

ALICE NELL ALLAN

HAVE YOU SEEN MISS TESSIE ABOUT?

She did the boundaries for the third time. The front and back doors were locked and bolted, the windows were shut and the stove was off. She picked up her glass of water and went to bed.

It was silly to look under the bed, especially now that her back was so stiff, but if you've been doing a thing for nearly eighty years you simply can't stop. She had almost forgotten the reason for doing it, or what it was that she must never, never find under the bed. It was all part of keeping yourself pure, she did remember that. Like for instance switching off TV when rude love scenes came on or — well other things you didn't do, like not showing off your legs, or not brazenly hanging out your bloomers or nightgown in the light of day. Herself, she always hung them out at night.

For Mother had brought up her girls to be innocent. And most of all to avoid men. It was not that men were actually bad — after all they were God's creatures too. And of course there'd been Father. As a child she'd seen lumpy shadows on a lamplit wall and heard strange sounds from Mother's bedroom. But Mother had never liked it! That much she had, more than once, whispered to them.

Well Mary had taken the veil years ago and Dolour had died young. Was it two, or three years now since Bernadette had passed on, leaving her, Miss Tessie, quite alone in this house. This little house, in this little street, in this little town. What was its name again? She did get muddled at times, especially late at night. Yet on the whole she thought she managed well.

She finished her rosary, crossed herself and got into bed, folding her long flannel nightgown around her legs as she'd been taught to do in childhood. She flattened the quilt along her thin frame until she was only a head and feet with a straight line drawn between them. She took her tablet, put out the light and lay there drowsing.

How lucky she was to have this house! It mightn't look much to others, but she thought it sat in its shrubby little

garden like a fat bird on its nest, keeping its one last chick cosy. And she kept it fastidiously clean, she was one of the clean Irish, not the dirty ones, thank God. By screwing and scraping, too, she was just able to afford a lad to care for the garden, trim its shrubs and hedges. It was one of her greatest pleasures, once a month, to call him in when he had finished and carefully count out his pay. It was her delight to spoil him outrageously, and to offer him a glass of lemon syrup and a fairy cake. From the way he spluttered and chortled over them she'd be game to bet that he just lived for the days he came to her!

This lad, and the gnome in the garden, were the only males she ever saw. Oh of course yes, there was doctor. But would you call doctor a male? Certainly he never, by so much as a wink of the eye, betrayed himself or acted that way around her. A gentleman himself, he knew how to control his passions before a lady. But as for the gnome, as for that scalliwag, why the way he swaggered out there beside her front steps you'd think he owned the place. Sometimes, when she was in the garden, she would stand quite close to him, just to see who was the taller, and wouldn't he grin? She wouldn't be at all surprised if he thought she belonged to him too. For when she would take out her old face washer and rub the grime off his coat, he would look right into her eyes and smile and smile. . . .

During the night something woke her. The call of nature, yes. But something else besides. It was a strange sound, one that her ears had quickly classified as being out of the common, before her mind had time to identify it. Through the bathroom window, once she had turned the light off, she looked out into the garden. How bright the moonlight was! It must be full moon. If you had good eyes, you could read by that light. Not only were the fences, trees and shrubs clearly visible above their shadows, but you could see colour too. She was able to pick out the anti-Christ communist red of the poinsettia and the perfidious orange-free-state flaming of the bignonia venusta on the tankstand in Mrs Fresser's yard. She could even see the yellow centres of the innocent shasta daisies that starred the shadows. And she could see . . . but what was that?

Holy Mother of God! There was a figure in the garden next

door. Not a statue — Mrs Fresser had no statues. For a second she thought of the gnome. But the figure moved, and it was a man. A real man. And naked, mother naked in the brilliant moonlight. In all her long life, truly, she'd never seen one. So that was what it was like? But how extraordinary! And not very nice either. No wonder Mother hadn't liked it. But no! Wait! Stop!

Wearing only a fixed grin (was this what had reminded her of the gnome?) the man was deliberately lifting his leg, was gingerly climbing over the fence into her garden. She screamed, or thought she did, though no sound came out. Her legs caved in and she sat down heavily on the bathroom chair. Was her time come at last? Had she lived for eighty years, hoarding her tight virginity, preserving her immaculacy, to meet her fate at last? She saw again the lumpy shadows on the parents' wall, heard again the guttural grunts they made. And Mother hadn't liked it, hadn't wanted to do it. Yes, but if so, why had she? Time and time again, why had she?

