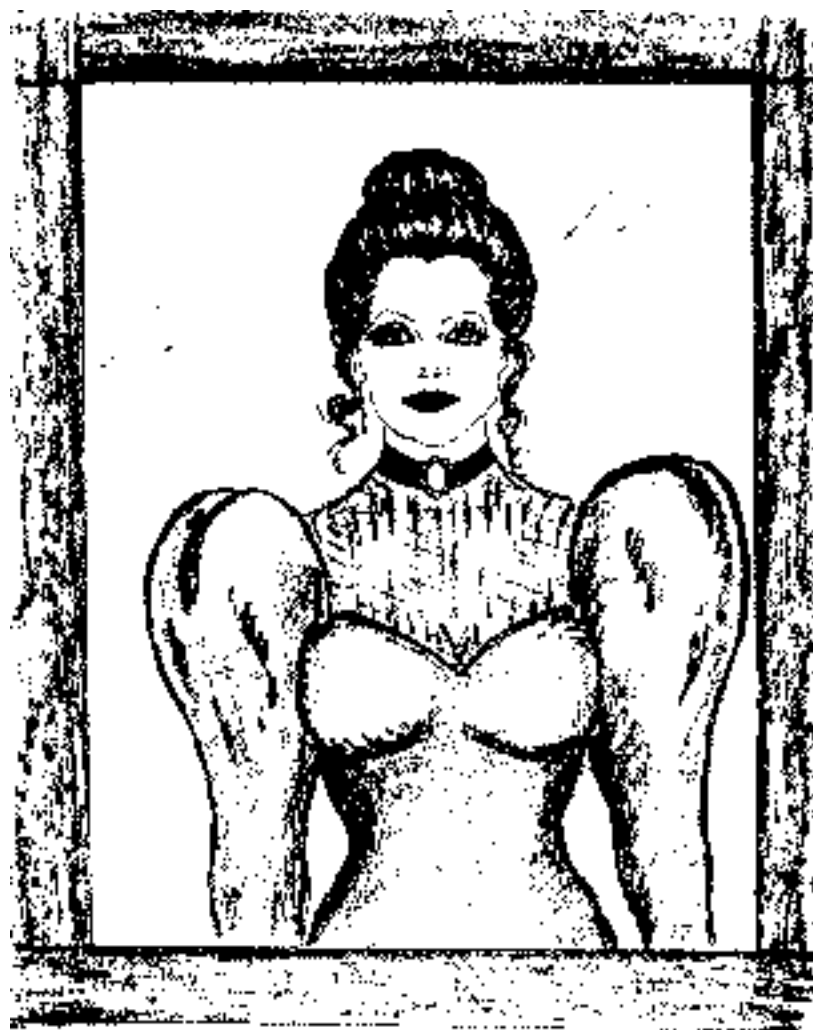




Reluctant Press

Cameo

Annie Warren



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

Copyright © 2002, Friendly Applications, Inc. - All Rights Reserved

Reluctant Press TG Publishers

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. All situations and events herein presented are fictional, and intended only for the enjoyment of the reader. Neither the author nor the publisher advocate engaging in or attempting to imitate any of the activities or behaviors portrayed.

Persons seeking gender reassignment surgery, hormone therapy or any other medical and/or body-altering process should seek the counsel of a qualified therapist who follows the Benjamin Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorder.

Protect Professional Fiction on the Internet!

We need *your* help! We want to keep providing our readers with low cost, professional quality fiction on the Internet. We spend thousands of dollars to edit, illustrate and typeset *each story*. It is important, therefore, that everyone works to help keep professional fiction alive on the Net.

This story is protected by US and International copyright law, and is owned exclusively by Friendly Applications, Inc, DBA Reluctant Press, which retains exclusive rights to publish these materials. The civil penalties for copyright infringement can be severe, including substantial monetary damages, injunctive relief, and liability for attorneys' fees incurred in prosecuting a case. If a court determines that the infringement was committed willfully, statutory damages of up to \$100,000 for each copyright infringed can be awarded. Even if not found to be acting willfully, a defendant can still be held liable for statutory damages of \$500 to \$20,000 for each copyright infringed. **These penalties apply even if money was not charged.** In addition, criminal penalties may be imposed if someone willfully infringes a copyrighted work for commercial advantage or private financial gain. This crime is punishable by up to five years imprisonment, up to \$250,000 in fines, or both. State civil damages and criminal penalties vary from state to state and country to country, but are always severe.

The best way to keep professional illustrated fiction available on the Internet is to do *YOUR* part to protect the author's and publisher's copyright. *You can be part of the solution.* Encourage others to purchase our stories. Never share the access rights you've purchased. **You** make the continued availability of TG fiction on the Internet possible. Thank you for your cooperation!

