

*WHAT WOULD
YOU HAVE
DONE?*

*by
Charlotte Armstrong*

*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
July 1955*

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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

A new story by the brilliant author of THE UNSUSPECTED and MISCHIEF, and more recently, CATCH-AS-CATCH-CAN, THE BETTER TO EAT YOU, and THE DREAM WALKER . . . We shall only say this about Charlotte Armstrong's prize-winning story: read the first paragraph, and if you can stop—or once started, if you can lay this story aside—well, go right ahead, and good luck to you! We found this story un-put-down-able . . .

WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

If you were riding along in a bus and, through the window, saw a man who was supposed to have died a year ago, you would be startled, wouldn't you? But if you were, at that very moment, on your way to buy a wedding present for his widow . . . who was marrying the man you loved . . . so that your heart was breaking . . . *what would you have done?*

The man's name was Eddie McNaughton. It was my cousin Marcia who was getting married again—to John Lockhart. I had adored him since I was thirteen years old.

Right after my mother died, Aunt May took me to live with them. My cousin Marcia was then in her last year of high school, flying around on dates, thinking about college, seventeen years old. I was too young to be her bosom friend. It was the kind of household in which everyone goes about his own business. My Uncle Paul teaches English Literature and seems to live locked up in his own head. Aunt May, civic-minded to the saturation point, is a handsome, buxom figure in a tailored suit, giving orders and suggestions at the breakfast table; then she vanishes until dinnertime.

It wasn't that I lacked anything. I had clothes and food, and the doctor if I was sick. I had my teeth taken care of and my schooling planned out for me. I wasn't put upon: nobody was unkind. It was just that Uncle Paul never quite heard anything I said and Aunt May settled my problems along with each day's menus and then was gone. And my cousin Marcia never looked in my direction with those long green eyes as if she ever really saw anybody there.

I was all legs and eyes and I suppose I was shy. I suppose I would have fetched and carried and been Marcia's slave, if she had wanted to bother with me. She was just that much older and better poised, slim, with hair the color of wet sand, and a high-boned arrogant face, and she was so much more knowing in a female way. I stood in awe of her. But she didn't let me get a crush on her. Maybe she knew my childish devotion would be too easily come by, and that I could have been a nuisance. A thirteen-year-old tagalong is not what a girl needs, at seventeen. Anyhow, we lived in the same house and we never quarreled. We passed each other by. She would say, "Hi, Nan? How've you been? What's up?" Questions like that. But I could tell she never really wanted any answers.

John Lockhart was 26 the year I came to live next door. He was an orphan, too. I used to think of that. The lovely old white frame house, the old housekeeper, as well as the family business and quite a lot of money, had all been his inheritance. He was even then a widower. Alone, good-looking, a little quiet and sad, and with the nicest manners in the world. . . .

He rushed into the vacuum in my heart. There I was, lonely, skinny, knob-kneed, wide-eyed, always hanging around the yard. Somehow he started to teach me to play tennis. Sometimes I helped him do things. Once we built a brick wall. Then he'd give me tickets. Sometimes he'd take me along to a ball game or to the beach. He was neighborly with my Aunt and Uncle—often in and out of their house. I often thought he was lonely, too. Marcia had no time for him. She wrote him off, in those days, as a stuffy middle-aged widower. Anyhow, she went back east to school, so she wasn't around much. But all I needed was a pat on the head to behave like a puppy at his heels. He treated me as if I had been his kid sister.

I grew up adoring him. I never quite got into the boy-crazy state. All through college, even after my figure emerged and I learned to comb my hair, and my face got big enough to hold my eyes, I was insulated and apart from all others—because I adored only him.

I knew his young bride had died suddenly of some quickly devastating disease and I tiptoed in the presence of his sorrow. I could wait, I told myself. While his heart healed, I could grow.

For reasons of my own, then, I didn't want to go east to school; so I went to UCLA. I never got mixed up very much with campus affairs. I didn't mind. I was waiting with sweet suspense for John Lockhart to notice that I had grown up. He didn't seem to notice. He still took me to the beach now

and then. He still—no matter what kind of bathing suit I wore—hunted for pebbles on the sand “with the little girl next door.”

Well, by the time I finished school, Marcia was being a career girl, doing something for a fashion magazine in New York. Whenever she whirled home for a visit, which wasn't often, her clothes were astonishing and her air of amused impatience with all of us used to strike me dumber than ever.

But then Aunt May got it into her head that I was getting too narrow and provincial and decided to give me a cruise for a graduation present. But, oh, I didn't want to go too far or too long away from the center of my life. So I begged for a trip to New York instead. We had just about compromised on a visit to Marcia—Aunt May had written and I was preparing myself to bear it—when Marcia wired, like a bolt from the blue, that she was married.

Aunt May and Uncle Paul were first shocked and then bravely determined to be happy. Neither could get away to go to New York just then, and Marcia had no intention of bringing her new husband home. So when I went to New York I was a token of family solidarity and also a kind of spy.

But that's how I could recognize Eddie McNaughton. I had spent two weeks in his apartment. I knew him very well when I saw him standing on the sidewalk, one year after he had died.

That was a strange unhappy two weeks in New York. Eddie and Marcia lived in a brownstone, the like of which I'd never seen. To me, after California light and spaces, it was dark and unwholesome. And the sticky heat took all the starch out of me. Marcia had her job. She met my plane with “Hi, Nan. How've you been? How's the family?” After that she went right on with her daily routine.

So there I was. I slept on a couch in their living room. I slept, rose, dressed, ate. I might have been a stranger, a paying guest, or a mouse in the wall. After a day or two, I feebly tried to show myself the city, but I didn't know where to go or what to do. I didn't much care. I'd given up and was quietly suffering the time out, dreaming that John was missing me *terribly*, when Eddie McNaughton suddenly took notice.