But for her, for Miss Tessie, was this the way it had to come? Was this the dreaded violator? Not sneaking out furtively from under her bed (for now she remembered what it was she must not find there!) but striding in boldly, as if he had a right, naked and grinning in the moonlight.

She looked up and met her own eyes in the bathroom mirror. Her cottony hair fluffed about her face like a halo, above the faded blue nightgown that fell board-straight to the floor. Suddenly a hot blush flooded over her in a tide of blood she never knew she had. She trembled.

After a moment, she found new strength. She got up and looked out of the window again, to find that the man was gone from the side garden. She pattered along the passage and peered through the front windows. There was only the gnome, goatishly grinning. With an almost girlish gait, she hurried to the back windows and saw the man again. There he was, his naked back towards her, his apelike arms upraised. How strange! He was taking no notice of her or her house, but busily unpegging something from the clothesline. The blessed saints preserve us! It was her washing he was about. First, he took her long white

bloomers that dangled obscenely in the moonlight, then her pink flannel nightgown, companion to the one she had on. Her heart drumming madly, she stared at him.

He was holding up the bloomers. Next thing, he was putting them to his face. Was it to see if they were damp? Damp or not, he stepped grotesquely into them, pulling them up over his hefty hams and stroking them sensuously. While Miss Tessie stared avidly, he unpegged her pink nightie. Thrusting his dark head into the neck of it he dragged it down slowly and luxuriously, down over his bare chest, down over his bloomer-clad hips and muscular legs. Suddenly he gave a shameless Marilyn Munroe wriggle to settle the garment about him, then just stood there. His mouth was open. He rocked on his feet and panted like a dog. . . .

After a while he shambled away across the garden, climbed the fence with the pink sack lofted to his knees, and disappeared in Mrs Fresser's garden. In a moment Miss Tessie heard the sharp slam of a door, then silence. Disregarding the turmoil of her feelings, her mind prompted her that this was the noise which had woken her earlier. She stood for a long while watching the empty garden, but saw only a grey tomcat slinking through the pumpkin vines. She fell at last into a kitchen chair, still watching. It was nearly dawn when she crept back to her cold bed.

"But good heavens! It was only my Carl!" Mrs Fresser neighed with overdone amusement next day. Only Mrs Fresser's crazy son, long shut up safely in an asylum, one thought, forever. But suddenly, under a new policy of the Health Department, returned to the community, as being, if rather queer, quite harmless. "Of course he wouldn't DO anything," Mrs Fresser added in a lower voice, as if what you might have expected him to do wasn't to be mentioned. "And I'm sorry he took your clothes. I'll make sure he never does it again. I've washed them for you. See them out on my line in the lovely hot sunlight? I'll iron them and you can have them back by night-fall."

Have them back? Wear those things again? After. . . . Miss Tessie's old cheeks burned. A man — in her bloomers! In her pink night gown! She felt besmirched, dirtied. Worse than that,

she felt bad, wicked, guilty. She wouldn't have been able to face Mother. (Yet Mother had done it, often, often. Even if she hadn't liked it — or had she been pretending? To stop her daughters?) Miss Tessie felt she ought to go straight off to confession, but didn't quite know what she ought to confess.

Confused, seeking some sort of comfort, she trailed out to the front garden, to the gnome. But how awful! He blamed her too. He wouldn't — simply wouldn't — look at her. No matter where she stood, he looked right through her. When she stood in front of him he stared over her head. When she came up on one side he looked at the letterbox beyond her. Pretending to pull out a weed, she very humbly and painfully knelt at his feet — but he was hard, he had no mercy, he only sneered. It was clear that he despised her as a whore.

She went inside and cried for a while. Then she got up, found the heavy old hammer in the toolshed and spent the rest of the afternoon nailing up the windows. That done, she pulled down the blinds, double fastened the front and back doors and crept silently to bed. Once there, she turned her face to the wall.