CAMEO

By Annie Warren

It was one of those blah days. There was just enough rain falling that we couldn't go out without getting wet. Somehow we had run out of things to do indoors and were bored. Mudhen, my older sister, had just turned off the TV and sat staring at me as I stared at her.

“Well, Peanut, what have you got to do?” That was her nick name for me, Peanut. “I'm bored spittleless and the tube is dead.”

“Beats me. Until the rest of my stuff arrives, I'm also at a dead end. I wish the mover had come earlier and left more.”

We had just moved into a “new” old house. Dad had bought the estate of the previous owner for a reasonable price. I had never really seen her, but, since we got the house, I heard a lot about her. She had been a woman in her nineties who had lived here for who-knows- how-long.

She was a white-haired woman who always dressed in the fashion of the turn of the century. She never “went modern” and so, various parts of her wardrobe went in and out of style as the fashions changed.

Her relatives had removed her personal effects from her bedroom; the rest of the house had been sold “as is”. It seems that none of the family members wanted more than they took, apparently thinking the furnishings were just too old-fashioned. They were obviously not into antiques or they would have emptied the house.

Dad had been only too happy to “take the rest off of their hands”. Of course, what it meant was that we had a lot of creepy old furniture. Dad said that we “just didn't appreciate antiques” to which I replied that I didn't if it meant sleeping in a creepy bed. I never did know why she had so many bedrooms when she lived alone.

We had been looking for a place since our house had suffered some fire damage, enough that the house was no longer sound and would have to be replaced. Most of my toys, books and clothes had been destroyed by the fire. My games had been in a chest that had been spared, but it was too large for the apartment and was put into storage. We were still waiting for the storage to be shipped here so that we could re-

sume the life we had become accustomed to before the fire. The apartment had been cramped and the result was that Margo and I had cut to the minimum our personal toys and clothes. Even most of the family library that had survived the fire had gone into storage. There was a library room here but it was devoid of anything of interest. The shelves were blank for large stretches. Either they had not been filled or, more likely, the relatives had hit it with a vacuum machine.

There was no dust anywhere. The former occupant, Bessie McGuire, had kept an immaculate house, clean to a fault.

Thus having little of our own, when the parents left us here alone, there was little to do. I looked out the window at the gently-falling rain, but it didn't help much. Margo turned and looked at me. Then, her face lit up.

"I know what we can do. Let's go explore the attic!"

Dad had forbidden that action as he felt we might ruin some good antiques that might be stored there. The relatives had not even remembered that there had BEEN an attic and so it was supposedly "in prime condition".

"We're not supposed to do that, you know. Dad said it was off limits to us."

"Well, I don't know about you, Peanut, but before I die of boredom, I'm going exploring, with or without you." With that she got up and started towards the door.

"Seems like another of your hair brained schemes, Mudhen, but I guess I'll go along so that you don't find me dead of boredom in the meantime."

I tagged along behind her. It is amazing how many things I get roped into by my idiot sister by just "going along"—like the time I followed her on my bike on a path that she apparently knew and I didn't. I ended up falling off and bending my wheel beyond all repair. I should know better by now, but here we went again.

I guess that Dad had believed more in the power of his words than in the lock on the door. We went up to the second floor and then made our way up the dark, narrow stairway leading up to the attic. The door opened easily but the darkness was inhibiting. The only windows up there were small, incredibly dirty and let little light in. Due to the rain, the light was weak at best.

Margo looked around and finally found a switch to flip. The single bulb did manage, barely, to throw light enough to allow us to see what was there.

Below, the house was immaculate. Up here in the faraway attic was an awful lot of dust. You could see where you had walked. There was old furniture and boxes and barrels and just "stuff". Naturally when Margo saw an old stuffed rabbit, she had to go and pick it up before clasp it to herself. I watched that antic for a bit, wondering how my older sister could act so childishly. We're both in our mid-teens and she is supposed to be some sort of role model... this was ridiculous, I thought. As I looked around, I didn't see much of interest, and Margo (again) led the hunt.

"Drat it all, Peanut, this place is dirtier than your room."

"Say what you will, Mudhen, but I don't need a shovel for my room." I kicked at the dust on the floor, raising a bit of it and making a noticeable mark in it, getting down to the bare wood. "It doesn't look like anyone has been here for years."

“That's probably why the relatives left it alone, if they even knew about it. Maybe they thought this stuff was haunted.” Her eyes lit up as she looked at me. “Wouldn't that be cool, to have a haunted attic? Or maybe she walks the halls down stairs at night. Awoooooooooooooooooo.”

