his wife and son, but it wasn't a holiday to dread anymore. In fact, times were darn good.

* § *

Hardcastle replaced the phone and chewed his lower lip. He had just talked to Frank, and there had been another break-in a near-by neighborhood but no more information. There had to be a way to catch these guys. If he could just think. But for that, he needed peace and quiet and since McCormick had finished his "stuff", peace and quiet didn't exist. He had tried to bake Christmas cookies and burned them. He managed to make a holiday snack mix that did come out okay, but he'd broken two bowls in the process. And since he couldn't seem to breathe without the television and the radio, the noise level was constant. Last, but not least, there was the mile-a-minute McCormick mouth, an experience in itself.

Hardcastle walked into the hallway, intending to tell Mark to turn the radio down when the ex-con ran past him, almost knocking him down. The Judge ran into the kitchen in time to catch Mark slamming the phone down - again.

"Are you trying to win that stupid contest again, McCormick?"

"Well, I'll tell you this is the last time. I'm through fooling with it."

"I hope so. Why don't you use your own phone anyway?"

Mark leaned against the wall and made a face. "Well, I kinda let my bill go - you know, I needed the extra cash."

"So that's why you've been hanging around here with the radio going full blast."

Mark shrugged. "I'll turn it down."

"Thank goodness. You about ready for lunch?"

Mark sat at the table, resting his chin in his hand. "Yeah, I guess. What do you want?"
Hardcastle rubbed his hands vigorously. "Tell you what, kiddo - I'll make a specialty of mine. Hardcastle's hot Mexican chili - you like that, don't you?"

McCormick grinned. "Believe it or not, I do. Tonto love it when Lone Ranger cook."

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The Judge placed a steaming bowl of chili in front of McCormick and sat down across from him. The spoon was half-way to Mark's mouth when Hardcastle spoke. "I have an idea."

McCormick stopped, mouth open, and looked at the Judge. "I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Christmas Eve is the most popular night for crooks to break in and steal things. That's the one night when a lot of people are out, and everybody's got their shopping done. Now, I know it's a long shot, but this neighborhood hasn't been hit in a couple of days, and maybe - just maybe - we can arrange for this house to be next on the list!"

"How are you going to do that? Hang out a sign that says 'Burglars Welcome'?"

"We'll just park the cars out back, turn out all the lights but the tree, and leave the gates open."

"Wait a minute; let me get this straight. You are suggesting that we spend Christmas Eve sitting in the dark because there might be a slim chance that the house is going to be burglarized."

"Now yer cookin'."

"You've got to be kidding! Of all the dumb things you've ever wanted to do, this has got to be the dumbest. You can't outsmart these guys because they're stupid - I mean, this isn't an operation where you plan something. They just cruise around looking for empty houses."

"So, the house will look empty."

"You don't get it, do you? They could be in any neighborhood Christmas Eve - or in Nebraska, for that matter. It can only be a trap when somebody's coming."

"It's a trap when you can make yourself a target, and that's what we're gonna do."

"There's a Christmas poem in this somewhere."

"Come on, McCormick, it's not gonna be that bad. We were gonna stay home anyway. We can make some hot chocolate, get plenty of stuff to eat--"

"And you can sit there with your shotgun over your knees."

"Right."

"Uh-huh. No way, Hardcase. You want to sit up all night, fine - but count me out. Insanity is not catching."

§

McCormick settled himself on the floor with his back against the couch and a quilt on his knees. "Just how long are we gonna wait up for these guys?"

Hardcastle poked his head through the doorway of the den. "Keep it down, McCormick. I'm trying to fix us something to eat, here."

"It's only 6:30. Are you hungry already?"

"Listen, we're gonna do this right. That means no moving around and making noise."

"Well, maybe so, but if I need to make a pit-stop, Hardcase, that's it. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." Mark looked up at the Judge and snickered.

Hardcastle gritted his teeth and went back into the kitchen. He knew if he answered McCormick, he'd end up standing there running his mouth all night.

*

McCormick's eyes widened when Hardcastle carried the tray into the den. "How long did you say we were gonna stay here, Judge?"

"I didn't. Just remember that just because all this food is here, you are not obligated to eat it all. This is just so we'll have a little variety."

"This is just like camping out."

"That's the spirit, kiddo."

McCormick was going to say something about this not being anybody's idea of Christmas, but decided against it. Who was he kidding? He'd had plenty of Christmases worst than this, and not just in prison. At least they had a tree, and Hardcastle had tried to make it pleasant. He'd laid out a tray of food that would feed an army. The Judge sat on the floor next to Mark with a grunt. McCormick ignored the shotgun, and concentrated on the tray instead. "Let's see what we got here. Sandwiches, chips, my holiday mix, Twinkies, my cookies--"

"We'll save those for when we get desperate."

"Funny. What's in the two thermoses?"

"Coffee and hot chocolate. Sorry it's nothing stronger, but we may need to be alert."

"And we may be wasting our time."

Instead of blowing up, Hardcastle looked at him carefully. "I know what you're thinking, McCormick, and you're probably right. But I can't get a handle on this thing, I want to do something, and this is the best I can come up with. I don't want to think I didn't even try."

McCormick sighed, resigned. "Well, maybe we'll get lucky - or unlucky, depending on your point of view."

"We won't have to wait too long. These guys don't want to walk in on somebody, so if they don't show by 12:00, we'll hang it up - deal?"

"You got it, Kemosabe. Here, have a burnt cookie."

They spent most of the evening making small talk and admiring the Christmas tree lights. At about 15 minutes to 12:00, Hardcastle noticed that McCormick was watching him, a devilish gleam in his eye. He figured he was going to get a lecture on lost causes, but McCormick did the unexpected - again.

"What's in the packages, Hardcastle?"

"It's a surprise, McCormick. That's one of the first rules of Christmas."

"I think that rectangular box is clothes, maybe a jacket. And that smaller, heavy box - well, it's about the size of a clock radio. Don't you think I can get up?"

"I don't know if you can get up or not, McCormick, but you never are up."

"So, that's what it is?"

"I didn't say that." The Judge squinted and looked under the tree. "I meant to ask you, what's in that weird-looking package you got Frank?"

"The new Stephen King book and a Rambo gun set."

Hardcastle grimaced. "You're really weird, kiddo."

"It's just a joke. Well, part of it; he really likes Stephen King."

"How do you know?"

"We've talked about it. You don't need to look surprised. We've been over his place for dinner; he comes over here to play poker. Not to mention we end up in his office a couple times a week. I mean, we have to talk about something while you're out cleaning up the streets. He likes Joseph Wambaugh, too, but he hasn't written one in a while."

Hardcastle grunted, feeling as if he'd somehow been one-upped. "I knew you read that crap, McCormick, but I sure didn't know Frank did. I hope he doesn't scare himself into staying up half the night like you do."

"Come on, that only happened once - well, maybe twice. What did you get him?" McCormick asked, hoping to change the subject.

"A shirt and tie."

"Boy, you must have lost plenty of sleep thinking of that one."

"It's a nice gift, McCormick! Set me back \$38.95!"

"I know. I know. Just calm down, willya? It was only a joke. Geez, you're sensitive."

"I'm sensitive? You're the one who takes everything to heart, and I'm the one who

has to watch you mope around for days."

"Am I always that transparent?"

Hardcastle paused for a moment, realizing the question was half-way serious. "Well, yeah. I can't always tell what the problem is, but I usually know when there is one."

"Are you sure that isn't just because you know me better? I mean, I usually know when there's something wrong with you, too."

Hardcastle sighed. The kid could come up with the darnest stuff sometimes. The Judge had never really analyzed the situation, and didn't know what good it was going to do now. As it worked out, though, he didn't have to give an answer. McCormick shifted and stared at the tree. In the faint Christmas light, Hardcastle could see his expression was melancholy and thoughtful.

"I don't know - my Mom always said I 'dwelled' on things."

"Well, sounds like she knew you pretty well, too, kid."

