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Chapter] Seventeen

Ⓢ The first thing that struck Mrs. McBee's eye when she entered the room were the dolls. She had not known what to expect really. In her mind she had rather pictured the greenhouse Mrs. Flemming, dressed as she always was in her peach-colored smock but rearranged of course, lying on her bed, her face perhaps swollen with grief and shock.

11/13
X24
Bask.

1 1/2 px But what she saw now was a different Mrs. Flemming altogether. Mrs. McBee had never given much thought,

if any, to what the woman's life was at home, how she dressed, her more intimate habits. It simply did not interest her. But the dolls, even the room itself, was the last thing she would have come to expect.

The bed, a large double bed with a ^{brass headboard,} ~~pink satin~~ skirt ~~sewn to match the curtains at the window,~~ was neatly spread. And in the middle lay Mrs. Flemming in a faded flowered housecoat, her large feet in black house shoes sticking straight up like the wings of a bat. A water glass was at her side and a man's handkerchief was wadded at her forehead. Surrounding her everywhere, it seemed, were the dolls, elaborate dolls, all shapes and sizes, on the bed, chairs, hang^fing at the windows.

^{1/2 px} At first glance Mrs. McBee guessed there must have been a dozen or so. All different. Rag dolls, plastic dolls with long hair and staring eyes, dolls with stiff extended arms and legs^f dressed in lace and aprons, a baby china doll, its eyes shut, a Swiss doll looking as if it were about to yodel, cushion dolls with yellow hair and spread skirts.

Mrs. McBee had always had a disliking for that sort of thing. Once she had bought a cedar chest and

inside was a large skirted doll with blinking eyes. She had told the man at the store: "Now you can just keep that ~~thing~~; it ~~will~~ just end up in my trash can."

She knew, of course, there were those who admired such ~~things~~. But as far as she was concerned it was just clutter. Tacky clutter, at that. Whatever, it was certainly not a thing she would have connected in any way with Mrs. Flemming. And, in light of ~~things~~ ^{everything} now, it was strikingly grotesque as if in some sick brain it had all been planned.

Mrs. McBee indicated none of this, however. She drew up a chair near the bed and sat looking into the woman's half-closed eyes.

"Have you seen a doctor?" she asked matter-of-factly.

Mrs. Flemming turned her head slightly. "One come ~~them~~ ^{them} in last night and give me ~~them~~ er thangs." Her eyes rolled in her head, indicating a bottle of pills on the bedside table.

"That's good," said Mrs. McBee. "Sometimes we need help."

"He never knowed nothing," said Mrs. Flemming drowsily.

18 pts | "He didn't suffer, you mean?"

"She musta come up on him from behind. Doctor said he probably didn't feel nothing!"

"That is reassuring to you, I'm sure," said Mrs. McBee. She was thinking she did not want to go into any details of the thing. "The main thing right now is: how are you?"

Mrs. Flemming said nothing but took the man's handkerchief and pressed it down over her eyes, her body shaking with silent sobbing.

"Now, now," said Mrs. McBee. "We have to be brave."

Mrs. Flemming jerked the handkerchief away and turned a scarlet face to Mrs. McBee. "Last thang he said in this world was ~~a~~ about you."

Mrs. McBee moved in her chair. She didn't want to hear that either. If he had said anything she had a pretty good idea of what it was. "It was too bad we had to have that unpleasantness. I've always tried to make it a policy never to take up my children's misunderstandings."

18 pts | "Last thang he said was 'we gotta go over and pologize to old lady McBee!'" She pressed the handkerchief to her eyes again.

HERE

Old lady McBee. The term was jolting.

Mrs. Flemming turned to her again. "He died a downed man, Mizz McBee. Last thang he learned in this world was his daughter wasn't nothin but a ho. Learned that, then Tilda come off and killed him."

11/13

Mrs. McBee unsnapped and snapped her pocketbook. "Oh, I'm sure there must have been some mistake in that," she lied. "Times have changed so. The young girls are just a little freer than they were in your and my day. That doesn't mean²--" She leaned closer to the bed. "How could he have learned such an untruth^fful thing?" She could not hold back the question.

Mrs. Flemming rolled her head back on the pillow. "Lawdy, Lawdy. I don't know. He had some dealings with that Johnson man -- down the road. He was gone swap out one of the beagles for one of Johnson's hounds and they got to arguin and it just come out and later on him and Bertha [Mae had it out. Told her she had to leave the house and--" She looked at Mrs. McBee with her weak eyes. "Them was the last words Bertha Mae ever heared from her daddy in this world."