“Cut the corn, Mudhen. If it was haunted we'd surely know it by now. Unless she only comes out on the night she was murdered. Arghhh! Looking for vengeance on her murderer, most foul, or anyone else she can find to mutilate in their sleep... ” It was my turn to try to throw some scare... Unsuccessfully.

“Oh come off it. She died naturally in her sleep. So maybe she doesn't haunt.” I had turned her idea back on her and chuckled to myself. “But there has to be something of interest up here besides this little bunny.”

Again, she hugged it. It was plain cloth with the face and earfluff apparently drawn on in ink. Maybe plain isn't descriptive enough; perhaps I should say “crude”? She had taken a momentary fancy to it, though, and that was that. Then, I noticed that she was looking at the floor, not where I had scuffed it or where we had left foot marks but over by a large chest.

“Hey look, Peanut, see what I see?”

“I probably see what you see but I don't see what you're looking at.”

She walked over to a large chest with some stuffed animals on it and tossed them off to one side out of the way, clearing the top of the trunk. I knew her attention had been diverted. “This chest is not like the rest of this stuff, it has been messed with, not too recently, but...” She scuffed the floor and I saw that here were indeed the traces of other foot prints and “scuffings” in the dust on the floor. The chest had indeed been visited reasonably recently. The dust was definitely disturbed. I walked over to it as she was fiddling with the lid. Soon, she opened the hasp and pulled up on the lid which opened wide.

It was a large trunk, one of those old things with the semi-rounded top. As it opened, it revealed a tray with handles left and right to lift it out. It was piled high with miscellany. Margo lifted it out and placed it on a nearby square-top trunk that looked almost like it had been placed there for that purpose, which it may have been.

Underneath the tray were clothes, neatly folded and colorful. Margo reached in and grabbed something and pulled it out, shaking it lightly. It was a dress with a slender waist, some draping at the hips, and a long skirt. There was some ballooning of the sleeves at the shoulders. No one wears dresses like that these days; at least I never saw anyone. The cloth looked either well-preserved or fairly new.

“How old fashioned. I'll bet these were some of Bessie's things. They say SHE was old-fashioned.” She looked over at me. “No one wears things like this today unless they are as old fashioned as the clothing.”

I got the idea that she thought they were “old fashioned”. I thought of telling her about redundancy, something that I had learned about recently in Sophomore English class. Looking down again, she spied something and crumpled the dress. “Oh no, it can't be.” She dropped the dress into the chest as she reached in. “She WAS old fash-

ioned.” With that, she brought out what looked like an old laceup corset, but again the cloth didn't look aged at all.

Holding the corset up high, she spread it out. She looked at the laddering of the laces between its two halves and the garters hanging down. Then she looked at me. “I know what we can do, Peanut! Let's play ”dress-up" now that we have something to use.”

“Oh come on, Mudhen, you'll never ever fit into any of that stuff!” It was true. Margo, for all of her female charm, was built more like a linebacker than a waif. I gave her the name “Mudhen” years ago when I told her that she looked more like a Mudhen sitting on a brood of chicks than a chick, which was true. Although she was my older sister, she was not petite. She seemed to have inherited our father's robustness while I had inherited Mom's slender liveness. Speak about a mismatch in inheritances! Margo always kept her hair about an inch above collar length while I kept mine considerably longer. Mine was straight but hers had been curled and permed. She'd complain about how she had to curl hers as Mom wouldn't let her wear it straight.

Mom also insisted that she wear makeup and such and have her ears pierced and be feminine... It was sort of like trying to make a brick feminine, but she did her best to please Mom. Now what was on her mind?

“Not me, Peanut, you! You have a skinny waist that could probably take this and not even feel it. I'd like to see how these dresses hang, and with a bit of help, I'll bet they are close enough to your size to fit. Come on, let's do it.”

“It seems you're trying to get me to do something that you don't have to.”

“You called it earlier. I could never fit into these things, but I'll bet dollars to donuts that you could fit easily.”

“I'm no old woman, you turkey. Maybe I should call you ”Mudturkey" instead of Mudhen. You have to be crazy!” I turned away, looking for something else to be interested in.

“Tell you what! If you do this, then I'll do your chores next Saturday.”

Do my chores? I never did like sweeping and dusting and mopping. I had somehow gotten roped into having these “chores” heaped on me. She did the upstairs while I did the downstairs. Our parents said it was a “job” to earn our allowances. The prospect of not having to do them was enticing indeed.

“You do them for a month and I'll do it.”

“A month? Four weeks? That's a lot to pay for just a bit of dressing up.”