There was a long silence before McCormick spoke again. "She - well, I thought, she wouldn't understand. Sometimes, I didn't even care if she'd understand. That's terrible, I know, but I felt like nobody else was having the kind of problems I was. I was mean to her a lot - not like I hit her, or anything, but when I was growing up I went through some rough periods. I'd stay out a lot, not tell her where I was going... And then she had to come up to the police station a couple of times and drag me home. We had some real screaming matches, I tell you. Years later, though, I realized how horrible it must have been for her - working two jobs, taking care of some ungrateful kid. Hell, what did I have to worry about? She was the one who had to make sure we had clothes and food and a decent place to live. It used to make me angry, because it didn't seem like we had enough. Of course, I resented Sonny, but there were times I resented her, too. For not marrying him, for somehow not making him stay. I know it probably wouldn't have made any difference, but I just kept thinking about it. Now, I realize things could have been a lot worse. We didn't have everything, but we had enough. I don't know why I was always thinking about what Sonny did to me because it must have been ten times worse for her, and I couldn't see it." He looked at Hardcastle directly. "You know what amazes me about the time I almost committed suicide?"¹

Hardcastle shook his head, not sure if he should speak. McCormick rarely talked this much about his past, and he didn't want to interrupt him.

"I can't figure out why she didn't do it first. It was such an effort for me to get up every morning and go to school. I could hardly get out of bed - there was just nothing ahead of me. You see, I can't understand what kept her going when all she had were endless hours of work that barely paid the rent, and new problems all the time. I never realized how strong she had to be." McCormick ducked his head suddenly and said in a quiet, strained voice, "I was never tough; I was never strong enough. Hell, I almost jumped ship."

The Judge hesitated, knowing he had to be careful here. He had always felt inadequate when trying to deal with someone else's pain. He was no psychiatrist, but here Mark was, pouring out his soul and needing...something. Nancy had always been able to help, to say the right thing, but he had always felt like a bull in a china shop. Oh, well. He sighed and plunged in. "You can't compare the way you behaved as a kid with the way an adult behaves. Kids go through a lot of difficult periods, and they...get confused. As for being selfish - kids are selfish. They haven't developed a realistic perspective yet."

"I'll bet you weren't selfish."

"Listen, McCormick, I don't know where you get this weird idea that I was never young. I had to grow up, too, you know."

He was rewarded with a small smile from Mark. "I'll bet that was a trip."

"Listen, wise guy, what I'm trying to say is that you're being too hard on yourself. Even kids who have a normal family life and all the advantages have a hard time growing up. It's not something you can decide not to do because it would be inconvenient."

You weren't ignoring your Mom's problems, you just had too many of your own. You think she was stronger - sure she was; she was an adult and you were a kid. You were her responsibility, and she accepted that. She wasn't working for nothing."

"Probably better if she would have been."

"You're wrong there. I'm sure she thought you were worth it. It meant that all she was going through counted for something. Take my word for it, it's a whole lot easier to face stuff when you've got something, or someone, to fight for. Now tell me the truth, McCormick, your whole life doesn't read like a case history, does it? Didn't you have some great times when you were growing up?"

McCormick nodded slowly. "Yeah. Even in the really low times, there was some good stuff to remember." He grinned suddenly. "Did you ever have mock apple pies?"

"Nope. Is that some kind of secret family recipe?"

"I don't know where my Mom got it, but they were really great. She used to make them for me when I'd get kind of depressed. All she did was put some applesauce between two slices of white bread, fry it in butter like you do grilled cheese, and it would taste like a fried pie. If you wanted to get creative, you could add cinnamon or cheese."

"That doesn't sound half bad, McCormick. Why didn't you make some of those, instead of those stupid burnt cookies?"

"Just didn't think about them, I guess; but I'd be glad to make some. Thanks for helping me to remember them."

"No problem, kiddo. Lighten up on yourself, okay?"

"Okay. Hey, what time is it?"

Hardcastle squinted at his watch. "Wha-- 1:30? Well, it looks like our friends passed us up."

"Surprise, surprise."

"Oh, shut up, McCormick. Did I ever tell you about the time the old turkey farmer down the road told me if I could catch a turkey I could have it?"

McCormick laughed out loud. "Gee, you must have been adorable. I thought I'd get to go to bed sometime tonight."

Hardcastle continued as if he hadn't heard. "I was about ten. It was a week before Christmas, and those turkeys were almost as big as me." He was unsure as to why he was telling this story, except he felt it was important to lighten the mood. He became so engrossed in it, it took him a few moments to realize McCormick was leaning against him - heavily. Sure enough, the kid had fallen asleep, something he seemed to do quite easily whenever he kept his mouth shut long enough. Oh well, maybe it was time for both of them to get some rest.

* § *

Mark awoke to the smell of bacon and eggs. He stretched...and squinted; it was daylight and sun was streaming in the den window. He was sacked out in the middle of the floor, a throw pillow under his head and a quilt over him. He leaned on his elbow and checked his watch - 9:30. He followed the smell of food into the kitchen where Hardcastle was busy cooking up a batch of 'Eggs Milton'. Mark leaned his elbows on the counter and regarded the Judge sleepily. "You took the couch last night didn't you?"

"You're younger, you can sleep on the floor. Anyway, the way you were conked out, I wasn't about to try to wake you up to send you to bed. That's a 30-minute job."

"You sure you're not just mad because I fell asleep during your great childhood story?"

"Half the time you don't listen to anything anybody tells you, so why should I start letting it bother me now? Go get ready for breakfast, will you? I've been up since 8:30."

McCormick grinned and leaned forward. "Hey, when are we gonna open our presents?"

"After breakfast. We always eat a big breakfast first - that's tradition."

Mark nodded. "Okay." When Hardcastle decided something was tradition, that was it. There was nothing wrong with hurrying him along, though. McCormick slapped the counter with the palm of his hand, "Ya better get with it, Judge, 'cause when I'm

hungry, I'm fast."

Hardcastle grunted. "So I've noticed."

*

Mark could eat fast, too. Hardcastle was trying to finish up his coffee when McCormick started pulling on his arm, trying to get him into the den. Hardcastle got up slowly, looking terribly put-upon, but secretly enjoying McCormick's enthusiasm. He took the cup of coffee with him.

Mark sat out Hardcastle's packages in the order he wanted the Judge to open them, then started looking for his own. Hardcastle leaned back and waited for a few minutes, grinning when he saw McCormick pause at the back of the tree.

"Hey," Mark said in a surprised voice, "Where did this come from?" He brought over a good-sized rectangular box. "I thought I knew every box under that tree."

"It wasn't under the tree. I hid it." As McCormick grinned wickedly and shook the box, he continued, "Don't break it, McCormick. Just open it - last."

Mark sat it aside carefully and watched as Hardcastle opened the cassette player and tapes. McCormick was a little apprehensive about how this particular gift would go over. He had wanted to get the Judge something special, but he had limited resources, and what did you get a guy who already had everything?

Hardcastle seemed to get a real kick out of the cassette player, though, and it looked as if they'd be listening to "The Lone Ranger" most of the day. The Judge reached down to open the other box, then paused. "Open yours," he said.

Mark opened the large box that had already been under the tree. It was a fawn colored leather jacket, and it was truly one of the nicest Mark had ever seen. He was a little awed that Hardcastle, whose taste was sometimes questionable at best, had managed to pick out something that suited him so well. He stood up and moved around in it for a few seconds, then turned to the Judge with a broad grin. "This is great! I've never worn anything this nice. Thanks. Thanks a lot."

The next one was, not surprisingly, a clock radio. Mark grinned and looked up at the Judge. "Yep. You do know the sound of rock'n'roll helps me sleep?"

"Yeah, I thought it might. That's why I pre-set it on a jazz station."

"Think I'm not creative enough to turn the dial?"

"I think you'd better play whatever gets you out of bed, unless you want me to come over and haul your ass out."

"Did I ever tell you how much I appreciate the way you look out for my interests?"

"No, and don't bother. Open the last one."

Hardcastle watched Mark's face carefully for his reaction and wasn't disappointed. He had thought McCormick might suspect what the gift was, but apparently he hadn't. There was a few seconds of total silence, then Mark said quietly, "It's a CD player."

"Yeah." There was another pause during which Hardcastle waited patiently for McCormick to find his voice again. Finally, McCormick looked up and asked, in all innocence, "How'd you know?"

The Judge rolled his eyes. "How could I not know? You think I didn't notice those Kamikaze runs you were making for the telephone?"