Marcia's husband was a musician. He worked only sometimes, playing a piano by night. He came in and out of their bedroom most informally at any old hour, not minding me in my night clothes on the sofa. He was fair-haired and thin and rather weedy, as if he'd grown too fast, and he was pale. He wasn't as young as he seemed at first glance. I found out he was 30. It was the aura of instability about him that made him seem younger. He was very

uneven, sometime languorous to the point of sloth, sometimes feverishly active. Oh, he was untidy, unorganized, scatter-brained . . . but he had charm.

At first he took his cue from Marcia and paid no particular attention to me beyond a well-wishing grin whenever I caught his eye. But one morning when Eddie, surprisingly, turned up at the breakfast table, he said, “Hey, Marcia, why don’t we do something for your cousin Nan? What’s she seen? What’s she done? What a stupid time she’s having.”

Marcia shrugged. “I’ve got a job, after all. How can I go sightseeing?”

“Okay,” said Eddie. “But *I* can make like a cousin-in-law, can’t I? Come on, Nan, I’ll show you the town.”

And he did—the best he could. Of course no day ever quite jelled. We wouldn’t quite get where we had planned to go. Eddie was no tourist, anyhow. He had a way of dragging me past the sight we were supposed to be seeing, pouring a rapid patter into my ear that assumed I surely was not such a square as to wish to linger and look at that. We always ate in a Chinese restaurant. We usually ended up in a bar.

Eddie was not much of a drinker. It was just that nothing interested him for long and he often ran into people he knew. I sat in a lot of bars listening to Eddie talking with strange people who spoke a language I didn’t quite understand. I suppose I was really naïve. But I just didn’t know the words. I couldn’t play whatever the game was.

Eddie would kid me about my eyelashes. He said I had “daisy eyes”—daisies with blue centers and stiff black petals all around. I think I amused him, yet I couldn’t help liking Eddie—just for taking the trouble to tease me . . . even if I never understood him or his life or theirs together.

I saw swift passages of affection between them, lightning understanding. I’d hear guttural anger in their voices in the bedroom behind the door. I thought Marcia was on edge, and I supposed it wasn’t easy to be working all day and carrying on this mysterious duel of passion and protest with Eddie at night. She seemed worn and thin and tense. As for Eddie, he was a creature of moods entirely. He seemed to live formlessly, but driven just the same.

Their whole regime was a rat race. I didn’t understand it at all. But when Eddie put me on the plane to come home—his good impulse for that day—I said goodbye with real affection and I thanked him warmly. I remember Eddie’s pale brown eyes, with that flicker of kindness and pity in them, as he

patted me and said, “Aw, let it go, kid. It was kinda nice having you around, after all.”

So. Marcia hadn’t wanted me around and she must have said so to Eddie. I wasn’t very much surprised. If I was twenty-one, why she was twenty-five and a woman—and I was still a tagalong.

I came home and reported. *I* liked Eddie but I knew Marcia’s parents would never approve. But it was impossible to tell them the intangibles I felt. I tried not to make my report just a series of smooth falsehoods. Of course Uncle Paul didn’t notice what I said. He kept repeating, “That’s fine.” Aunt May listened more carefully and caught some of my doubt. But when I stumbled on the word “adjustment” I saw her mind close. I felt as guilty as if I had told her a lie. I remember how I tried to talk to John about it. But of course he wouldn’t let me. It wouldn’t have been good manners for him to listen. He wouldn’t gossip. He kept himself aloof from all that.

Eventually I got a job and it was all right. It wasn’t very important to me. Actually I just kept on waiting, next door to John.

The next thing we knew, word came that Eddie was killed in a plane crash. Uncle Paul flew east and flew home again, vague as ever. A few weeks later, Marcia came home to stay. That was nearly a year ago.

I had tiptoed in the presence of John’s sorrow. I thought I understood it. I broke my heart to understand. He went to Marcia as if only he could understand her sorrow. She was thin and haggard, as if she had just come out of a hospital. She was tragic and stunning. I might as well have been thirteen years old all over again.

Her green eyes saw John Lockhart and now she was 26 and tired and needing different things from those she had needed nearly ten years ago. So she saw John in his charming house, with his position, his wealth, his background, his manners.

I was frightened. I could see what was happening. One awful morning I tried to tell her that I was in love with him. My cousin’s green eyes passed over my face. She chose to pretend I was only praising him. She never had bothered about me.

I guess she saw the security, the safety, the peace, there next door, after Eddie and the New York rat race. Besides, what could I do? *Maybe* she fell in love. *Maybe* all’s fair. . . . I don’t know. I simply watched her take him away from me, and it looked so easy. I watched John Lockhart fall in love

with her. And then they were engaged and Aunt May told me. I must be in the wedding party, give them a present to show my love. But I put it off.

I knew I had to pull myself together. I had to buy a wedding gift and go gracefully through the wedding and somehow hide my anguish. I had to behave the best I could. I had to remember that John thought of me merely as a child. I had to realize that he always would. I had to count the years and understand that although I was twenty-two, he was 35, and there was a gap I would never close and my devotion would be, forever, only thirteen years old. But maybe you can understand how what was left of my heart hated my cousin Marcia, steadily and fiercely, no matter how I prayed to be better or stronger. . . .

Ten days before the wedding day, I got on that bus—me and the lead in my heart. I was thinking miserably of nothing at all when suddenly I saw Eddie McNaughton on the sidewalk, as alive as I am.

I cried out and beat the window glass with my hand. The motion caught his eye. He saw me and knew me and started to grin in his old familiar way. I pushed out of my seat, rang buzzers, stumbled to the door. By the time I got out, the bus had carried me a block and a half away. I ran back. But he wasn't waiting anywhere. Oh, I asked people, described him, went into every shop. I searched desperately for him. I couldn't find him. Who remembers a man on a sidewalk?

If you were in my position, what would you have done?

