A Story By Angela Poe

Stephen Vincent Benét

I was a very young man in the publishing business at the time—even younger, I think, than most young men are nowadays, for this was before the war. Diana poised her bow at the sky above a Madison Square Garden that was actually on Madison Square—and some of the older men in our New York office still wore the paper sleeve-protectors and worn alpaca coats of an older day. There are young offices and old ones: brisk, shiny, bumptious new offices that positively buzz with expert inefficiency; and resigned, rather wistful little offices that have come to know they will never do well in the world. But the prevailing atmosphere of Thrushwood, Collins, and Co. was that of substantial tradition and solid worth. The faded carpet in the reception-room had been trodden by any number of famous feet—perhaps by not quite so many as I avouched to the young men of other publishers, but still the legends were there. Legends of Henry James and William Dean Howells and a young man from India named Kipling who was taken for a boy from the printer's and sent off with a flea in his ear. New authors were always greatly impressed by our atmosphere—until they looked over their contracts and discovered that even their Australian rights had, somehow or other, become the inalienable property of Thrushwood, Collins, and Co. But then they had only to see Mr. Thrushwood to be convinced that their most successful works were being published from a rigid sense of duty at a distinct financial loss.

I had the desk that was farthest away from both radiators and window, in the front office, so I broiled in summer and froze in winter and was perfectly happy. I was in New York, I was part of the making of books, I saw celebrities, and every Sunday I wrote home about it to my family. True, some of the celebrities were not nearly so impressive in the flesh as in the print; but that made me feel I was seeing Real Life at last. And there was always Mr. Thrushwood, with his thin, worn, cameo face and his white plume of hair, to restore my faith in mankind. When he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You're coming along nicely, Robbins," I felt an accolade. I did not discover until later that I was doing three men's work, but, if I had known it, then, I would not have cared. And when Randall Day, of Harper's, irreverently alluded to us as "The Holy Burglars," I flung the insinuation back in his teeth, with an apt quotation about Philistines. For we talked about Philistines, then.

As a matter of fact, we had an excellent list, on the whole—for, though Mr. Thrushwood, like most successful publishers, hardly ever read a book, he had a remarkable nose for the promising and the solid. On the other hand, there were names which, as an idealist, I boggled over—and the first and foremost of these was Angela Poe. I could tolerate Caspar Breed and his lean-jawed, stern-muscled cowboys with the hearts of little children. I could stomach Jeremy Jason, the homespun philosopher, whose small green ooze-leather booklets, "A Wayfarer's Creed," "A Wayfarer's Vow," "A Wayfarer's Hearthstone," produced much the same sensation in me as running a torn fingernail over heavy plush. Publishers must live, and other publishers had their

Breeds and their Jasons. But Angela Poe was not merely an author—she was something like breakfast-food or chewing-gum, an American institution, untidy, inescapable, and vast. I could have forgiven her—and Thrushwood, Collins—if she had sold moderately well. But long ago, the New York Times had ceased to say anything about her except, "Another Angela Poe . . . sure to appeal to her huge audience . . ." before its painstaking resumé of the plot. I often wondered what unhappy reviewer wrote those resumés. For he must have had to read the books, from "Wanda of the Marshes" to "Ashes of Roses," and I did not see how that was possible for any one man.

The settings of the novels ranged from the fjords of Norway to the coasts of Tasmania, and every page betrayed that intimate knowledge of a foreign country which can only be acquired by a thorough study of the chattier sort of guide-books. But though the scene might shift, the puppets remained defiantly the same. Even in Tasmania, the wild roses in the heroine's cheeks remained quite unaffected by the climate and the malign but singularly unintelligent snares of the cynical villain in riding-clothes. The villains almost always wore riding-clothes, as I remember it, and were usually militant atheists, though of high social position. The heroines were petite, unworldly, and given to calling the native flora pet names. And over all, insipid, lingering, and sweet as the taste of a giant marshmallow, there brooded the inimitable style of Angela Poe. Occasionally, this style would goad some fledgling reviewer to fury and he would write the sort of scarifying review that only very young reviewers write. Then the girl at our reception desk would be warned and Mr. Thrushwood would put off all other appointments for the day. For Angela Poe read all her reviews with passion.

It was on such an occasion that I saw her for the first time. I was passing Mr. Thrushwood's private office, when Mr. Collins popped out of it with a worried look on his face. A dumpy little man who haunted the business department, he left all personal contacts with authors to Mr. Thrushwood, as a rule. But this time, Angela Poe had descended in Mr. Thrushwood's absence and caught him unprepared.

"Look here, Robbins," he said, with no more preface than a drowning man, "have we got any really magnificent reviews on the last Poe? You know the kind I mean—all honey and butter. The Washoe Gazette has just called her a purveyor of literary lollipops—and if I could get hold of her clipping-agency, there'd be blood on the moon."