McCormick grinned suddenly. "Guess I was kinda obvious, huh? Seriously, though, this is fantastic." He finally started opening the box, his natural animation returning as he got over the shock. "I don't believe this - it's got everything. It's got memory and plays up to seven disks automatically. Wow, the one on the radio was only one of the \$200 models."

Hardcastle blinked. He had wanted to get McCormick something else, and the CD had seemed perfect, but he really hadn't known much about them. The salesman had obviously shown him only one of the most expensive models - he had paid almost \$500 for it. Oh well, McCormick certainly seemed pleased, and he guessed that was the most important thing.

"Hey, Hardcastle, you sound like Scrooge but act like Santa Claus - ya know that?"

The Judge grunted. "Yeah, well - glad you like it."

"Open that last present," McCormick said with an abrupt change in tactics.

"Oh." Hardcastle lifted the box gingerly. "This is nothing that's gonna jump out at me, is it?"

McCormick shrugged. "Maybe."

Hardcastle opened the box and took his turn at being speechless. "Wha--?"

"It's a parrot shirt!" McCormick said excitedly. "Just like the one you used to have, only without the bullet hole."²

Hardcastle grinned broadly. "Where in the world did you get this? I'd never seen another one."

"Believe me, it wasn't easy. I've looked at so many Hawaiian shirts I think I've cured myself from ever wanting to go to the Islands."

"I have to give it to you, kiddo... You did great." Just then the phone rang, saving the Judge from getting even more demonstrative.

Mark could tell from what the Judge was saying that the caller was Frank, but he got engrossed in his instruction book and didn't pay much attention. There was a tap on his shoulder, and he looked up at Hardcastle.

"That was Frank. He's coming over in a little bit and bringing some of Claudia's cookies."

"I guess it was pretty tough for you to eat crow, huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, McCormick."

"Com'on, are you telling me Frank didn't ask about your great stake-out?"

"So, we missed one night--"

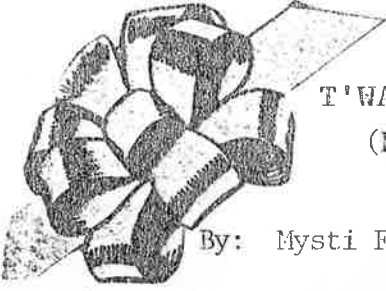
"One?"

"--The times between Christmas and New Year are big for rip-offs, too. I figure, between you, me, and Frank..."

McCormick groaned and buried his head in his hands. "God bless us every one."



² "The Birthday Present" - aired episode.



T'WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

(Hardcastle and McCormick style)

By: Mysti Frank

'Twas the night before Christmas
And in the gatehouse,
McCormick wasn't sleeping.
He felt like a louse.

He was snug in his bed,
but his conscience kept jumping.
He hadn't gotten caught,
but his heart was still thumping.

The day before yesterday,
he put the vette in the garage,
and stumbled over a mound
of what he thought a mirage.

For back in the corner,
hidden under a tarp,
was a large pile of presents,
each wrapped neat and sharp.

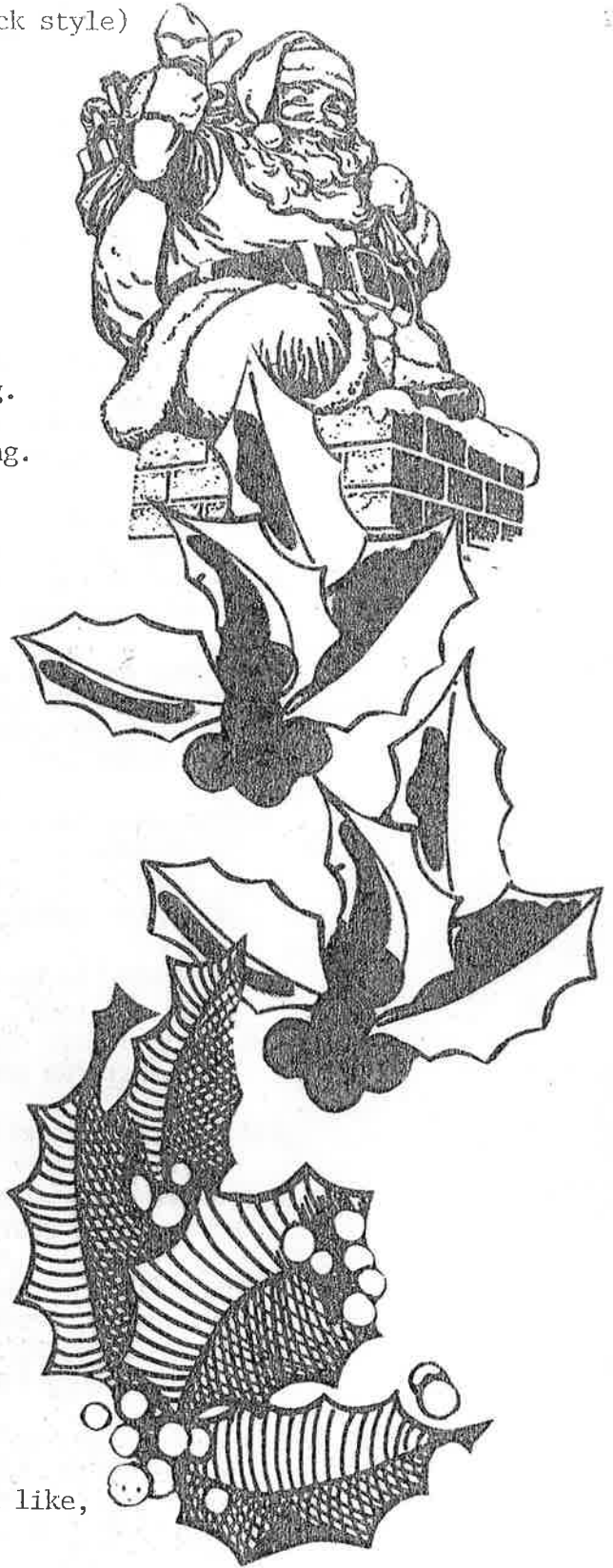
Away to the garage door
he flew like a thief,
but could see Hardcastle nowhere,
and he sighed in relief.

He drew in his head
and then turned around,
determined to know what
was in the boxes he'd found.

He thought a small peek,
to undo just one,
but before he was finished,
each box was undone.

His eyes opened wide.
His lips twitched with joy.
He'd never seen
so many wonderful toys.

A baseball and bat,
the first, white as a dove.
And a mitt that fit his right hand like,
well, like a glove.



A stereo system
and albums galore.
The number broke a record.
He'd never seen so many before.

A thick, light blue sweater.
And after several tries,
he opened the next one:
tennis shoes, just his size.

Mark slowed as he realized
only a few boxes remained.
And he shook them as he guessed
what each one contained.

Perhaps a tennis raquet?
No, a snorkel and mask.
And a model plane, not a fruit cake.
He wasn't good at this task.

When at last he was done,
and the gifts 'round him lay,
McCormick thought sadly
of the upcoming day.

Christmas was arriving,
but Mark felt no glee.
For he already knew
what would sit 'neath the tree.