I knew what I *had* to do. But the lead in my breast wasn't getting any lighter. I got a cab to go home but I was sure what was going to happen.

Marcia was in the library, writing thank-you notes. If I looked what I felt when I came in, I must have been the picture of calamity.

"What's the matter now?" she said with a delicate boredom and then put the tail of the pen in her mouth.

What could I do but simply tell her? "Eddie McNaughton is alive. I saw him on the street. He isn't dead."

It was just as if I had lit a match. The flat green eyes began to blaze.

"I was on the bus . . ." I began, and suddenly I was scared. "Marcia, I can't help it. I *saw* him!"

She had dropped the pen and stood up. "You rotten little liar!" she said viciously.

“I’m not lying. . .”

“Of course you’re lying! What you say—it’s *impossible!*”

“No, it’s not impossible. Because the plane burned up and they couldn’t identify. . .”

“You thought of that, didn’t you?” she screamed. “You’ve been brooding around in corners, thinking this up, for days, for weeks. Of all the rotten evil things to do to me! Of course, you thought of it! Well, you’re not going to get away with this. Everybody knows what’s the matter with you. You’re mad about John Lockhart and you’re eating yourself up with jealousy. I told mother . . . I knew you’d make some sort of scene! But I must say I never expected anything like this!”

“I had to tell you,” I said as quietly as I could. “I saw him. How could I let you go on if it’s bigamy?”

“Bigamy!” she exploded. “How can you be so *wicked*? Eddie is dead, dead, dead! And you know it as well as I do. You’re *lying!*”

Uncle Paul had heard the commotion and he put his head in. “Dad,” cried Marcia, “she’s telling the most monstrous lie!”

“I saw Eddie McNaughton on the sidewalk,” I said, once more. “He isn’t dead. I tried to find him and speak to him but I couldn’t.”

“Dear me,” said Uncle Paul, his mild eyes filling with shock. “Oh, dear me, Nan, now how can you be so sure?” He didn’t know what to do.

“She’s inventing it,” cried Marcia. “She’s doing this to break up my wedding. You know she’s off her head about John. You know she’s been absolutely green. You know John and I have been so sorry for her.”

My poor leaden heart was down to the carpet. “But Eddie was standing there on the sidewalk. . . .”

“Perhaps,” said Uncle Paul hopefully, “it was some kind of hallucination. . .”

I said feebly that I thought they ought to check. I could hardly stand up; I don’t tell lies—I never have.

“Check!” Marcia was frantic. “There’s nothing that can be checked and she knows it. A man standing on a sidewalk! What trace can there be? And John . . . oh, John. . . . What do you *want*?” she shrieked at me. “You want us to wait seven years? Is that it?”

I mumbled that I was sorry, but she kept flinging herself up and down the room. “You’ve got to stop her. You’ve got to get a doctor, Dad, and send her off somewhere. I never heard of anything so wicked and cruel! Don’t let her tell that insane story to John. Why must *we* suffer because she’s so jealous of me? She always has been.”

“No,” I said.

“You *are* a liar!”

“I wasn’t always . . .” But I couldn’t talk, not to her. I couldn’t explain I had never minded her not bothering about me. I had never minded *anything* until she came home and broke my long dream and took John away.

Uncle Paul can tell you the slightest juicy whisper of gossip or intrigue that breathed in Elizabethan London. But angry voices in his own house and in his own century were too much for him. Aunt May came home and she took over. She told Marcia to be quiet, then began to grill me.

“You knew that Edward’s body in that burning plane wreck was never fully identifiable?”

“Yes, Aunt May, I knew that.” I was sitting down now, with my head hanging.

“Look at me, Nan. Is *that* why you say you saw him?”

“No. Of course it isn’t. I *did* see him—at least, I honestly think so.”

“Now, that’s pious,” said Marcia. “But look at those big round blue eyes. She’s lying her head off.”

Aunt May hushed her, impatiently. “Had you been dreaming of this, dear?” she asked me.

“Oh, no. Never.”

“Come. Nan.” I shrank at the prospect of Aunt May “understanding” me. “You may have been dreaming of some miracle that would give you John Lockhart. We all know how you feel. Now, come, dear, you’re young and it has been a blow and young girls sometimes make up these fantasies.”

“No,” I said, weeping with humiliation. “No, I wasn’t dreaming. I was trying to accept. . .”

“Don’t believe *that*,” said Marcia.

Aunt May didn’t believe me. I could tell. “Now, Nan, you do resent Marcia’s coming home, I’m afraid. You have been very much upset about

her engagement to John. I think it's quite possible that you would like to have seen Edward alive. And I think it's possible you've convinced yourself that you did see him. But I wish you would realize . . . what a dreadful thing you are doing. I don't like to ask for gratitude, but I could point out that this is a poor return to your Uncle Paul and me. . . ."

"I know it's a dreadful thing," I said, "but I'm only saying what I saw."

I don't think she really believed me at all. "We might," she said judiciously, "quietly ask the police to . . ."

"No!" cried Marcia. "No, no! You can't make this *public*. That's what she *wants*. Don't let her go around telling this! Don't let her tell the newspapers!"

"I said 'quietly,' Marcia." Aunt May was trying to be firm and sensible. "If we could find some way to prove to Nan that she was mistaken. . . ."

"She doesn't need proof. She knows she's lying. Eddie is dead. The airline knows that. It's crazy to say he's still alive. It's cruel."

Aunt May looked out the window. "Hush, here's John. . . ."

"Nan, if you don't take it back, right now . . . If you tell John this—this terrible lie. . . ." I think my cousin Marcia was ready to strangle me.

"I've got to tell him," I said stubbornly. "Or *you've* got to tell him. Even if I were lying, he wouldn't forgive you . . . He'll have to know."