"Well, we can't think of those things, can we? He didn't know they would be his last words, I'm sure. Had he known²--"

"I told T. J. myself: ~~Said~~, said 'I don't thank it was John Beford, T. J. Said, 'He aint capable of no such as that. He don't like no girls any whichaway.'"

"Why, come now, Mrs. Flemming." Mrs. McBee scraped her chair as she moved it slightly. She forced the ~~little coils~~ ^{using} of anger back into herself. "Certainly that is not true. John Bedford's had many a girl friend."

1/2 PX "Has? Well, anyhow, the last thang he said in this world was concernin you." She gave a wheeze which sound^d ed like a little squeal and began the silent sobbing once more. "Just thought you'd like to knowww...."

Mrs. McBee narrowed her eyes. She was ruffled over the remark about John Bedford. Tactless. Tactlessness was just native with all of them. John Bedford did have girl friends. She was thinking of the telephone operator. But was that the way other people saw him? She had never considered such a thing before.

"Didn't even have no time to make his peace with Jesus," squealed Mrs. Flemming from the bed.

Mrs. McBee looked away from her. "Maybe we shouldn't speak of those things just now," she said.

"Let's try to remember the pleasant things about Mr. Flemming ^I-- all the pleasant days."

11/13 Mrs. Flemming opened her eyes wide as if it were an idea she had never thought of before. "He was a good man, Mizz McBee. He didn't have no fancy ways or nothin. But he was always helpin out the poor and folks ~~that~~ didn't have much. How come you spose such as this shoulda happened to somebody like him?"

Mrs. McBee was still thinking about the remark about John Bedford. She was thinking, too, she wouldn't stay much longer. "We don't know these things, Mrs. Flemming," she said.

Mrs. Flemming said nothing. She just lay on her back gazing up at the ceiling with drowsy swollen eyes. Mrs. McBee looked from her to the dolls again. The one with the stiff arms and legs bothered her more than any of the others. It had long brown hair and wide staring eyes with its eyelashes curled upward. The outstretched arms appeared to be pleading.

She forced her gaze away from it. "The best thing for you to do now is to get busy," she said. "I know after Mr. McBee died being busy was the one thing that kept me going. Of course, I had to be busy, settling

the estate, trying to make a life for myself ^I~~M~~ and two young children. They were small then."

"Aint no estate to settle far as T. J.'s concerned. There aint nothin. He had to borry on his in-surance so as to build ~~that~~^e thang out there." She turned to Mrs. McBee, and in her eyes there was a light of terror like the eyes of an excited mare. "Guess I'll just end up scrubbing the streets. He owed everbody. I told him: ~~Said~~, said 'Whatcha want with thet er thang ~~for~~^{for?}' And he said it was for Buster, Junior and ~~them~~^{PK} and he could pay it off in ten or fifteen year. He didn't know nothin like this here was gone come off." She half sat up on the bed, her fat face pale. "He done left us here with nothin but ~~them~~^{them} dawgs out yonder."

1/2 px | It was not a total surprise to Mrs. McBee, though she had not calculated things were that bad. Still, she might have known had she thought twice. As high as prices were now there weren't many country people who could afford to build a greenhouse as big as that, especially when they had just started a shop and everything else.

"All ~~that~~^{that's} gone happen to me is I'm gone end up a lonesome old woman beggin for bread. And, Jeeee-zus,"

she squealed to the ceiling, "You oughtta not did ~~that~~ ^{that} to nobody like me. I done the best I could for You, gone out in the world and spread the gospel, tried to do right by ever-body. How come, Jesus?" She put the handkerchief over her eyes again.

The last thing Mrs. McBee wanted was a fit of hysteria, and it appeared one was about to come. She patted the woman's arm. "We must be brave. Something will work out. How good it is you have your faith."

Mrs. Flemming turned to her almost angrily. "And I aint never lost it neither, and I aint ever gonna. No matter what descends down I aint ever gone lose my faith." She sniffed loudly. "I'm washed, Miz^z McBee, so was ~~T. J.~~ ^{T. J. -¹/_M} in the blood of the Lamb." She looked blackly at Mrs. McBee. "And can't nobody take ~~that~~ ^{that} away."

"No, they can't," said Mrs. McBee, fearing the little pat had done nothing to ~~e~~ ^{at}leviate the hysteria.

"Jesus gone see me through this thang. He's gone see me through ever-thang." She let out a long sigh.

Mrs. McBee sat regarding the woman. She lay on the bed with her hands crossed over her stomach and for the moment her face was relaxed, almost peaceful.

It was as if she were having some momentary vision from whence came a great strengthening. Looking at her, Mrs. McBee was thinking of the day John Bedford, Senior had died. His death, too, had been sudden, shocking in its way. There had been a few tears, she remembered. But mostly her mind was filled with practical things, the immediate things to be done, the children, how she would live, wondering, too, if she could bear the long years alone.