I turned and looked at her. “Look, Mudhen, I don't want to do it, and to make me, you have to pal. No chores, no deal.”

She pondered a bit, biting her lip as she thought, then brightened.

“Ok, you're on. Let's see what's in this chest. She dove in and then came up with a bag that smelled of lavender. I could smell it from where I stood. She opened it up and pulled out some hose, some pantilettes, and some other lingerie.

“Okay, strip. Here, you can put on these pantilettes and this chemise.” She handed me the two items. “Leave your socks on but take off your shoes.”

“You want me to strip here? In front of you?”

“Oh all right, I'll turn my back. I know what you look like anyway.” She giggled, “Not that that makes any difference.” With that, she turned her back as I took off my shirt. Once off, I immediately put on what she called a “chemise”. It was easy to see which was front and back as the front was decorated with lace and had cups while the back was straight and plain. It felt cool going down my body and sent a shiver or two through me.

It was tight enough to stretch the cloth a bit but. Pulling off my pants was another thing. I turned and looked and she was still busy so I pulled off my shoes and stepped out of them. Holding my pants up like a shield, I turned to her.

“Can't I keep my shorts on?”

“For four whole Saturdays of chores? No way!” She answered without turning around, and so I turned again and dropped my shorts and pants.

The panelettes were soft and silky and had more lace than the chemise. It took a bit to find which was front, but the excess cloth in the back finally convinced me and I stepped into and pulled them up.

Like the chemise they also sent some chills up and down. I felt that I looked like a weird cyclist with lace trim all over the place. With the exception of the looseness at my rear, they fit tight like the chemise. I must have been a bit larger than the original owner, but the cloth was soft and overly smooth. I turned again and she was still rooting.

“Okay, now what?” At that she turned and looked.

“My, how turn of the century. I remember seeing lingerie like that in one of my home economics classes. This is going to be fun. I found a pair of shoes and there are silk stockings, too. But first...” She went to the chest and picked up the corset from where she had put it on the edge. “We have to give you the proper shape for the dress and put the garters in the right places to hold the hose.”

I attempted to argue, but she repeated the deal we had made. She wrapped the thing about me and showed me how to hook up the busk, a long steel strip sewn into one edge of the corset going from the top to the bottom with a series of short steel spikes topped with small plates that sunk into a similar long steel plate with keyed holes sewn into the corresponding edge of the other half of the corset.

It did not take a lot of thinking to realize that the corset would have to be very loose if the pins were to be removed from the holes due to the keying. Actually it was a set of nubbins that fit firmly into a hole-and-slot receiving piece so that, when hooked, it would not come out easily or more likely at all, once it was under pressure. After all, if you were going for the pull, you would not want the thing to suddenly pop open, would you?

“My goodness, Peanut, I did not realize you were really this slim. I wish you had a smaller waist; then, with a bit of effort, we would be able to get this thing to close.”

She was mumbling to herself as she fiddled with the laces. "As it is, we'll draw you in but still be a ways off from closing." When the busk was hooked, the corset was loose enough that I had to hold it up so that it did not slip down while she took up the initial slack. Of course, when she took up some more slack, it began to be snug.

When I let go and put my arm down, she stopped and told me to hold my arms over my head. When I did, I felt it go slack again, but she quickly took that slack in and more. It was at the point where I was getting uncomfortable.

"It doesn't close, Peanut, not by a long shot, but there's no more to come out of it. You can put your arms down now."

I put them down and felt more discomfort as my body wanted to expand but couldn't.

"My goodness, but that nips you in almost to an hourglass figure. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it."

"Done it', don't you mean? I'm having second thoughts about this. Maybe it isn't worth it for even a month's worth. Let it loose."

"Not on your life. I made a bargain and I want to see the final image and that's final. You don't get out until it is all on. Can you bend over?"

I tried bending and found it almost impossible. "No way. This iron maiden is impossible."

With that, she came around and, reaching under the front of the corset, pulled up whatever loose skin I had down there and pulled it up into the lacy cups at the top. Damn! But it was like getting instant tits. Small, yes, but mammaries just the same! Looking down as best as I could, feeling with my hands, I knew that my waist had been really drawn in. From hip to just under the arms I thought I had been coated with a quick-setting, rock hard plastic. I didn't have to feel all that much with my hands to know what had happened as my breath was relegated to short gasps. How could anyone have ever worn such a garment day after day, year after year?

