

SHORT STORY

(Continued from page 27)

day, or carted coal and rubbish, or tipped disinfectant down drains while someone guarded you.

—Come home this instant—Mrs. Skeat was amazed that Roly had dared to leave the new chickens. He had seemed like a mechanical toy that you wound up the way you wanted it to go, and it went, it went all the time.

Roly moved his tongue round and round in his mouth. He was sorry he hadn't done what he had been told to do. They were good people to him, and gave him cream at dinner time, outside in the shed. He smiled at Mrs. Skeat, but his eyes showed fear. He got up from his seat and walked towards her.

Ah, the mechanical toy had moved! Relieved, Mrs. Skeat stepped on to the tennis court, her high-heeled shoes going tick-tack-tuck, tick-tack-tuck. Roly followed her, his heavy boots clattering harshly on the surface.

Mrs. Skeat turned round, letting out a small scream. "How dare you, how dare you cross the court in those boots. Don't you see the notice? No one, no one is allowed on here in anything but soft shoes. You'll ruin it, you oaf."

She looked lovingly at the drab, prison-grey surface. She had bought five tickets in the raffle, even bought one for Roly, but neither of them had won anything, not a thing, and all for this tennis court, and she didn't even play tennis, but still, she had a share in it and had to protect it, there had to be someone to protect it.

—Get off at once, she flung. Get off at once.

She clattered on over the court. Tack, her shoes said. Tack, attack. Soon she disappeared behind the hedge, knowing that Roly would follow her. Her anger with him had died down. He was a poor soul, but the rain should have not been so sudden and rained all over her best dress.

Roly stood a moment looking at the court. He saw the players getting ready to come for a new game, and he knew he would have to walk across the court, even if he took his boots off, he would have to walk across it. So he stooped down and removed his boots, the left one, the right one, and tied the laces together, and hung the boots around his neck in the way he had seen it done. Then he approached the court and stepped on it. His bare feet were narrow and sunless and his big toes curled back like the prow of a canoe. The surface was hot and pricked his feet, but he walked across, smiling, smiling to himself, and thinking. Why did they all go away, why did they suppose that nothing would happen? But there seemed to be no one to look at him. He left the court and disappeared behind the hedge.

Then the two players emerged from the pavilion and resumed their game. They volleyed and shouted. Their whiteness made them seem like tall sticks of chalk, but they made no mark on the court, and their feet moved softly, as on grey blotting paper. And the sun, lower in the sky now, shone out of a clear darkening blue, and there was no more rain that day.

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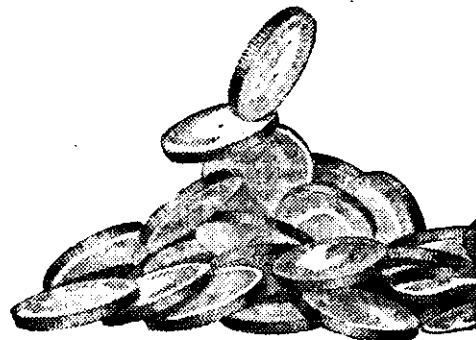
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