

The Dangerous Scarecrow

By Carl Jacobi



They were two very ordinary strawmen on adjacent farms. Nice playmates for a couple of imaginative kids. Then Jimmy gave a knife to—

Both Mr. Maudsley and Mr. Trask were resplendent that October evening. Mr. Maudsley stood deep in the cornfield, overall trousers ballooning in the wind, one hand nailed to a pie-tin that caught the moonlight and reflected it like a mirror. While across the road the hat of Mr. Trask was bright with the strip of foil Jimmy had fastened to it that morning.

From the rear seat of the car Jimmy looked down upon the two figures as the road wound between the shocked fields.

Next to him his sister, Stella, said, "Mr. Trask looks fine tonight. I think he likes the silver ribbon you gave him."

Jimmy nodded. "Mr. Maudsley looks good too. See the way his hand shines?"

In the driver's seat as he twisted the wheel to avoid a rut in the road, grey-haired Mr. Tapping coughed and glanced at his wife.

"What are those kids whispering about?"

The whispers died abruptly, and the car rattled over Goose Creek bridge and began the long climb to the Tapping farm.

They stopped at the roadside mailbox, but there was no mail; then they were rolling up the cedar-lined lane, past the silo, past the barn, into the farmyard.

Stella went into the house with her mother, but Jimmy remained with his father to open the garage doors. He snapped the big padlock shut after the car was put away, made a vain attempt to catch Higgins, the cat, and followed Mr. Tapping up the porch steps into the house. Upstairs in his room half an hour later, he

undressed reluctantly and climbed into bed, wide awake. He lay there listening to the old house creak and groan in the night wind.

From the distance came the mournful wail of a train whistle.

Presently Jimmy got out of bed, crossed to the window and stood looking out into the moonlight. Below him he could see his ball bat leaning against a tree, looking strangely white against the shadows. Beyond was the outline of a mounted horseman, the pump, and beyond that the grey circular walls of the silo pointed upward like a castle tower. Something caught Jimmy's eye, made him look to the east. He looked again, then moved to the table and rummaged through the drawer until he found the silver spyglass his father had given him last Christmas. He carried the glass back to the window, pushed the window open and peered out.

In the bright moonlight he could see Mr. Maudsley clearly. And a little farther on he could see Mr. Trask. Two silent figures alone in the cornfields.

The boy lowered the glass, wiped the lens on his sleeve, and carefully focused again. A puzzled frown furrowed his face. Save for the flapping of his trousers in the wind, Mr. Maudsley stood motionless, as of course he should. But Mr. Trask.... A passing cloud slid over the moon, darkening the landscape. In the few seconds before it brought complete blackness Jimmy thought he saw Mr. Trask kick up his heels, leap high in the air and begin to dance a rigadon over the shocked corn.

At breakfast next morning Jimmy waited impatiently for his sister to come downstairs. He hoped she would get to the table before his father because with Papa present he couldn't talk, and he wanted to

talk. When at last Stella took her chair, he stretched his foot under the table and kicked her slightly.

"I've got a secret," he whispered.

"Tell it to me," said Stella.

"It's a big secret."

"If you won't tell, I won't give you any of my Flinch candy."

Jimmy was silent a moment as he gave this thought. Then he leaned forward and whispered,

"Mr. Trask moved last night."

"He always moves," replied Stella, unimpressed.

"I mean really moved. Toward Mr. Maudsley."

Stella choked on her porridge and the spoon all but slipped from her hand. She stared with wide open eyes. "He didn't."

Their whispers broke off as Mr. Tapping strode across the kitchen and took his place at the head of the table. A heavy-set unimaginative man who seldom entered into conversation with the children, he eyed them speculatively. But he said nothing and began to eat his eggs and thick strips of bacon. He ate slowly and methodically, keeping his eyes to the table. When he had finished his coffee, he settled back to light his pipe. He passed the match back and forth across the bowl with quiet deliberation.

"Who's Mr. Maudsley and who's Mr. Trask?"

His wife smiled. "Those are just the names the children have given the scarecrows."

"What scarecrows?"

"The one in our field and the one on Edmund's land."

Mr. Tapping considered this while strong curls of strong tobacco smoke rose about him.

"Why those names? Why not Brown and Smith?"

"Because those are their names," explained Stella patiently.

Mr. Tapping cogitated on the mysteries of the juvenile mind. Abruptly he remembered the section of pasture fence that needed repairing and got to his feet.

But it was nearly noon before he got around to fence fixing, and then he had but one wire stapled when he heard a "halloo" and, turning, saw old Jason Southby hobbling across the field toward him.

Jimmy, who was holding the wire for his father, let go the pliers and joined Stella who was trying to capture a bumble bee in a fruit jar.

"Howdy," said old Jason, reaching the fence. "Got a couple of helpers, I see."

Mr. Tapping smiled and nodded his greeting.

"I came over to ask if you're goin' to post your property for no-huntin' this year."

"Don't think so," replied Mr. Tapping. "Aren't many grouse, and I don't expect there'll be many hunters."

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