When she told me to, stiffly I went over to the other end of the square trunk on which the tray was sitting and sat down, after dusting off "my end". Margo then worked the silk stockings up my legs and up under the legs of my pantilettes. She then fed the garters down under them and hooked them to the hose, front and back and on the sides. Before I could stand, she put some shoes on my feet. They fit reasonably well, but a bit tight at the sides. I found, when I finally was allowed to stand, that they had high heels. They weren't "stilt" heels but were high enough to make my ankles wobble a good bit until I managed to get most of my balance.

By now I was really feeling foolish. I was standing in the dark, dusky attic wearing high heels, silk hose, silky pantilettes, a chemise and a corset that gave me a passing, if slender, image of a young woman, albeit old-fashioned. With my long hair, there was nothing to mar that image other than the lump in my pantilettes.

"Now put this corset cover on and then we can get to the dress." How did she know it was a corset cover and not just another chemise thing? Whatever it was, I pulled it

on over the corset. It covered longer than I thought it would. Anyway, the sooner I satisfied her, the sooner I'd get out of this stuff.

“And now the dress, put up your arms.”

I put them up as she slid this thing down them and over my body. I felt it playing about my calves when it finally came to rest on my shoulders. She then started in on the back. “I wish this thing had a zipper, it would make it a lot easier. There must be a million buttons back here.” I felt her slowly working up my back. At the time, I did not even think that buttons in the back might not be reachable by me later. I just stood there and let her “do me up” as I posed as rigidly, thanks to that corset, as a good dressing dummy would. Done, she turned me around.

“Oh that looks great, too cool! Just a few more things and we'll be done and we can go and see what it looks like in the light.”

“Go and see? I don't want to go anywhere!”

“Just down to where there's a mirror and you can see how good you look. It would be sad if you didn't see what a fine “old” lady you make. With white hair and some lines, you'd be perfect.” She looked about quickly but apparently didn't see any wig boxes. “Hmmm, nothing in sight, so we'll have to make do with what we got here. Turn around.”

“More?”

I felt her working with my hair, first pulling it into a pony tail and then pressing something on it. It must have been bobby pins as she stuck me every so often. When she was done, I reached back and found she had put my hair into a tight bun. There was something underneath it, a bun form? Whatever it was, my hair was now off my shoulder and tightly held by what felt like a goodly number of pins that I could feel. Where did she get bobby pins? Must have been in the top tray, I guessed.

“She had almost only pierced earrings, some quite elaborate, so these will have to do.” She said that as she clipped a pair onto my earlobes. She put some rings on my fingers, fitting them quite tightly, until I was wearing a sum of 5 rings. Boy, if I were to smack her now, she'd feel it! She looked into the box and sighed. “All of this makeup is dried out. We'll get some down stairs.”

“What do you mean makeup? I didn't agree to makeup!”

“Quiet, it goes with the dressing up. Let's see what else is there. Ah some bracelets.” She dug them out and put them on my wrist.

There was a small box labeled “Danger!”; the letters were faded. She read them aloud to herself, then opened it to find a cameo on a black, silken ribbon. Under it were some envelopes which she ignored, pulling out the cameo before closing the box and putting it back. Digging some more, she found a dainty wrist watch that she also picked up. She found a pair of ancient reading glasses that she also picked up after putting them back in their case. Finding no more, she stood up and motioned for me to follow her.

“I can't go downstairs like this.”

“If you don't come, I won't let you out.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Do you think you can get out of that dress without help? Or that you can get out of that corset without knowing how the knot was tied or even where it is? You're my dress dummy until I say so. Four Saturdays is going to cost you some more, Peanut, or should I say, `Miss Peanut'?”

I tried to reach behind my back only to find a line of small nubbins running up my back. I tried to attack one to get it open only to fail. I had no idea how it closed much less how it opened. I was hooked and knew that she had me. I clacked over to the stairs and almost fell down them following her. Using both hands on the railing, I managed somehow to make it down to the second floor without falling.

When I got there she was waiting in the doorway of her bedroom for me with an impatient look on her face. I wobbled over to where she waited and then followed her into her bedroom.

One of the first things I saw was her full-length mirror. I went over to it as I knew she expected it. Damned if it didn't look like a tiny-waisted little lady with her hair in a bun. The only thing that marred the image was my face that I recognized immediately.

“That isn't me, is it?”

“Don't recognize the face in that super feminine context, eh? Well, let's see if we can make your face even harder to recognize. Sit down over here.” “Over here” was her vanity with her (mother-dictated) cosmetics on top.

“Hey, Mudhen, you take it easy on that stuff. What if we cut it back to three Saturdays and no make up?”

“No way, Missy, I want to see the final results and this is going to have to be a part of it. Sit down and be still until I'm done.”