I stared my cousin Marcia down. I don't know how I did it—I felt as if I were dying. I knew I'd lost John forever. But how could I let him marry bigamously, by retracting or keeping still, no matter what they thought I was doing? What would you have done?

They put me out of the room and told John Lockhart themselves. They put it the way they wanted to put it. I couldn't do a thing about it. I thought I had been miserable on that bus. It was nothing to what I felt now, sitting alone in the corner of the green couch, the pariah of the world, while on the other side of the library door they were telling John Lockhart in their own way that I was a cruel, malicious liar.

John came out of the library alone. He looked white and strained. "Nan, please tell me about this." His voice was the same gentle monotone.

"Yes," I said, my heart sick.

When I was through stumbling once more through my wretched story, John said, "This is hard for me to say, Nan. We've been good friends." He

was sitting with his back very straight, his feet together almost primly. “But now I think it is necessary for me to be very clear.”

“Yes,” I said, my heart even sicker.

“You must believe,” he went on carefully, “that even if I lose Marcia, even if I can never marry her, I could not marry *you*. I don’t and never can care for you that way, Nan. You must believe me.”

“All right,” I said. “I believe you.”

“So, since it can’t possibly do you any good . . .” he continued wanly.

“*You* think I’m lying?” I said, hurt worse than I had ever been hurt before. “*You* think I am so mean? Don’t you know it’s because I love you. . . ?”

“Nan, don’t . . .” he said, wincing as if I were something no fastidious person could touch. “Please don’t . . . don’t say you love me. Love is being considerate, not giving pain.” I couldn’t speak at all. “Can’t you say, now, that you were mistaken?”

“Why, John,” I said dully. “I wish I could. I don’t want to give you pain. You see, it’s just that I really did see him. . .”

He stood up with a sigh. “You know I can’t risk letting Marcia in for any . . . nastiness. You’ve put us all in agony,” he said.

“Not *I*. Not *I*. Can’t you see? *I’m* not doing it. A fact is doing it.”

“Don’t be too proud to admit you were . . . impulsive,” he said with that same ghastly kindness. “We would understand, Nan. Please think about it.” Then he left me.

Every shred of comfort in the world was gone from me. Oh, when people set out to “understand” a person, how terrible it can be!

They conferred a long time in the library and then, finally, Uncle Paul asked me to come in.

So I said to them all, quickly, before they could speak, what I had made up my mind to say. “I’ll go away. I won’t live here. I promise you, now, that I won’t speak one word. There will never be anything in the newspapers. You can forget all about me . . . hate me . . . whatever you please. But don’t think I’m just lying to hurt you.”

Aunt May said briskly, “We’ve come to the only sensible decision. Frankly, Nan, we don’t think you saw Edward McNaughton. We think you

are probably self-deluded. And we do understand how difficult it is to back down. But we must protect ourselves. John is going to hire a private detective to hunt for proof of Edward's death. If he can find it, then nothing you can do or say will hurt anyone."

"I think that is the best thing to do," I said, not looking at them, looking at the wall behind them.

A detective came the next morning. He was a youngish man, homely and red-headed. His name was Benjamin Brown. He listened to Aunt May while she stated the situation, and Uncle Paul nodded and agreed. He listened to Marcia tell him in a sad, cold tone exactly what they all thought of me. He listened to John Lockhart say that I had long been childishly attached to him and if in any way it was his fault, he was sorry. He had merely been kind, he said, as any well-bred person would have been. Oh, it was painful . . .

But Mr. Brown was businesslike. He got the names and addresses he would need. "I wonder if you've given any thought to the implications. First, if Eddie McNaughton didn't die on that plane, who did? Second, if Eddie McNaughton is alive, why doesn't he say so? Anyone have any ideas?" He was looking at me.

Aunt May snorted. Marcia put her handkerchief to her eyes and moaned, "You see how crazy. . . ?"

John said stiffly, "No man would do such a thing to his wife."

But Mr. Brown kept watching me.

I said, "No, I don't have any ideas. I don't understand it—I just saw him."

Mr. Brown asked if he could talk to me alone. The rest of them went away hopefully, I thought, as if they supposed I might confess my sin to a stranger.

"You knew McNaughton by sight pretty well?" the stranger asked, with no comment in his voice, no judgment of me.

I told him about my visit to New York.

"So," he said quickly, "you didn't think your cousin Marcia was particularly cordial?"

I explained about Marcia.

"You say you didn't resent all this? All those years she paid no attention to you?" Still no comment in his voice, still the plain, flat questions.

“I don’t think so,” I said earnestly. “It seems to me that I got used to it before I was old enough to resent it. It never occurred to me, Mr. Brown, that I had any ‘rights.’ Doesn’t ‘resent’ mean that you feel you’ve been cheated out of your rights? I never thought there was any law she *had* to like me—so I simply got used to it.”

He was listening thoughtfully.

“Maybe subconsciously,” I said, “there was resentment all those years . . . but I didn’t know it.”

“You don’t hate her—not at all?”

I had to go on, honestly. “Yes, I do. I hate her now. I was in love with John since I can remember and I told her so and she paid no attention . . . Oh, I’m perfectly conscious that I hate her now.”

He looked away and rustled some papers. I guess he was embarrassed. “You’re absolutely sure about this, in your own mind, Miss Brewster? You did see Eddie McNaughton?”

“Well,” I said, “as sure as I *can* be. He recognized me, too.”

“How do you know?” Mr. Brown sat up higher.

“Why, he just . . . you know . . . lit up and started to smile.”

He was shaking his head. “I hope you’re not basing your conviction on that reaction.”

“But . . . if I know him, he knows *me*.”

“Suppose you’re in a public place,” said Mr. Brown in a musing way. “Somebody stirs. You notice. You look around. This person is waving and making faces at you. Right away you say to yourself, Ah, somebody I know. And before you are quite sure who it is . . . don’t you assume that if he knows you, you must know him? Don’t you begin to respond?”