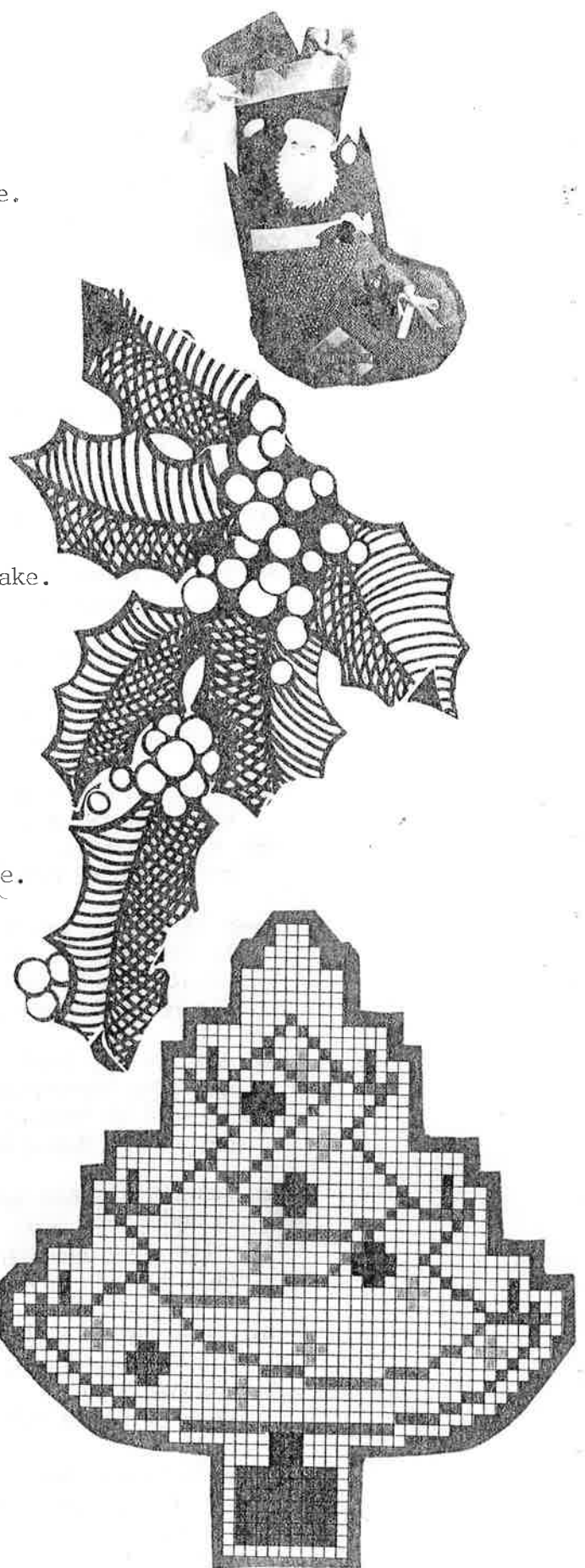
"I shouldn't have looked,"
he thought with a sigh.
"Next time I'll ignore things
that have caught my eye."

So thinking, he hunted up
paper and tape
and returned all the presents
to almost the same shape.

And he carried and stacked them
under the dusty, old tarp,
not quite as new, or as
nice, or as sharp.

Then he fled to the gatehouse
and stared at the wall,
trying to remember
why he'd done it at all.

Hardcastle had hidden
the presents with care.
In hopes that McCormick
would not find them there.



And now he had spoiled
the Lone Ranger's surprise.
He knew that Hardcastle
would see the guilt in his eyes.

So for almost two days,
he'd avoided his friend.
But tomorrow was Christmas;
the deceit at an end.

When he glanced at the clock,
which proclaimed 4:02,
he suddenly realized
what he had to do.

He'd go to Hardcastle
and tell him the truth:
that he'd acted age seven,
brash and uncouth.

Ol' Hardcase would holler,
there was no doubt of that.
And he might take a swing
and knock poor Mark flat.

But then he'd forgive him
and the rash deed he'd done,
and Christmas from then on
would be much more fun.

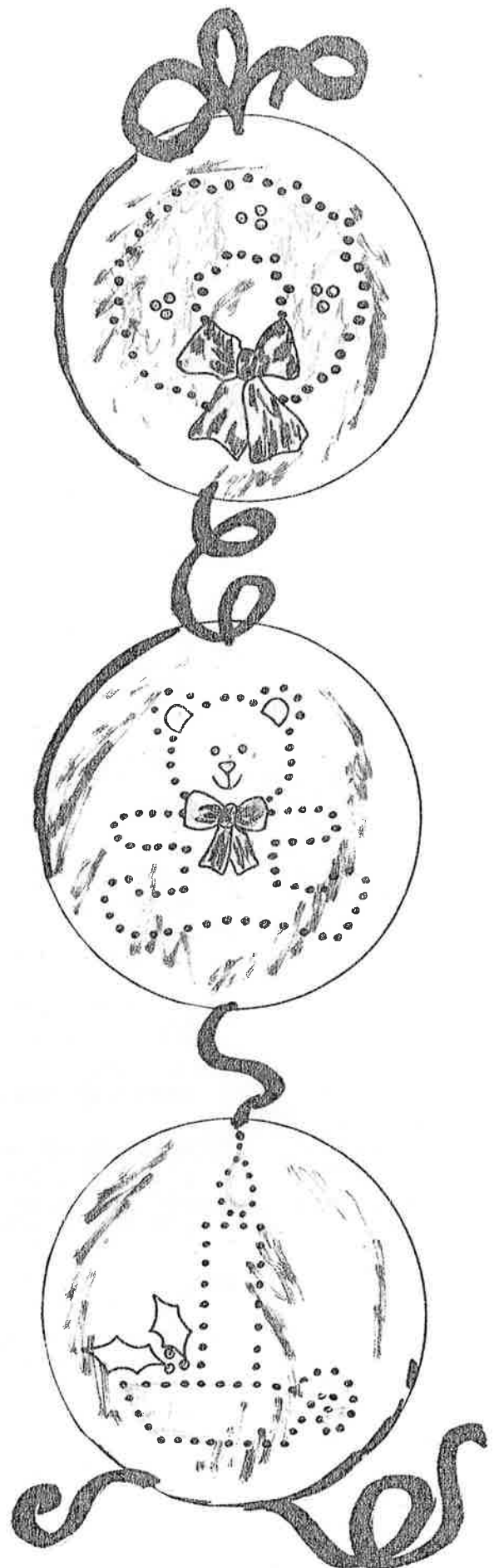
So he sprang to his feet,
to the main house he jogged.
But he slowed when he noticed
the truck, windows fogged,

sat idling in the driveway,
the engine too warm,
and lights in the den.
That wasn't the norm.

His first thoughts of burglars,
he snuck in the room,
convinced that his best friend
had come to his doom.

And there he found Hardcase,
his hands 'round a cup
of coffee and brandy,
drinking it up.

The older man smiled
and said with a grin,
"Finally decided
to show up again?"



He mistook Mark's shocked silence
for something far worse.
Had something he said
been much too terse?

Was the kid missing his family
on this holiday morn?
What was it that had Mark
looking sad and forlorn?

McCormick broke down
under Hardcastle's gaze,
and confessed the secret
he'd kept hidden for days.

Then he closed his eyes
and awaited the danger,
but after several minutes,
relaxed into languor.

When no punch was coming,
he cracked an eyelid by half,
then opened them both
when Hardcastle laughed.

"Is that why you've
been avoiding me, kid?
You thought I'd been angry
at what you did?"

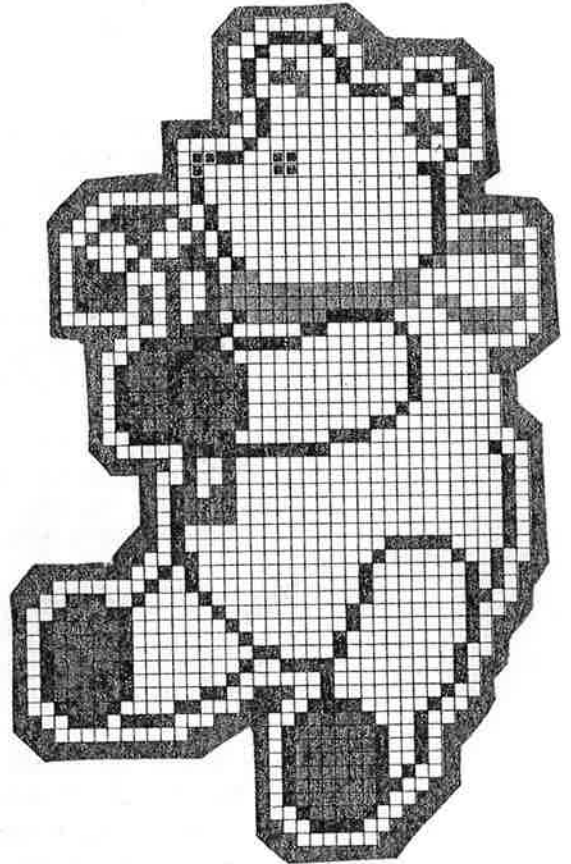
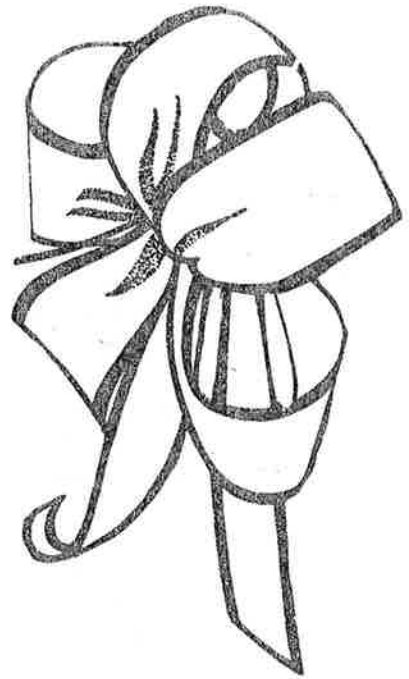
He laughed again,
which make Mark uneasy.
The unexpected reaction
was making him queasy.