7/13
 1 1/2 px She never remembered once thinking about God or anything like that. There was too much else to consider. At the funeral, of course, she listened, took in the words of the rector. And she read the sympathy letters people had written, all about John Bedford, Senior being with his Lord now and that she should rejoice.

Feb 81 She didn't rejoice, and she hadn't rejoiced since. She had given little thought to where he was. And in the years following she had given little thought to faith either, any real kind of faith. She went to church, of course. But she had become so overly familiar with the Prayer Book she could recite the Morning Prayer verbatim without ever giving it thought. She could recite and at the same time think of all the things she had to do tomorrow.

She simply did not have time to think of God very much.

11/13 In its way it would have been helpful to have been a little like Mrs. Flemming, to feel, to know there was someone, a Divine Spirit who would bring in the money, add up the bills, bring food into the house, educate the children, pay doctor bills, gas bills. And looking at Mrs. Flemming now, lying in her puzzling serenity, a slight bewilderment came to ^{Mrs. McBee,} ~~her~~, a bewilderment for her own lack.

Perhaps things would have been better, less demanding, had she really prayed. Perhaps her children would have turned out better; maybe she would never have got high blood pressure. She wondered if she really had any faith at all. Real faith. She believed she had not. And the thought was disquieting. She would die a sinner, unwashed. She shook her head nervously. Unwashed. Even the woman's words were contagious.

She had never been partial to words like "sin" and "saved" and people who "passed" instead of "died". They were embarrassing words, and she herself would never have used them. But she never used the other

words either. All that was a private matter, she had reasoned, to be done in one's closet. But there had been no room in her life, either private or public, to dwell on such things. And it was too late now. She was too old to start filling herself with things she had never had before.

11/13

But I must, another voice was saying. I must.

Before I die.

$1\frac{1}{2}$ px She became conscious of the dolls again. It seemed the entire room was filled with bright staring eyes, gay and happy, all watching her. And she thought of T. J. Flemming lying there, the two of them, husband and wife, entwined on their marital bed with the bright eyes forever ~~with~~ ^{and} them. She pushed away the thought and gazed at the sickening pink of the window curtains. She was feeling slightly ill.

Mrs. Flemming turned to her, and a serene smile spread over her bloated face. "We're just too ~~W~~ old widow ladies now, aint we? Don't [↑] time go by, though?"

"Yes," said Mrs. McBee, unsnapping and snapping her purse again.

"Sometimes it don't [↑] seem like but yesterday I was just a ^{quill} girl."

"I don't know where the time goes."

"Lawdy, Lawdy," said Mrs. Flemming and began to shake her head. "I guess it won't be too long a time fore I'll be called myself."

"Yes, well." Mrs. McBee rose from the chair.

"We won't think about that just now."

11/13

Mrs. Flemming swung her huge feet over the side of the bed and sat up.

"No, now, you just be calm," said Mrs. McBee.

"You need your sleep. Try to sleep."

"No'm, lemme see you to the door. Don't know where Lojean and Buster, Junior's at."

"I think your sister said they were in Ashton making arrangements."

Mrs. Flemming hung her head and tightened her lips.

Mrs. McBee gave her a final little pat of reassurance.

Outside the air was misty with coming rain. Clouds hung low over the horizon of pine trees. Both women stood on the front porch gazing out as if from the hazed distance they were waiting for something. Rain or a burst of light.

"All out there," said Mrs. Flemming finally, and

she lifted her hand like a blessing. "All out there ^I~~M~~
~~T. J.'s~~ out there, strewn over everywhere ^{g r}. Scattered
 like seeds."

18 pts Yes, thought Mrs. McBee, to grow and grow.

uu When she got home John Bedford was sprawled in
 the wing chair, a martini at his side, one hand hiding
 the left side of his face, a study in gloom.

As if that was doing anybody any good, she thought, Mrs. McBee,
 just sitting there brooding. She went straight up to
 him and standing before him with both hands on her
 hips she just came right out with it:

"John Bedford, you like girls, don't you? You
 don't have anything against girls?"

He slowly drew his hand down the side of his face
 and gazed up into her face utterly dumb-founded.

18 pts "Well, let me tell you this: when a man doesn't
 marry sometimes people think ^{he's}you're peculiar. And
 another thing: you'd better start having children
 because if you don't the Flemmings, people like that,
 are going to start taking over the world. There're
 more Flemmings than there are us. Their seeds are
 everywhere!"

She left him still sprawled in the chair and having had her say she marched out to the greenhouse to wash down the floors.

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