With that she put on lipstick, full eye goop including shadow, eyebrow pencil, eyeliner and a half pound of heavy, black mascara- the waterproof kind. Then she put heavy blusher on my cheeks. In the mirror, I was no longer discernible and there was more of the old-fashioned woman there. As a final touch, she just had to paint my nails.

While the enamel was drying, she put the watch on my wrist, transferring several of the bracelets. She pulled out the reading glasses and had me put them on. They had small lenses that were sort of hexagonal with thin wire frames, really old fashioned. With them on I had trouble seeing things across the room, but I was yet clear in her vanity mirror. I'd swear it was a little old lady looking back at me except for the color in my hair. The problem was that when I smiled or frowned, she smiled or frowned back at me. Margo was almost done but had one more bit to add. For that, she had me look again in the mirror.

With the addition of the make up and nail polish, there was now only “woman” to be seen. One that was really old fashioned but with a really slender waist, a trace of trim ankles in the somewhat dark silk stockings and the old fashioned shoes that went right along with the old time dress. It was low cut enough to show the promise of a cleavage, really only the smallish “breasts” that were pushing out the cloth.

Margo stepped behind me and put the cameo ribbon around my neck.

“We can use this to hide your Adam's apple. It isn't big, but this should disguise it, and besides, it goes with the outfit.”

She placed it on my Adam's apple, made one tie, then pulled it really tight and tied the second part of the knot. I was not choked, but I suddenly felt a wave of nausea rise and then things started to gray out. I staggered and she released the bow on top of the knot she had made. I staggered again and then headed for the bed that I made just as the gray turned to black.....



Agatha McGuire entered the store somewhat cautiously. She was a lady of position and this was a store that ladies weren't seen in. It was in the seedier part of town, where women were known to go about their business without corseting. She was almost afraid that she would soil her fine dress in this, uh, shop. In actuality it was the second time she had been there. She was here to pick up a special order.

“Ah, Milady, it is good to see you have returned. The Item is ready.”

“And you guarantee it?”

The little old man behind the counter looked up and smiled. His white, bushy eyebrows twitched nervously, being made the more obvious by his square reading glasses. They sat low on a bulbous nose. His balding pate still had a few strays on top but a white fringe ran around an almost polished dome. While he was in a rumpled shirt with an ill fitting celluloid collar, she was dressed in the height of fashion, just as she had been on her first visit to his humble shop. It had curios and certain items that were enhanced by those persons with special gifts. She wanted a cameo for her high-spirited daughter. It was to have special properties and powers. The initial fee had been paid and now with delivery, she would make the final payment. “There are difficulties in what you have requested, Milady. We have done what we could. To the best of our abilities the qualities have been instilled. I have instructions on how to do it and what it will do in this envelope; however, you need but put it on tightly and it will do as you requested. If you wish, I could put it on you now?”

“Thank you, my good man, but it is for another.” She reached in her small purse and pulled out a small bag with a number of gold double eagles in it, the requested mode of payment. They were somewhat hard to come by but they were necessary if she desired to deal with him. “Here is the balance.”

With a deep bow, the little man gladly took the money. He opened the bag and shook the coins out into his hand, counting as he did. The coins all looked alike and had the heft of the real thing, but he picked one and tested it with his teeth. “Ah yes, Madam, the cameo is now yours. This pays in full.”

He knew that the cameo was fully armed with what the lady had asked for. It had been a strange request. Most people wanted amulets for strength or money or power. He wondered what manner of person she was planning on giving it to. Whoever it was would be a very feminine and fashionable person when it had applied its powers.

His friends had told him that they had a measure of fun weaving the net of powers into it. He hoped they had not overdone anything there. His reputation was based on good results, not odd ones. Well, it was no longer his concern. He watched her place the beribboned cameo and the envelope with the instructions for it into her little purse and leave. He felt again the weight and listened to the dull clunking of the gold coins as he lightly tossed the little sack into the air and caught it. It was a good deal all around... It was a rich and potent prize for a rich person, apparently to tame someone else. He could only speculate on who it would be, but... that was now no longer any concern of his....



From a great distance, I heard a voice calling me to wake up and felt a jostling and shaking. “Wake up, oh please, wake up.”

When I came to, I felt strange. There was something crushing my middle and my fingers felt strange. My head felt strange. In a word, nothing seemed normal. When I opened my eyes, Margo stopped shaking me and asking me to wake up. Had I been asleep? Then I remembered what we had been doing and all made sense.

“I’m okay! Stop shaking me.” With her help I sat up, seeing my skirt-covered legs as I did. “What happened? I passed out?” “All I did was put the cameo on you as you were looking in the mirror and you seemed to fall onto the bed. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Let me look again. It was weird.”