"Kid," said Hardcastle,
when he finally clamed down,
"Those gifts are for St. George's
Orphanage downtown.

"They're in the back of the jimmy.
I was just about to make
a trip down there now,
before the kids are awake."

McCormick smiled shyly.
"Can I come along?
I'd like to try and
make up for my wrong."

"I'd like that," said Hardcastle,
now sure of his facts.
"But if you do it again,
you're getting the axe!"



"I promise, Kemo Sabe,"
answered Mark with a grin,
and the two men approached
the truck and got in.

The silence of the trip
to the orphanage and back
held no anger or tension --
in fact, a distinct lack.

McCormick was curled
on his side, in a heap,
trying to regain
a whole night of lost sleep.

As he grew dozy,
mile after mile,
a singular thought
made the ex-convict smile.

"I couldn't care less
what's under that tree.
I've got ol' Hardcase
and that's enough for me."

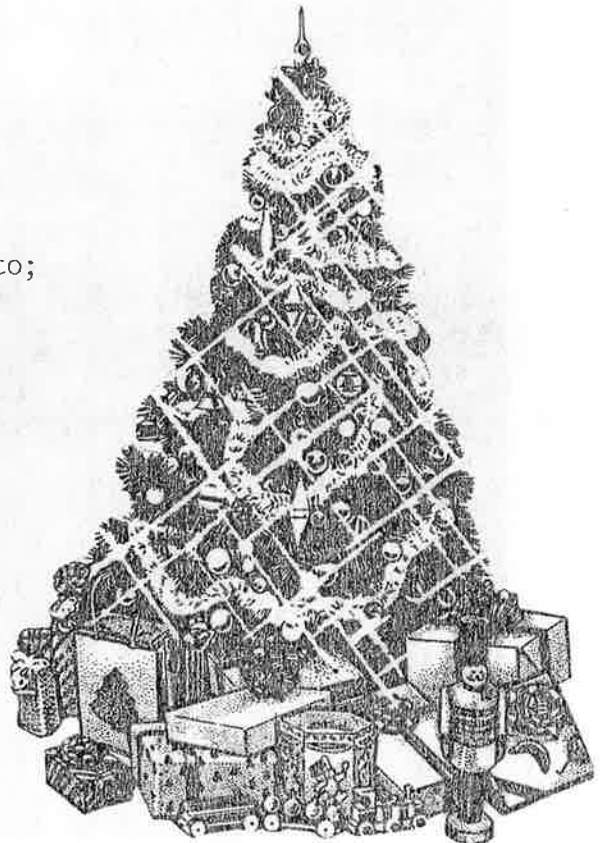
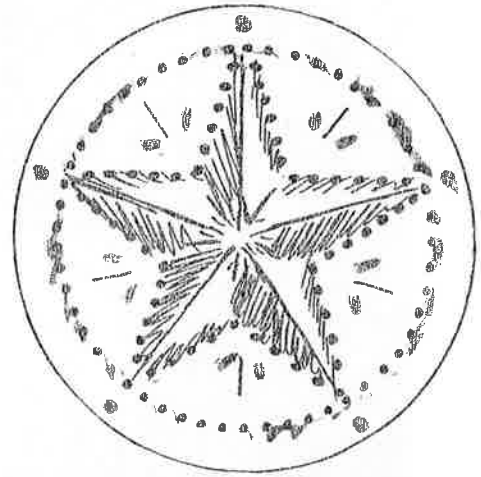
Hardcastle watched
as Mark fell asleep,
wondering how he did
so in the jeep.

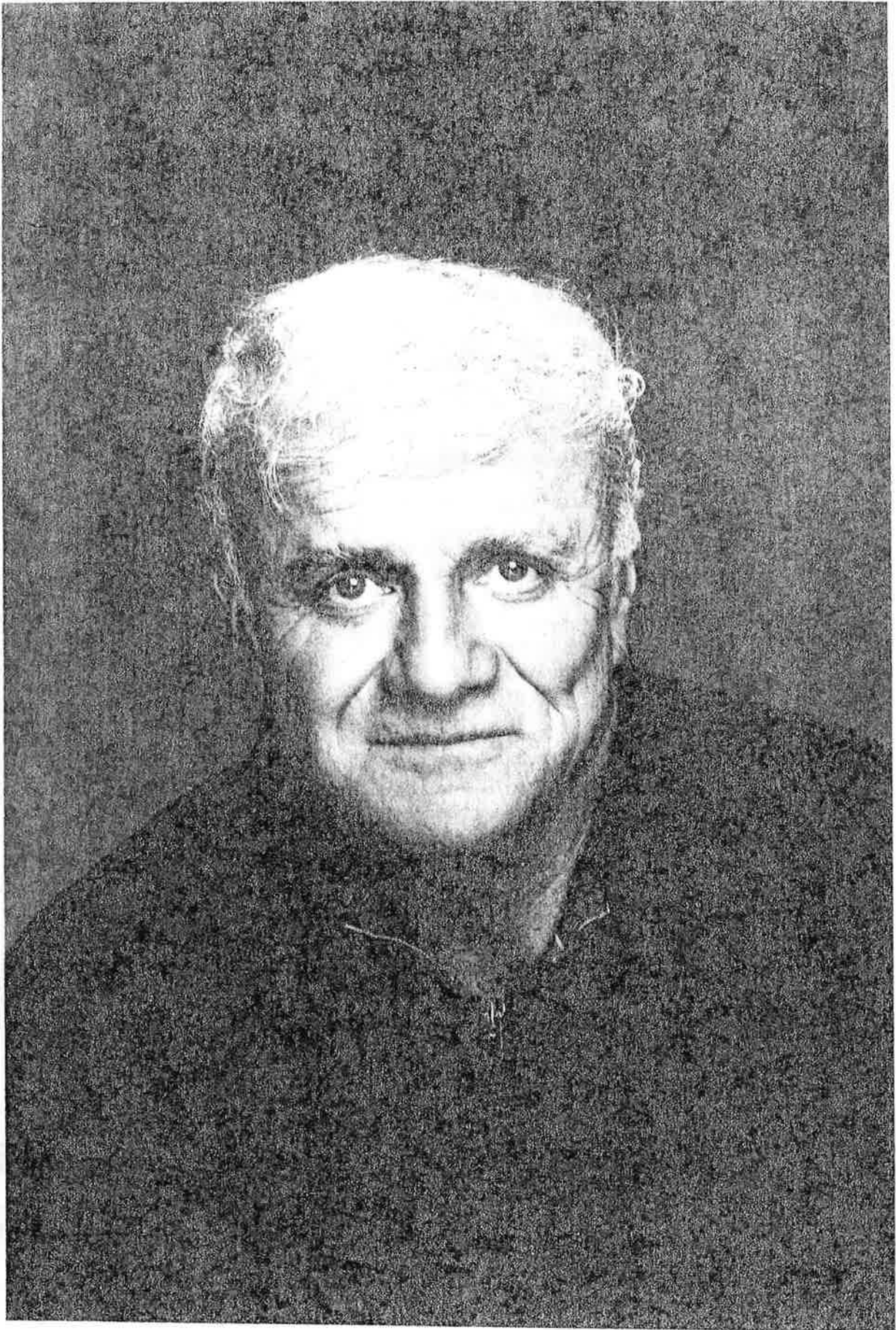
He saw the small smile
that was there and then not,
and he wished he could know
what McCormick had thought.