“That’s so,” I sighed. “Of course, that’s so. Mr. Brown, I suppose I could have been mistaken. But I still think it *was* Eddie. It certainly looked exactly like him and he smiled his kind of smile. I *believe* it was Eddie, Mr. Brown.”

“You saw him clearly?”

“Oh, yes. Full face. Of course if he has a twin or a double, that would explain it, too.”

Mr. Brown chewed on his lips, looking at me thoughtfully. “So it would,” he said in a few moments. “Well, I better get going.”

“Whatever can you *do*?” I asked.

“The best solution would be to find some unimpeachable evidence that he *was* on the plane. Otherwise we may be balancing probabilities . . .”

“I told you that I hate her,” I said, “and that’s true. But I’m not just telling a plain lie, Mr. Brown. I couldn’t have thought of such a bad one. I’m not that clever.”

He said lightly, “When you come right down to it, it’s not very clever to call anyone a plain liar. Because you think *you* know exactly what’s in his mind. People jump to conclusions too fast. Always figure somebody else is simple . . . plain black or plain white . . . I try not to do that, Miss Brewster.”

“Thank you,” I said uncertainly.

“Listen,” he said suddenly, “if it’s any help to you, I believe that you *believe* you saw him. And if you do, why there wasn’t anything else for you to do but say so.” I began to cry. “Excuse me,” he said, “I shouldn’t make remarks like that. It’s not professional. I hope I can settle the thing,” he added rather wistfully and went away.

During the next dreadful week I found myself leaning on what he had said. It was all I had to hold me up. I went to work every day, but I doubt if I was much help at the office. I came home just to sleep at night. Aunt May spoke to me now and then to make sure I was fed. I could feel Marcia’s hostility in the house like a time bomb. I didn’t see Uncle Paul. I took care not to see John Lockhart because I couldn’t have borne it.

Nothing, so far as I knew, had been done about changing the wedding plans. It was supposed to take place quietly at home on Monday afternoon. I was so mangled and torn, I didn’t seem to care. I would have moved away, but Aunt May wouldn’t let me. So we all waited for Ben Brown to come back, and he did, on Saturday morning.

He phoned and we were waiting in the library. He looked tired. He tried to say something to ease our tension. “I wish I could tell you people right now, yes or no. All I can say is that I *may* have something helpful.”

Marcia whimpered and turned her face, which was as haunted as mine, into John’s shoulder.

Ben Brown had with him a fat brief-case and now, while he talked, he began to take little tissue-wrapped packages out of it.

“There’s no doubt someone got on the plane with McNaughton’s ticket and reservation. The question is, was it really McNaughton? I had no luck

with witnesses—turned up nobody who could swear that he saw McNaughton at the airport that day. For that matter, unless it was a friend of his who actually talked with him, such a witness would be less than perfect proof, now, a whole year later. I even took a crack at the idea of identifying some missing person. But New York's a big place and too many people get missing, every day. So no luck—no proof there. Now from the other end: the job of identifying the body is a real tough one.”

He threw a sheet of paper on the table. “There is the list, with twenty-eight names on it. If it were possible to get permission to exhume twenty-eight bodies and x-ray them all. . . .” A shudder passed over all of us. . . . “Even then, since I can't locate a dentist or even a doctor who ever worked on or examined McNaughton, it looks like a totally futile procedure.”

Now he had five little paper-wrapped packages out on the library table. He leaned on his palms. “One more thing I'd like to mention—something that I turned up in New York. I'm afraid there's a possibility that McNaughton was mixed up with some unscrupulous people. He was more or less involved with a racing crowd, and not an honest one, either. Gambling on the wrong side of the law and some fleecing of innocents.” His voice got louder. “You may have known this, Mrs. McNaughton?”

Marcia said quickly in a high bitter voice, “I'll confess I'm not surprised.” She held her head high. “You must know I'd broken away from him.” Ben Brown's lids lowered as if they nodded.

John Lockhart said icily, “Marcia had left this man. They had separated. She had decided to divorce him, some time before this fatal plane trip.”

Ben Brown said, “Yes, I knew she'd broken it off.” His voice was gentle. “Maybe she knows no more than I do about what was troubling him. His reservations, you know, went through to Havana. The point I'm making is this: within this shadowy area there could be a reason for McNaughton to seize an opportunity to disappear, and if he *is* alive, not to want it known.”

“Without even communicating with his wife?” said John haughtily.

“They were estranged. . . .”

“Letting her run the risk of a bigamous marriage?” cried Aunt May, with her handsome nose in the air. “That's contemptible!”

Ben Brown licked his upper lip. “If a man is on the criminal fringe,” he said, “and involved in debts, for instance, to people who collect rather violently . . . and perhaps in danger of his life . . . why, under those circumstances he's not subject to the same principles of conduct as . . .”

“It would be like Eddie,” I interrupted. “If you knew him . . . Why, he’d just think that what people didn’t know wouldn’t count. If people wanted to think he was dead, and it was convenient, he *might* just let it go at that. He’d mean no harm. He . . . well, he was like that.”

Marcia was white. “I left Eddie because of certain things about him,” she said, sounding prim and stiff, “but I can’t believe he’d do this to me.”

Ben Brown said, “I don’t put much faith in this kind of guessing. But it does make a shade of difference when we come to balancing probabilities . . . if we see that he might have a good reason for hiding.”

“Nonsense,” said Aunt May grimly.

“What does it matter?” cried Marcia. “When he is dead.”

Ben Brown said, “He is thought to be dead, all right. He is dead to his friends—and to his enemies. I went to the scene of the crash. It’s not far from a small country town. Well, you know how kids are and, as I had imagined, the kids had been poking around the wreckage of that plane. I advertised that I’d pay good prices for any relics they might have turned up . . . if they could convince me they were genuine. Here I have the somewhat meager results. But that’s why I came back. I realize that you are anxious, that time is short, and it would seem cruel,” he lingered on the word, “to force a postponement of this wedding if there is any chance there’s no real impediment . . .”