With difficulty due to the tightness of my corset and also hampered a bit by the narrowness of the skirt, I got to my feet, feeling again the wobbly instability of the heels working on my rubber ankles. I was gradually getting used to them but the muscle control just wasn’t responding as it should. I walked over to the mirror and looked at the woman in it. When she smiled, I smiled—or was it the other way around? I really didn’t know. I do know that I was enraptured with her. I ran my hands up and down my slender waist. It looked so right, somehow. Then a spurious thought came to mind.

“Mudhen, where’s my purse?”

“Huh? What do you mean your purse?”

“Oh yeah, I guess we left it upstairs in the trunk. There should be a purse that goes with this dress. It matches the colors and the cloth. I’m sure it’s there.” Even as I said it, I was wondering where these thoughts and ideas were coming from.

“Are you crazy? There’s no purse for it. None that I saw unless it was on the other side of the tray. You sure you’re all right?”

“Of course I am.” I was posing this way and that.

“That corset does give me a fine figure, wouldn’t you say?”

I again put my hands on my hips, uselessly pushing up against the seemingly steel-hard slenderness of my tightly corseted waist. Throwing out what chest I had, I found

that I was actually proud of the figure I was showing. Deep down, I knew that I should have more on my chest, but that could not be helped.

There was a stronger conflict. One side said, “how could I ever go anywhere and be seen looking like this?” while the other side said, “How could I ever go anywhere without a purse?”

Somehow, I recognized that I was dressed up quite properly for an afternoon outing or a tea. I just seemed to know it, but how could I expect Mudhen to know? She obviously knew nothing of such things. As I stood there preening, we heard a noise down stairs. Mudhen had been sitting on the bed, watching me at the mirror adjusting my dress for proper fit when the sounds came. She immediately leapt up and ran to the door and out into the hall. Before she could return, I heard Mom and Dad's voices as they came up to the second floor. “We've come home early. The rain ruined it all!” It was Mom. “And what have you two been up to?”

“No good as usual, I'll bet,” was Dad's reply.

Mudhen had not gotten a word out before they were at the door of her bedroom. Mom was the first to look in.

“Margo, who is that? And where is Alvin?”

There was a genuine agitation in her voice. We weren't supposed to have any friends over to the house yet. Especially “strange” women. Dressed as I was, I definitely qualified as strange.

For my part, I had frozen the moment I heard their voices. All thoughts of purses, teas and everything else was driven out of my mind, leaving a blank that was horrified by being found wearing, not only a dress, but a corset, too. I think my high-heeled shoes took root and started growing into the rug that I was standing on. I turned and looked at Margo and our parents as they all came into the room. My voice had ceased to function.

“Yes,” my father repeated, looking straight at me, “Just who are you? What are you doing in such antiquated clothes?” He then turned to Mudhen, “and where the devil is Alvin?”

Then Mom looked again at me, this time more closely. “Alvin? Is that you?”

My father did a double take, and then, he too, looked at me very closely. I could only nod my head.

“What are you dressed up like that for?” he asked, taking several steps closer. “Are you some kind of fairy or something? Eh?”

He reached out and touched my corseted waist, feeling the solidness of the stays beneath my dress. “What are you wearing under that dress?” He then turned to Mom. “I'll bet the loony is wearing a corset or something under that get-up. Where did you two get this stuff?” He asked that of Margo since I had still not come out of my “voice lock”.

“We were bored out of our gourds and went into the attic. This stuff was in one of the trunks. I know we shouldn't have, but one thing lead to another and, as you can see, it fit him and wouldn't fit me so I got him to play dress up.”

“He's awfully old fashioned, but he does make a good looking woman,” Mom said. “I didn't know that he could look so good. That slim waist and the hint of breasts with the hair done up that way and the makeup all look so natural.”

When I moved my hands, she spotted the rings and nailpolish. “You did do a through job of it didn't you, Margo? There's barely a trace of Alvin to be seen, just an image of uh, something more of an ”Alice”, wouldn't you say dear?”, she asked Dad.

“Much as I hate to say it, I think you're right. We seem to have gained a second daughter and lost a son. She is a bit old fashioned, but we can tolerate that for a week or so.”

I looked up. What did he mean a week or so?

When I looked up, he smiled, but it was more an exasperated grimace than a friendly smile. “I told you two to stay out of the attic. But you disobeyed me. So there will be a penalty to pay. You, Alice, are now wearing your penalty. You will be... `Miss Alice' for a week. You can stay in your corset and frillies — I'm sure you're also wearing frillies, especially if Margo had her way. You can stay in them for a week and be a demure girl about the house. Margo will see to it that you are a proper lady.