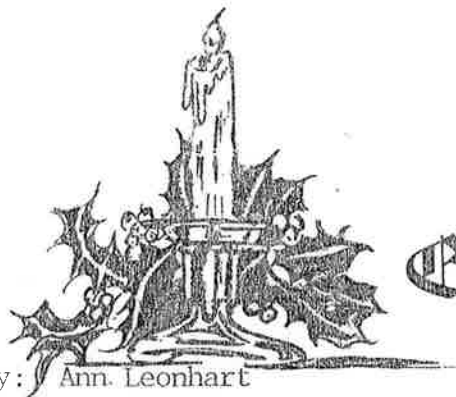
He gazed at the man
almost half younger than he,
and thought, "Mark's a good Tonto;
that's enough for me."

Then he said lowly,
not to awaken the sleeper,
who only shifted position
and dozed all the deeper,

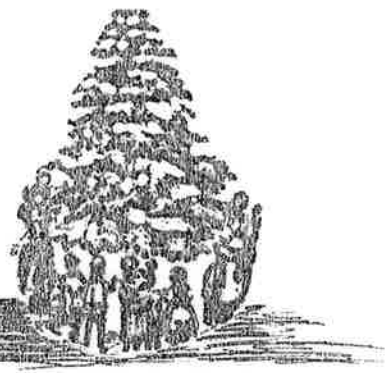
"Just one more thing, kid,
then this case is shut.
If I catch you peeking again,
I'll kick your damn butt!"







A Dickens of a Christmas



By: Ann. Leonhart

Milton C. Hardcastle was in a bitchy mood. And if he was unhappy, then by God, the whole world should be, too. Not even the fact it was December 23rd -- two days before "C-day" -- did anything to lighten his foul disposition.

He sank further down in his recliner, reading but not comprehending the newspaper -- a prop in his "preoccupied" act -- perched on his stomach. He rustled the pages to cover a grunt.

"Let that two-bit Hickman slip through my fingers like some wet-behind-the-ears-rookie," he muttered darkly to himself, repeating the same accusation he'd punished himself with for days. //Hmph! Maybe I'm gettin' too old for this sorta thing. Oughta leave it to the younger generation.// His eyes flitted to McCormick, then back to the paper. //Like the kid over there. Didn't seem to dampen his spirits none. But does he have to be so damned cheerful? Been hummin' those stupid Christmas carols all day, stickin' Christmas cards all over the place, hangin' that dang mistletoe everywhere. Just who the devil he think he's gonna catch under that green nonsense? Me? Hmph! Waste of time if ya ask me.//

Rattling the newspaper noisily, Hardcastle buried his head again, ignoring the curly-headed young man busily wrapping a box in bright red and green striped paper.

"Hey, Judge, you think Frank'll like this?" McCormick asked, proudly plopping a self-sticking gold bow on the corner of the package.

Hardcastle kept his nose hidden. "How do I know, McCormick," he grumbled. "It's a shirt. Harper wears shirts. What's to like?"

"Ah, ah, ah!" McCormick grinned, looking like a dutiful elf, then broke into song. "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm tellin' you--"

"-Cut that out!" bellowed Hardcastle. "I'm tryin' to read the paper here. Don't you have anything better to do than irritate me?"

"Not really," McCormick chuckled, climbing to his feet.

Hardcastle was aware of the kid standing patiently in front of him but stubbornly refusing to acknowledge his presence.

"That's not gonna work, Judge," said McCormick, shoving the paper down into Hardcastle's lap.

He raised his downbent head, fixed a warning scowl on his face, and lifted it toward his tormentor. It didn't work.

"Come on, Judge," Mark pleaded. "You been moping around here for two days. We'll get Hickman next time. So what if he figured out what we were up to? It's not the end of the world, you know."

"We were so close, McCormick," he growled, throwing the newspaper to the floor. Its pages separated in a chaotic mess. "He outsmarted me. That cunning little weasel knew what we had planned from the beginning. He made a fool out of me."

"So, you oughta be used to it by now," McCormick shot back, a mischievous grin plastered on his face. It disappeared in the wake of Hardcastle's fury.

"Come on, Hardcase. Lighten up. We'll get him later. It's Christmas!" McCormick's eyes lit up. "Hey, I got a great idea," he said, tugging at the Judge's arm. "Let's go to one of those all-night tree places, drag out the ornaments, and put up our tree. That way we can enjoy it longer."

"Nah, let me alone, kid," Hardcastle muttered, brushing Mark's hand aside.

"No, listen, Judge," McCormick said gleefully, "We'll heat up some egg-nog -- course, we'll have to buy some first; maybe some hot chocolate will do... Wonder if we have some, better check, and--"

"Will-you-put-a-sock-in-it, McCormick," he snarled, halting the bubbling flow of words. The light went out of Mark's eyes, and his face fell, immediately causing a stab of regret in Hardcastle. But the guilt wasn't enough motivation to change his mind. //He'll get over it// he told himself before turning to the dejected young man before him. "Listen, kiddo, I know you're excited about Christmas and all, but I'm just not in the mood. Why don't you go out and pick us up a tree by yourself?"

The curly head nodded almost imperceptibly, refusing to look up. McCormick shuffled his feet, striking the Judge as a little boy who'd just lost his favorite toy. "Nah, that's okay," he said in a low tone, still avoiding Hardcastle's eyes. "Never mind. I just thought it might be fun, something we could do...together."

The last word was barely audible. Taking a roll of festive paper under each arm, McCormick gathered up the remaining gift-wrap paraphernalia and pitched them into a nearby cardboard box. "I'll get this stuff out of your way," he mumbled.

"You don't have to leave, McCormick," Hardcastle said softly, not knowing how to undo the damage he'd done.

"Thanks, but I'm tired anyway," the young man returned, a weak attempt at a smile failing. It was a lie, and both men knew it. "Night, Judge."

"Night, kiddo."

§§§

The silence he'd craved earlier was now his, but instead of enjoying it, Hardcastle felt its incriminating presence. "Why'd the hell did I do that?" He chastised aloud, adding silently, //The kid only wanted to cheer me up// Straightening the newspaper with a disgruntled flip, he ignored his nagging conscience and busied himself with the sports page.

From there he moved to current events, the obituaries, want-ads, and finally, his favorite. Saved till last so it could be savored: The comics. Still chuckling over Garfield's latest victory over Odie, Hardcastle laid the paper aside and stretched into a lazy arch. Yawning, eyes growing heavy, he felt himself drifting off and jerked awake. "Guess it's time to hit the old sack."

§§§

Hardcastle crawled between the cool sheets, pulling the covers up over his chest, and snapped off the light. Alone, without anything to occupy his mind, his thoughts returned to the unpleasant words he'd spoken earlier to McCormick. //Damn it, shouldn't of been so rough on Mark. He was so excited all day, like a little boy gettin' ready for Christmas, and what'd I do? Spoil it for him. Poor kid must think I'm worse than Scrooge the way I was actin'. Well, too late to do anything about it tonight.//

He swallowed a deep yawn and after a few minutes his eyes closed in sleep.

"What was that?" He bolted upright. The loud noise that had awakened him sounded again and swinging his legs over the edge, he shoved his feet into the slippers beside the bed, snatching his robe from the foot of the bed at the same time. Gripping 'Ole Bess', the shotgun he always kept handy, Hardcastle edged quietly toward the door, ready to spring on the intruder.

Hugging the wall near the exit, he stayed out of sight as he took in as much of the hallway as possible. The eerie sound, like metal clanging against metal, drew nearer and Hardcastle realized with a start that someone, or something, was coming his way.

Whirling in front of the doorway, gun poised confidently ahead, Hardcastle stopped stunned by the sight that greeted him. He knew the intruder immediately. Jim Bateman, his old partner and friend. But it couldn't be. Bateman had died over forty years

ago; Hardcastle had held the ambushed cop in his arms as the life drained from his body, reddening the dark, filthy alley that had been his deathplace.

Closing his eyes, Hardcastle shook his head, then opened them again, but the apparition was still there. Dressed in the familiar blues of his time, Bateman dragged a long, heavy chain wrapped about his body, reminding Hardcastle of a snake coiled around its victim. His partner drew nearer, lifting the weighted metal clear of the final step.

"M-I-L-T..."

The ghostly pallor of the man's face, the quivering voice, the transparent body that was there but not, sent chills up the Judge's spine and he stepped back, raising his weapon. "Stop right there or I'll shoot," he warned, knowing as he said it that bullets could not harm a man already dead.