My cousin Marcia was not breathing at all. She hung forward, watching his face. We all did.

“. . . no real impediment,” he repeated. “It is just possible I have something here that belonged to McNaughton.” Out of the first package he took a metal belt buckle. “I better mention that this buckle is monogrammed HY.”

“What about it?” John’s voice snapped with his nerves.

“If you’ll check that passenger list, you’ll find there was no one on it with those initials. Not proof, of course, that an improperly listed person was aboard.” He turned around to me. “Is it, Miss Brewster?” It was just as if he challenged me to be fair.

“No,” I said slowly, “it isn’t proof. Someone could have borrowed a belt. Or the kids in that town could have fooled you. I don’t see that you’ll get any *proof* unless you find Eddie alive.”

“We won’t do that,” said Marcia, “because he’s dead. May I see what else is there?”

The detective unwrapped a tiny thing: it looked like a cuff link. Then he unwrapped a small pocketknife. The fourth package held a metal money clip shaped something like a letter of the alphabet. Last there was a ring with a cracked stone.

We sat in the soft light of the comfortable library and on the polished table the relics were tiny and cold, from that wild distant hill.

Marcia said, “Let me see that.” Her finger pointed and Mr. Brown handed her the money clip. She rubbed it in her hand. The device, we could now see, was the treble-clef sign. “That’s *his*! That’s *Eddie’s*!” She dropped it on the table with a clatter and hid her face.

“Ah, darling,” said John Lockhart, “then it’s all right. It’s all right.”

“Do *you* recognize it?” Ben Brown said to me.

I shook my head. “That doesn’t prove anything,” I said. “I mightn’t have seen it, or he mightn’t have had it when I was there.” No one but Ben seemed to hear me.

John’s face was shining with relief. “Thank you, Brown. Thanks very much. A fine job. A good job.”

“Then you’re satisfied? You don’t want me to continue?”

“No need,” John said, holding Marcia in his arms. “It’s a moral certainty. I need no more.”

“That’s fine,” said Uncle Paul.

Aunt May said, “I’m very glad it’s settled.” And then they all looked at me.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. No one had tried to find a *living* Eddie. Maybe that was impossible. I opened my mouth again—I had a question to ask but I didn’t ask it. Everyone was watching me.

Then Marcia said, angrily, “Don’t sit there trying to think up something else, Nan. I’ll never listen to you again. Mother, I can’t have her at the wedding. I won’t risk it. I just couldn’t bear it.”

“Oh, no,” I said quickly. “I couldn’t, either. I won’t come. I’m very sorry for—for everything.”

“Now that you’ve been proved wrong,” John said appealingly, “please, Nan, won’t you admit you weren’t really sure?”

I looked at him, at his smile, the smile that was simply an arrangement of flesh on his face, as easy as always saying “Please” and “Thank you.” I looked across chasms and acres of separation. “Human beings make mistakes,” I said.

“Thank you, Nan.” The smile was his way of “understanding” me. I looked away.

“I’ve found a one-room apartment near the office,” I said loudly. “I’m all packed. So I think I’ll just go, now. I hope,” I said into the air, “that you’ll all be very happy.”

“Couldn’t I drive you?” said Ben Brown. “I have a car and it looks as if I’m free.”

“What’s a moral certainty?” I said crossly and bitterly to Ben Brown. “What did he thank me for? What did I say but that I’m not infallible?”

“True for you, you’re not,” he said cheerily.

“Oh, I was probably mistaken,” I said edgily.

“The chances always were,” he said in that light way.

“There’s only one question . . .” I knew I could ask *him*.

I saw his hands tighten on the wheel. “Go ahead.”

“You did get a list of the missing persons—the ones who were actually missing the day of the crash?”

“I did.” His answer was like a sigh.

“Did you check their initials?”

“Oh, there was a man named Harry Young, all right,” he said. I couldn’t speak. “Still missing, too. Want me to take that belt buckle and ask Young’s wife if it’s his? And if so, then will we decide the person listed as Eddie McNaughton was really Harry Young?”

“No,” I said hopelessly. “It wouldn’t prove a thing. No matter who else was on that plane, *Eddie* was there. *She* says so. And nobody doubts *her* and nobody thinks *she’s* hysterical and nobody sees that *she’s* got a big fat motive to tell a lie.”

“Why don’t you bawl a little bit?” he suggested pleasantly.

I read about the wedding in the paper.

I didn’t live with the family any more. My little apartment wasn’t bad and I went on working, as usual. Ben Brown took to dropping in. One day he told me he had quit his job and was going in for business management. He said he had decided detective work was not for him. Why not, I wanted to know. He said he couldn’t achieve the professional attitude. He said it depressed him to try.

One night he asked me why I always made him take me to a Chinese restaurant. “It’s coming out of my ears,” he said. “Frankly, Nan, if I never smell another Egg Foo Yung, I think I’ll live longer.”

“Eddie McNaughton was mad about Chinese food,” I said.

“Sooooooo . . .” Ben whistled.

“Well, I’m human, Ben. They said I was either hysterical or a wicked liar and they ‘understood’ me all over the place. But nobody even imagined I might just be truthful . . . no one but you. It still hurts. I just wonder . . .”

“You think in one million years you can happen to go to the right Chinese restaurant at the right hour, even if he’s still anywhere near Los Angeles?”

“No,” I said stiffly. “Probability is certainly against it.”

“Wait a minute. You always want to know if there’s music.”

“And there rarely is,” I said, “so that narrows them down. Oh, I know it’s foolish. But Eddie was a musician and it seems to me that his habits and his tastes and his skills are facts. If . . .”