"Why," I said, "I'm afraid I——" and then I remembered. Randall Day had the pestilent habit of sending me all the most fulsome reviews of Angela Poe that he could find—and one had arrived only that morning, with a neat border of hearts and flowers drawn around it.

"As a matter of fact, I have," I said, "but——"

"Thank God!" said Mr. Collins fervently and, taking me by the hand, he fairly ran me into

the room.

But at first I could see no reason for the odd, tense look on his face—and on that of Mr. Catherwood, our art director, who was also there. The plump, demure, little old lady with the face of a faded pansy who sat in the big chair opposite them had nothing terrifying about her. She was Angela Poe, of course, though ten years older than her oldest publicity-pictures. And then she began to talk.

It was a sweet, tinkling voice, monotonous and constant. And as it went on, about Mr. Thrushwood and all her kind friends in Thrushwood, Collins, and then—I could not mark the transition—about how her flowers in her wee garden were also her friends, I began to realize the secret of the look on Mr. Collins' face. It was boredom, pure and simple, but boredom raised to a fine art. For when Angela Poe was angry she did not fly into a temper any more. She merely talked in her low, sweet voice—and, as she talked, she bored, relentlessly and persistently, like a drill boring into a shell.

It was no use trying to interrupt her or change the conversation—you cannot change a conversation that has no real subject to change. And yet, as she continued, and each moment seemed longer than the last until the brute flesh could hardly be restrained from breaking into a veritable whimper of tedium, I began to realize that she knew exactly what she was about. For somehow or other, we always came back to Angela Poe and the fact that she was waiting for Mr. Thrushwood. Till I began to feel, myself, that Mr. Thrushwood's absence was a grave calamity of nature and that, if he did not come soon, I, too, might burst into tears.

Fortunately, he arrived in time, and saved us, as only Mr. Thrushwood could. Fortunately or unfortunately, for he came while I was showing her the review that Day had sent me. It mollified her greatly, though she said, in a serious voice, that of course she never read reviews. They broke the wings of the butterfly. I didn't know what she meant by that, but I must have made some appropriate response. For Mr. Thrushwood, with one of his Napoleonic gestures, informed me at five o'clock that afternoon that henceforth my salary was raised ten dollars a month.

"And, by the way, Robbins," he said, "I don't want to put too much on you—but Miss Poe liked your looks today. Well, Miss Poe is just beginning a new novel—I think this one is to be about Iceland, or possibly Finland—not that it matters greatly——" and he gave me a smile of complicity. "But, as you know, we always get her reference books for her and send them out every week-end—and she will have them brought by some member of the staff. It's on the west shore of the Hudson—and I'm afraid she calls her house The Eyrie," he went on, with a chuckle. "But she's really a very sensible little woman—quite a head for business, yes, indeed, quite a head," and his face held unwilling respect. "So, if you wouldn't mind? Then that's all settled. How jolly of you, Robbins!" he said, with his boyish laugh.

I had meant to tell him I would do nothing of the sort, but, while you were with him you were under his spell. Nevertheless, it was with internal revolt that I got on the ferry that week-end, with my bag of books in my hand. And then, when I got to The Eyrie, I met a nice old lady who reminded me of my aunts. She put me at ease at once, she fed me enormously, she fussed over me with just the right amount of fussiness. The tea was solid and bountiful—I was sent to the station in a carriage and pair. To my despair, in the train going back, I discovered that I had enjoyed myself. And through my mind still ran the small, tinkling monotonous voice of Angela Poe—saying nothing, and yet, remembered. I tried very hard to place her; she was like any dozen ladies I knew in Central City, ladies with little gold watches pinned over their bosoms, who fussily but efficiently presided over strawberry festivals and sales at the Woman's Exchange. And she was not—there was something else about her, some quality I could not place. It had made her Angela Poe—and yet, what was it? Her servants, I had noticed, were perfectly trained and civil and the dog got up from the hearthrug when she told it to get up. And yet, instinctively, you gave her your arm, when she came down a staircase. I could not make it out, but I knew, rather shamefacedly, that I was looking forward to returning to The Eyrie. Young men are apt to be hungry—and the tea was superb.

And then, as I told Randall Day, The Eyrie alone was worth the price of admission. It was one of those big wooden houses with wide verandas that the Eighties built on the cliffs of the Hudson—houses that, somehow or other, remind you of grandiose cuckoo-clocks. There were the lawns and the shrubbery, the big, cupolaed stable and the graveled drive; the hardwood floors and the heavily framed oil-paintings. It might all have come out of an Angela Poe novel—she had done it perfectly, down to the last gas-bracket. And through it all wandered Mr. Everard De Lacey, the man one must never address as Mr. Angela Poe.