Then he turned to Mudhen, “As for you, Margo, we'll have to come up with an additional, separate punishment for you. Playing ladies maid to Alvin will no doubt give you more pleasure than punishment.” He paused, then continued, “I think that since you liked the attic so much you can clean it up—remove all of the dust, dirt and grime up there and wash the floors. I suppose you will have to keep dipping into whatever you found to give `Miss Alice' new outfits, but be sure you do not go peeking into any of the other boxes, crates or trunks or we'll see if we can get a matching outfit for you like Miss Alice's, complete with a corset just as tight if not tighter. You could use to lose a bit off your waist too.”

I saw Margo sag. It was her fault and she knew I was going to hold her to her agreement. She was going to be a real cleaning woman before this would all be over. On the other hand, what was I going to be?

One thing was sure. I'd probably be able to walk better in these damnable shoes, if the folks had their way. On the other hand, their appearance had broken whatever mood of mind I had been in. I no longer thought of my purse but instead that I was a boy dressed in the absolute height of fashion, for some period more than 70 years ago....

We had erred and been caught. The sentence had been passed and I knew that my sojourn in this dress was going to be longer than either Margo or I had ever thought of, much less planned. We then filed out of her room and down to the living room. This time, however, I found that by gathering my skirt and raising it a bit, I could negotiate the stairs a whole lot better than when I came down from the attic. It never occurred to me to question from where that idea had come.

In the living room, I discovered how difficult it would be to sit in a chair while tightly bound. Earlier, I had fallen on Margo's bed, and she had pulled me up into a sitting position. In the attic I had sat on the box. Now, I had to sit in a chair with at least some grace. I couldn't flop into a chair, even if I had wanted to. Besides, I some-

how knew innately that a lady does NOT flop. I managed to sit with what Mom said was more elegance than she had ever seen me sit. When I told her it was because of the damned corset, she corrected me saying, "Alice, a lady does not use curse words." My only reply was to then tell Margo to clean up her act too. Margo laughed until she came under the hard stare of both Mom and Dad. Boy, things sure did change quickly.

When it came time to do dinner, I was more or less dragged along. Although I didn't do much, I did manage to help a bit. What did I know about cooking and such? I felt, also somehow innately, that one of my genteel breeding did not condescend to do such menial tasks. On the other hand, it was Mom's request, and I "somehow" felt that I had to obey Mom and so did what I could.

The genteel aspect seemed to fly out the window. Actually, Margo foisted things on me that I had to carry through when Mom told me to. Mom gave me a lot less to do.

At dinner time, I was put to a real test, along with the corset pinching and compressing. I had to fetch and serve the entrees which meant that I did a lot of rising and walking and then sitting down again until required to rise for the next service. The result was that I was actually beginning to get used to that corset. It did not seem to be as much of a horror as I had thought when I was first shoehorned into it. Oh, I wasn't doing cartwheels or hand stands, but moving came a lot easier. I was getting to the point where I was forgetting that my shoes had medium high heels on them. By the time dessert was served and eaten, it was not that big a bother for me to help gather up the dirty dishes and carry them to the kitchen where Margo was stuffing the dish washer. I couldn't move as fast as the others without getting winded, but I was doing as requested. I sure was glad we had the dishwasher as I knew what I would have been doing if we had not had one. One must be grateful for small (or mechanical) favors. When we went to watch TV, I brought out a kitchen chair with a straight back to sit on. It was definitely harder to sit on than the cushioned easy chairs but felt a lot better by giving my back the support that the corset demanded. Earlier, in one of the softer chairs my back had been put into additional tension. I really did not need that. My breathing evened out and I did not want to start a whole new cycle of gasping. They looked at me a bit oddly as I sat ramrod straight while they relaxed in their easy chairs. Well, the stays had demands, and when one is firmly in their grasp, the demands really have to be listen to and obeyed... or else!

When it came time for bed, Mom turned to Margo and made an odd request. Odd, but very logical. "Margo, since you started this, why not go up and see if there is any sleepware for Alice in that wardrobe you two broke into."

Margo disappeared out of the room in a flash as we made our ways toward our bedrooms. As I reached back to unzip my dress, I again was confronted by a fine line of small buttons. Not knowing how they had been closed, I found that I still could not undo a single one.

As my frustration grew, Margo and Mom walked into the room. Margo had something thrown over her arm, something pink and shiny with lots of lace.

"Alright, Alice, Margo told me about your dress; let me help you." Mom came around behind me, and I lowered my head to expose the buttons at my neck so that she could begin to work on opening the buttons.