Ben said, “You know I poked about, Nan. I didn’t neglect any regular channel. His name is no help, since he wouldn’t be using it. His description isn’t striking . . .”

“He had a habit,” I said, “of turning his lower lip inside out.”

“Shall I tell you what I think, Nan? I wish to God you’d forget all about it. Honey, John Lockhart is married and gone. Can’t you get him out of your mind?”

“It’s not that I love him so much,” I said, flippantly, “but that I hate her more.” I could say things like this to Ben, somehow.

“Then,” said Ben, very cool and matter of fact, “you think she was deliberately lying about that money clip?”

“Oh,” I said, stung, realizing what he was pointing out to me, “no, no, I don’t *think*. I don’t say she *must* have been lying. The clip might have been Eddie’s. Or she might have been so upset she made a mistake.” It was no good. I began to cry, helplessly. “All right. I *do* think she’d lie. She’d be smart enough. Oh, I don’t know . . . I just don’t know.”

Ben said, “Nan, it’s poison. Let it go.”

“Eddie used to say that,” I sobbed. “ ‘Let it go, kid.’ ”

“Honey, I say it too. Let the hatred go.”

I must have asked with a look, How can I?

“So maybe you can love somebody else some day,” he said.

“I . . . try. But oh, Ben, it isn’t easy.”

“I didn’t say it was easy. I said it was advisable. And you’ve got good sense, Nan, and you *are* fair-minded.” I looked at him. “And with your eyelashes wet you’re a sight to behold,” he said in a fluster, “and God forbid I should try to ‘understand’ you. So I’ll tell you right now, I think your cousin Marcia behaved like a perfect louse to you and if you’re *mad*, I don’t care. But don’t hate her, Nan. It’s not your style.” He looked so indignantly human, somehow, I had to laugh.

But after that we didn’t talk about Eddie, alive or dead, any more. We got to be good friends. Ben was nice to have around.

When I finally got a telephone, Aunt May called up one day. “Nan, how are you, dear? Will you listen to me?”

I said, of course I would.

“I think this silly feuding has gone on long enough. I want it stopped. Will you . . . now, don’t say ‘no’ too quickly . . . will you come here some evening and meet Marcia and John and let us all be together, as a family should?”

“Oh, Aunt May . . .” My heart spiraled down.

“Bring a young man,” she said shrewdly. “Please, Nan. Look ahead, not back. And let us be a normal family again.”

“Does Marcia want this to happen?”

"I want it to happen," Aunt May said firmly.

"Well, I don't know . . ."

"Call me," she urged, and I promised that much.

Ben thought I should go. He said he would go with me. "I'm the young man, I hope. Besides, I prescribe this."

"To get the hate out? Is this the way?"

"See them," he urged. "I'll bet you something."

"What?"

"They won't look the same."

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Well, you're not the same, for one thing. And listen to me, Nan, while I try to show you a different picture. Your cousin Marcia lived a life in New York that you called a rat race. Did it ever occur to you how far she has pulled herself away from that?"

"Of course. Money, security, a solid citizen for a husband."

"Well, just because you wanted the same thing and she got it, don't sneer. Stop and think. Marcia, herself, could have been way off the track . . ."

"Mixed up in gambling?" My eyes popped.

"Well," he said uncomfortably. "You say she looked ill and tired. What if . . . now let me talk a minute! . . . here's a lively girl, rebellious and a bit reckless, on her own, and she gets spinning in bad circles. She falls in love with this weak charmer and she's got a struggle on her hands. Suppose your cousin saw she was headed toward a bad fall? In the rackets, in that rat race, as you called it. Toward . . . well, say, dishonesty and trouble and . . . maybe even worse. Now suppose she broke it off, Nan, and painfully—God knows how painfully—then dragged herself back, reaching for some dignity again . . ."

"And for the man I loved," I muttered.

"Yeah. You loved him. You had a clear field for years. Did he fall for you? What did she take that was yours—really yours?"

"Do you *know* she was mixed up with gamblers and that kind of thing?" I gasped.

“No. I don’t know a damn thing. I’m putting a hypothetical case. I’m trying to get *you* out of a dead end. Look at it as if you didn’t, for God’s sake, know all there is to know about *her* motives and *her* pressures. Try giving another human being the benefit of the doubt, why don’t you? Concede it’s possible for people to change and that there is such a thing as putting your past behind you—and then give her a little credit for pulling herself out of that mess.”

I couldn’t say a thing.

“Oh, go on,” said Ben warmly, “make that date, Nan. Go and see them. She’s on committees, your cousin Marcia. She does good works. Charity and all that. She’s taking right after your Aunt May.”

“You have too much charity for me,” I said flatly. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“You might see a different person.”

“I’ll see John,” I choked.

“Is he? . . . You mean you still. . . ? That twerp? Well, what the hell am I hanging around. . . .”

“I’ll go,” I said quickly, “if you’ll help me.”

Ben began to grin. “Sure. It’s going to do them good to see what a slave am I to your charms. It’s going to show them you’re getting along fine.”

He made me laugh at myself. He was good at that. I made the date for the coming Friday. But when Ben came to fetch me he found me all upset. “I can’t do it,” I told him. “I just can’t go. I’ll behave in some stupid way . . .”

“No, you won’t,” he said firmly.

“I just cringe, Ben, when I think of seeing Marcia and John. How can I go?”

He said, and his face was grim. “I see we’ll have to have a showdown.”

“What?”

“For one thing—and get this straight, Nan—I’m not going to hang around any longer without getting your full attention. I’m telling you. I want this cleared up one way or the other. So we’ll have a showdown, shall we?”

“What do you mean?” I had never seen Ben’s face like this.

“I mean I’m going to take you to a certain place for a cocktail and some Chinese hors d’oeuvres.”

“Where?”

“Where there’s a piano player.”

“Oh!”