Bateman never faltered.

Drawing a shaky breath, Hardcastle lowered his gun. "Jim? What...what are you doing here? What do you want?"

The eyes of his deceased partner locked with his, and for a moment Hardcastle thought perhaps he was dead also. It was as logical an explanation as any to his confused mind. As if reading his thoughts, Bateman shook his head in slow, almost motionless motionless, gesture.

"No, Milt, that's not why I came. You will be visited by three spirits this night."

//This is getting too ridiculous to believe.// "Sure," he retorted, finally convincing himself Bateman was just a figment of his warped imagination. "Let me guess: The Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come. Right?" He added in icy sarcasm, then decided he might as well play along. //It's only a dream, after all. What can it hurt?// "Okay, you've said your speech. Now get out of here and let me get some sleep." Without a backward look, he marched into his bedroom, pulled off his robe and slippers, and clambered back into bed. //Shoulda known better'n to eat that casserole McCormick called supper.// Forcing his still jittery nerves to settle, he slipped once more into peaceful sleep.

His slumber was soon disturbed, however, when for the second time that night, he awoke with a start. Someone was in the room. Rolling over, he switched on the lamp and looking up, froze, hand still on the switch. "What the...?"

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past," the intruder answered his unfinished query.

"And I'm Billy Graham," Hardcastle shot back, deciding enough was enough. "Frank, what the hell are you doing here dressed in that get-up? It's Christmas, not Halloween."

A confused, barefooted Frank Harper stood before him donned in a floor-length white tunic. Dainty yellow daisies and other summer flowers ran up and down the long folds gathered at the waist by a pearlized belt. He held a holly leaf in his hand, a long stream of shimmering light radiated from the crown he wore upon his head. A laughable sight, had Hardcastle not been seething with anger.

"McCormick put you up to this, didn't he?" Hardcastle demanded, angrily shoving an arm into the sleeve of his robe.

"Milt, I'm as puzzled as you are," Harper insisted, lifting the 'dress' up as he walked the short distance to the bed. "One minute I'm at home in bed with my wife Claudia, and the next, I'm standing here dressed like Tinker-Bell!"

"Don't give me that! The kid put you up to this; there's no use denying it. You just wait'll I get my hands on him. I know he was upset about the tree and all but!"

"Mark never put me up to anything!" Harper repeated, the perplexed look on his face deepening. "Milt, this is crazy. Don't ask me why, but you gotta come with me. There's something I have to show you."

"Not on your life, Harper. Now, get out of my bedroom before I throw you out." Hardcastle clenched his fist to keep from carrying out his threat.

"No, Milt, listen. I have to..." Harper reached out to grab Hardcastle only to meet with thin air, his hand passing through the Judge's body. The two stood in amazed silence.

"Frank, if I'm having a dream, then it's one helluva convincing one," Hardcastle said at last, then sighed. "Okay, let's get this over with. Where are you taking me?"

"Beats me," Harper shrugged, "but let's go." A cloud rose up from Frank's feet, enveloping both men. The bedroom faded from view, to be replaced seconds later by an equally familiar sight.

"This is where you had to take me?!" Hardcastle exploded. "Frank, this is my den. Damn it, I live here."

Harper was shaking his head. "No, Milt, look around. It's your den all right, but something's different. I can't put my finger on it, but..."

"Wait a minute. Where's the picture McCormick gave me last year, and my awards? And...and that Christmas tree. It wasn't there when I went to bed. Harper, what the hell's going on?" Hardcastle whirled around at the sound of voices behind him.

A couple entered the room, walked past the two dumbfounded men as if they didn't see them, and settled onto the floor in front of the Christmas tree. Hardcastle approached in caution, not believing what he was seeing. "Nancy?" The woman never took her eyes from the man seated next to her, and shocked, Hardcastle realized who the object of her interest was. Himself, but at a much earlier age. He was looking at a younger version of himself, cradling his wife, his Nancy, in his own arms. //It can't be.// He looked at Frank in mute disbelief, then back to the scene before him. "Nancy," he said in a shocked whisper, but her attention never left his youthful self. He tried again to make her hear him, but it was useless. Desperate, heart aching, he touched Nancy's shoulder, jumping back when his hand melted into her body, reappearing on the other side. "Nancy, can't you hear me? It's Milt!"

"She can't see or hear you," Frank said softly. "This is your past. You can observe, but not interfere."

All the sweet, cherished moments came rushing back, and Hardcastle closed his eyes, trying to slow his racing heart. Resolved that no matter how much he wanted it to be, his Nancy would never again hear his voice, he slowly turned his gaze upon the couple once more. In fascinated torment, he watched the scene from his past replaying before him.

"I love you, Milt," said Nancy, leaning over to gently press her lips against his. "Merry Christmas, darling." She pulled a gaily wrapped package in red from under the tree and handed it to him.

"It's not Christmas yet," Hardcastle said, raising a brow in question.

"I know," Nancy smiled, her face lighting the room. "But I want you to open this one tonight. Please."

Hardcastle stood transfixed, remembering in vivid, bittersweet detail what was about to happen.

"What've you got up your sleeve?" The younger version of himself asked. "Okay, hand it here. I never could refuse you anything," he smiled, relenting at last. Tossing the crushed foil and bow aside, he lifted the lid and peeked inside. His eyes widened in delighted surprise as he lifted the treasure from its container and lovingly dusted the lint from the rich, wooden grain. "A gavel," he whispered. "Honey, it's beautiful." Bending over, he kissed the full, pink lips waiting for his.

Nancy beamed. "When you go into that courtroom for the first time, I want you to look the part."

He drew her into his arms. "I love you, Nancy Hardcastle."

The lump in Hardcastle's throat threatened to choke him and glancing over at Frank he felt a tear slide down his face. Coughing to cover, his hand flew to his mouth, swiping the tear away upon its descent.

"Come on, Milt. We have to go," Harper said in a hoarse whisper.

Hardcastle shook his head. "No, just...just give me a few more minutes, Frank."

"I'm sorry, but we can't. There's something else you have to see." The statement left no room for argument.

Reluctant, Hardcastle followed as Harper motioned him to the center of the room. When the fog cleared, they found themselves deposited in a room neither man recognized. A small space, with blue and gold papered figures on the walls, some baseball, some football, bare wooden floors cluttered with plastic and metal trucks and cars; a half-finished puzzle lay on top of a trunk pushed against the foot of a twin bed, the missing pieces lying in disarray on the mattress and floor; small, soiled socks and other articles of clothing lay scattered about.

But in the middle of all this youthful chaos, Hardcastle's eyes riveted to a curly haired boy sitting in the middle of the bed, hugging a well-worn stuffed bear tightly to his chest. The youth appeared to be five or six and Hardcastle winced at the pain he saw etched on that small, round face, the blue eyes huge and filled with unshed tears.

"He didn't come home, Teddy," the child told his companion, nestling his face against the fuzzy toy. "All I asked for Christmas was for my Daddy to come home, but he didn't. He don't care 'bout me no more." He sniffled loudly, the small chin quivering. "What'd I do to make him not love me no more?" The tears finally fell, and a pajama-clad arm rose to brush them away. But they were too fast, too many, and the small, wet face sank into the toy, trying to smother the grief of its owner.

"Mark?" Hardcastle asked, never taking his eyes from the sobbing child. He wasn't sure whether he was wanting verification from the youth or from the spirit beside him guised as Frank Harper.

"Yes, it's Mark," Harper answered softly. "But he can't hear you."

"Look at him, Frank. The poor kid's devastated." Any lingering benefit-of-doubt he might have harbored for McCormick's real father vanished in the wake of the small boy's tortured sobs, and Hardcastle bit his lower lip to hold back his own tears. "How could you do this to him, Sonny?" He said, longing to take the child in his arms, tell him it was all right.

"We can't stay, Milt. It's time to go."

"I can't leave Mark like this!" Hardcastle resisted. "Can't we do something?"

Harper's head moved from side to side. "I'm sorry, Milt," he said in a sad voice, "If I could do something, I would. You know that."

Torn between logic and longing, Hardcastle finally nodded and seconds later, found himself standing in the center of his bedroom... alone.