“Non-union. Doing a single, he doesn’t have to be union. But Eddie McNaughton wouldn’t be union—not with a phony name, and in hiding. So it narrows. I thought it was foolishness, too, until I turned up this one.”

“Do you think . . . ?”

“I dunno,” he said. “But he turns his lower lip out the way you said. Better come along and see.”

It was an unusual Chinese restaurant, with soft lighting and lush decorations. We came in quietly and Ben winked at a waiter who took us to a table as close as you could get to the piano in the corner. The man sitting on the bench had his back to us. He didn’t look around as we slipped into the booth not two yards away.

Ben nodded to me. I knew he would be listening. I got up and leaned over. “Hi, Eddie,” I said, as casually as I could.

“You must be taking me for somebody else, Miss.” His glance barely flicked at me. He was going to brush me off.

“Maybe it doesn’t mean much to you,” I said slowly, “but I cried when I heard you were dead.”

He swallowed. He said in a different voice, still not looking up, “What do you want with me, Nan?”

“Nothing. Just to know.” I hung onto the piano with one hand.

“Well, there was a fellow in a bigger hurry than I was that night,” Eddie said. “So I sold him my seat and he took the plane. That’s about it.”

“Eddie, you don’t want people to . . . find you?”

He let his wrists fall and he looked at me, a little angry, a little sad. “I bet you never got in a dangerous mess in your life. Listen, kid, let it go. I’ve got a deal. I’m going south again soon.”

“South?”

“South of the border, let’s say. You don’t have to know where. No speak da English any more. So be a good kid and let it go, huh?” His brown eyes were pleading.

I said slowly, “I was on a bus one day . . .”

“I know. I shouldn’t have been on the street. But waiting was driving me nuts. How come you’re here?” He turned to look behind him. Ben sat like a rock and seemed uninterested and unconnected with me.

“Because I . . . because . . .” I was afraid Eddie would jump up and run away. I groped for the right thing to say. “There’s only one thing, Eddie . . .”

“The Law don’t want me,” he said quickly. “It’s not that, Nan. Honest. Don’t let it get around, please. There’s some people that . . . well, I’d rather keep out of their way. People with nasty ideas, let’s say. I’m going south for keeps this time. Don’t stop me.”

“I wouldn’t stop you, Eddie. It’s only . . . well, it’s because of Marcia.”

He let his eyelids down. “Marcia and me were busting up. She don’t care if I’m alive or dead.” He peered at a sheet of music. “So don’t worry . . .”

“But does she know you’re alive?”

“Marcia? No . . . Not unless you told her,” he said.

“She wouldn’t believe me.”

“Just as well,” he murmured. “Aw, let it go, Nan. I *wish* you’d do that.” He lifted his hands, ready to play. They shook with impatience. “You can make me trouble if you want to.”

“She got *married*, Eddie,” I said desperately.

He swallowed again. I saw the commotion in his throat. “Yeah, I read it in the paper.”

“Eddie, she *can’t* be married.”

“I’ll never cause her any trouble,” he whispered.

“Oh, Eddie . . . don’t you see there’s another person? Her new husband. *He’s* involved.”

“All right,” he said. “Listen, kid. It’s legal.”

“What?”

He looked up at me. His eyes were, as I had remembered them, a little pitying and a little kind. “When Marcia’s folks wrote you were coming, we

had to sort of put it around that we were married . . . well, Marcia was always after me to get married. Maybe she thought telling it around would put the pressure on me.”

“You . . . you and Marcia were never married?” I hung onto the piano. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“She’s married, now. Just let it go, huh? This Eddie, poor slob, he wasn’t the marrying kind. But he’s long dead . . .”

He bent over the keys and I looked down on the top of his head. “This Eddie was nice to me once,” I said.

A Chinese was staring at us suspiciously. “Excuse me, kid?” Eddie rocked erect. “I got to eat while I’m waiting, so I better get to work.” His eyes asked me what I was going to do.

“Goodbye,” I said to him helplessly. “I mistook you for someone else.”

Music rippled out under Eddie’s hands.

I went to the table and picked up my bag. Ben rose silently and was close behind me as we left the place.

But there I had it—with a witness, too. The power to cut my cousin Marcia down. Because I knew—and the vision was blinding bright—that of all men in the world, John Lockhart . . . rigid, snobbish, so very proper . . . would never be the man to accept such a situation.

“Did you *know* this?” I asked Ben. “Did you find this out in New York, Ben?” He wouldn’t answer. We got into his car. “What shall we do?” I begged him. “Oh, what shall we do?”

“You do it,” he said harshly. “I’ll back you up, whatever you do or say.”

He started the car. It took us nearer to the house where my Aunt May, my Uncle Paul, John Lockhart and his legal wife, my cousin Marcia, would be waiting.

“I wouldn’t want to tell where Eddie is,” I blurted. “I wouldn’t want to put him in danger. I wouldn’t have to.” Ben didn’t speak. “If I tell them I talked to him and you say you heard us, then they’ll have to believe he’s still alive. Won’t they?”

He didn’t answer.

“Shouldn’t I tell them? Ben, help me!”

He said, “No. I won’t help you, Nan. I’ve told you. This is a showdown.”

“Please take me home,” I said nervously. “Let’s not go there to-night.”

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t change the direction in which we were going.

I knew I could destroy my cousin Marcia. And hurt them all. John Lockhart, who hadn’t fallen in love with me, and my Aunt May who was always so busy, and my Uncle Paul who never heard what I said. If I vindicated myself by showing them that I’d been truthful all along . . . oh, it would destroy Marcia all right!

And it would only be telling the truth, once more.

But Marcia thought Eddie was dead. She thought the past was dead and behind her. But I could take her off those committees, I could cut her down. . . .

I looked at Ben’s face. He wouldn’t help me . . . any more than he had already.

What would you have done?

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *What Would You Have Done?* by Charlotte Armstrong]