Disorientated, he looked around, uncertain what he'd seen had really happened or just the results of a very convincing dream. Still troubled, he decided it had to be the latter and cautiously made his way back to the security of his bed. His head had barely hit the pillow when he shuddered awake, the feeling of unease returning. "Not again," he bemoaned, sitting up in bed. "Don't tell me, Frank," he motioned the lieutenant quiet. "You're the spirit of Christmas Present. What the hell'd McCormick put in that casserole, anyway? Okay, where to this time?" He eyed Frank's outfit. //Damn, have I got a good imagination.//

The long white tunic of before had been replaced with a rich, dark green velvet robe, thick white fur draped across the neck and down each side of the open coat. Frank's head was covered with dark brown curls, a holly-wreath atop the curly mass. And to complete the image, a rusted sheath, minus its sword, was around his waist. The classic picture from Dickens' pen. Hardcastle waited for an answer.

Harper's shoulders arched. "How the hell do I know? This is your dream. Come on, Milt. I don't have all night."

In a whiff of smoke (Hardcastle must've been tired of the cloud, Frank had noted), they materialized in the Gatehouse. A fully grown McCormick sat drooped in a chair looking like he'd lost his last friend.

"Why's Mark so down?" Harper asked.

Remembering how he'd snapped at the kid earlier that evening, Hardcastle hedged.

"Ah, who knows?"

"Well, someone threw ice water on his Christmas fire. When I saw him this morning, he was bubbling over with Christmas cheer. Couldn't wait to show me your present."

"He bought me a gift?" Hardcastle said, feeling his conscience sting. He hadn't taken the time from feeling sorry for himself to buy McCormick's gift.

"What'd you think? He was going to forget you?" Harper snapped. "Come on, Milt, the sun-rises and sets on you as far as Mark's concerned. Thought you'd know that by now."

Hardcastle nodded, swallowing hard.

"Mark felt really bad about not being able to buy you much last year, especially after that scooter you gave him. Said he'd been saving all year to buy you something special.":

McCormick laid his head back against the chair and shut his eyes, a depressed sigh passing his lips.

"What'd he get me?" Hardcastle asked, his self-incrimination climbing at the sight.

Harper hesitated. "I don't know if I should tell you." At Hardcastle's 'you'd-better-or-else' scowl, he quickly reversed his decision. "A gold pocket watch that he had special made. It has Lady Justice etched on the front. Set the kid back several hundred. He even had a special inscription put on the inside."

"What'd it say?"

"'To Hardcase Hardcastle'," Harper quoted, "'One hell of a Judge and my best friend. I'll always be grateful. Love, Mark.' He dated it Christmas this year."

Warmth surged through Hardcastle, followed quickly by guilt as he looked down at the somber McCormick oblivious to the scrutiny he was receiving. //I had to ruin it for you, didn't I, kid? Why the hell can't I just tell you how much I love you? You're like a son to me; in some ways, more than even Tommy was.//

Lost in thought, he was only vaguely aware of the smoke surrounding him. Starting, he suddenly realized he'd returned, and Harper had vanished. //If he was ever here. I'm sorry kid.// He headed for the door, but was stopped by the lighted dial by his bed. //I can't go out there; it's two a.m.// Shoulders slumping, he went back to bed, facing what he knew would be a sleepless night.

This time he was wide awake and waiting for Frank's return. But true to the classic his dream was patterned after, the black-shrouded Ghost of Christmas Yet-To-Come said not a word, merely beckoning Hardcastle forth with an out-stretched, bony hand. The room, suddenly cold and damp, sent a chill through Hardcastle and as twice before, the familiar surroundings around him faded from sight.

He recognized the setting immediately. He'd sent enough men and women there. Hearing the opening and closing of security doors behind him, Hardcastle turned, sucking in a sharp breath when he recognized the prisoner being escorted in.

"Welcome back, Skid," a burly, black guard sneered in contempt. "Just in time for Christmas. Get in there." He shoved McCormick, causing him to stumble. "You jerks never learn, do you? Well, you're here to stay, this time, sucker. Strip those fancy duds off. You won't be needin' 'em anymore. The state's gonna furnish your clothin' for the rest of your miserable life."

McCormick stared at the taunting guard, about to do what he was told, when the shriek of alarms tore through the air. Stepping back, the guard slammed the door of the holding cell with an ominous clang and looked around as if uncertain what he should do. "You'll be okay for a minute or two. Just don't try anything, McComrick. I'll be back to check you out."

Hardcastle's eyes followed the running guard, then quickly returned to the man sitting on the cot. The air of innocence once adding charm to Mark's face was now gone, replaced by the experienced, hopeless expression of a con whose last hope for

a better life was far beyond his grasp.

The 'how' or 'why' escaped him, but somehow Hardcastle knew this stranger sulking on a prison cot was what Mark would have become had he not intervened in the young man's life. The realization was humbling, and Hardcastle felt hot tears burn behind his lids.

McCormick never left Hardcastle's sight, but the inmate, like the two manifestations before, was unaware of the constant, watchful presence. Flitting his eyes to one side, then the other, McCormick reached under his shirt and worked a small metallic object from under the waistband of his briefs.

"Mark, no!" Hardcastle shouted, powerless to halt the damning act about to happen.

McCormick shuddered, looking up at the moment Hardcastle called his name; then, closing his eyes, ripped the razorblade across his wrist, severing the artery just beneath the skin. Within minutes, his lifeless body toppled to the floor, the resounding thud drowned out by Hardcastle's scream of denial.

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Hardcastle's eyes snapped open and he shuddered awake, his body, as well as his pajamas, drenched in a river of sweat. Shaken, he tried to calm his pounding heart, then swung his legs over the edge of the bed. The nightmarish vision refused to go away, and he lowered his head, cradling it in his hands.

§§§

Mark McCormick felt rough hands shaking him, and, prying open one eye, peered up into a craggy, somewhat blurry face.

"Come on, McCormick, you gonna sleep all day, or what?" Came Hardcastle's gentle growl.

"Wha...Judge?" Looking at the clock by his head, he moaned. "It's four-twelve in the morning. Go 'way," he mumbled, burying his head under the covers.

"Get outta that bed, or I'll toss you out on your can!" Hardcastle bellowed, causing McCormick to snap wide awake.

"Juudge... Don't tell me," he complained plaintively and nudging his body into low gear, dragged one leg at a time off the bed until both feet were firmly on the carpet. Rubbing his eyes, he finally continued, "This is your idea of torture, right? Well, I gotta tell you, Kemo Sabe, torture went out with the Dark Ages. Tonto heap big sleepy, so this'd better be good."

"Ah, quit your gripin'. This was your idea, after all," Hardcastle grumbled, pulling Mark's arm to hurry him up.

McCormick's head shot up, the shoe he was trying to slip on falling from his grasp. "My idea? My idea!?" He sputtered, gaping at Hardcastle in astonishment, then chuckled, shaking his head. "Hardcase, you'd better go back to bed. You're talkin' delirious. Or it could mean you're senile," he teased gleefully, flashing a cock-eyed grin.

"Think you're cute, don't cha, kid?" Hardcastle growled. "You want to go after it, or not?"

"After what?" McCormick squeaked. Hardcastle had been acting a little strange the last few days, but he'd figured it was just their bad luck with Hickman at fault. Now he wasn't so sure. "You all right, Judge?"

"Of course I'm all right!" Hardcastle roared, then, averting his face, added softly, "The Christmas tree, McCormick. You still want to put it up or not?" He rubbed a hand across his mouth, and gazed at the ceiling as if it were the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

McCormick, still confused but feeling good inside, stood up, studying his friend. He didn't understand the sudden turnaround in Hardcastle's attitude, but he wasn't about to risk ruining this special moment by asking. "Sure," he smiled, "Just give me time to get dressed, okay? Wouldn't do for Tonto to be seen without his buckskins,

ya know."

With a grin of approval, Hardcastle nodded. "Meet ya downstairs, kiddo."
McCormick watched the retreating back, shaking his head as the door closed slowly behind the bulky figure.

"Hardcase, you old donkey." He smiled broadly, warmed by a rush of affection. "I'll never understand you, but it sure keeps me on my toes tryin'."

It was going to be a wonderful Christmas after all.



HAPPY
HOLIDAYS