It was my first experience with the husband of a celebrated authoress, and he still remains unique in my memory. You do not meet them now as often as you did—those men with the large, mobile mouths, the Hamlet eyes, and the skin that has known the grease-paint of a thousand small-town dressing-rooms. The new actors are another breed. Mr. De Lacey was not merely an actor, he was a Thespian—and it makes a difference. He must have been very handsome in his youth—handsome in the old barnstorming tradition of black, flashing eyes and Hyacinthine curls—and his voice still had the rich, portentous boom of Michael Strogoff, the Courier of the Czar. When he fixed me with his Hamlet eyes and quoted—it was The Bard—I felt ashamed of myself for not being a larger audience. But he was really very considerate about it, and I liked the way he treated Miss Poe.

For they were obviously and deeply attached to each other, those two aging people, and one sensed the bond the moment one saw them together. They deferred to each other ceremoniously, with a Victorian civility that I found rather touching. And Everard was by no means the harmless, necessary husband such husbands often are. It was agreed that he was

“resting” from a modern and sin-struck stage unworthy of his talents, but it was also agreed that, at any moment, he might return to the boards, amid the plaudits of welcoming multitudes. Later on I discovered that he had been “resting” for almost thirty years, or since Angela Poe first started to sell by the carload. But that made no difference to either of them.

“I could never have done what I have done without Mr. De Lacey,” she would say in her sweet, tinkling voice and Everard would boom in return, “My dear, it was but given me to water and tend the rose. The flowers are all your own.” Such things, if said, are oftener said than meant. But you felt that the Poes, I mean the De Laceys, meant them. Then a look would pass between them, the look of two souls who are linked by a deeper tie than the crass world knows.

I seem to be writing a little like Angela Poe myself in describing them. But it was difficult, in that setting, not to become infected with Poe-ishness. If a beautiful girl in a simple muslin frock had met me accidentally in the garden and flitted away with flushed cheeks and a startled cry, I would have been embarrassed but not in the least surprised. And there were times when I fully expected to meet a little lame boy, his pale, courageous face radiant for once with the sunset glow, at almost any corner of the drive. But the De Laceys had no children, though they were extremely kind to the innumerable offspring of Mr. De Lacey’s relatives. And that seemed to me rather a shame.

I had come to scoff, you see. But I remained, if not to pray, well, to be rather fascinated. They fed me well, they treated me with ceremonious politeness, they were sentimental, but generous as well. I had to listen a good deal to the tinkling, incessant flow of Angela Poe’s words—but, as time wore on, I even became used to that. It was as Mr. Thrushwood had said; she could be extremely sensible, even pungent, when she wished. And she could take criticism, too, which surprised me. At least she could take it from Everard De Lacey. Now and then he would say, in his rich boom, as she sketched a scene or a character for us, “No, my dear, that will not do.”

“But, Everard, how is Zepha to escape from the insane asylum, then?”

“That, my dear, I have to leave to your genius. But this passage will not do. I sense it. I feel it. It is not Angela Poe.”

“Very well, my dear,” she would say submissively, and turn to me with, “Mr. De Lacey is always right, you know.” And he would say, at the same moment, “Young Man, I am not always right. But such poor gifts as I possess are always at Mrs. De Lacey’s service——”

“The fruits of a richly stored mind, Everard——”

“Well, my dear, perhaps some slight acquaintance with the classics of our tongue—some trifling practical experience in interpreting The Bard——”

Then each would make the other a little bob, and again I would be irresistibly reminded, not of a cuckoo-clock but of one of those wooden weather-prophets where an old woman comes out for fine weather, an old man for rain. Only, here, the old man and the old woman were coming out at the same time.

I hope I have given the impression that they gave me—that of two aging people, a trifle quaint, more than a trifle ridiculous, but, beyond all that, essential to each other. For that is an important thing for a young man to see, now and then; it restores his faith in the cosmos, though he may not realize it at the time. The first taste of real life, for the young, has its frightening moments: one suddenly discovers that actual people, not in books, commit suicide in gas-filled bedrooms because they would rather die than live; one discovers that others really enjoy being vicious and make a success of it. Then, instinctively, one clings to the first security at hand, like a swimmer to an overturned boat. I wouldn’t have thought it possible when I first met them, but one of the things I clung to was the De Laceys.

And as I became more and more drawn into the endless spider-web of the work of Angela Poe, I began to realize how much she owed to her husband. Oh, he could never have written anything—be sure of that. But he knew the well-worn paths of stock-melodrama in all their spurious vitality, he knew when a thing would “go.” I know because, inevitably, I followed one book of Angela Poe’s from conception to delivery. It was not any better, speaking from the point of view of letters, for his suggestions; for it was perfectly terrible. But it worked; it was Angela Poe; the sun rose over the cardboard mountains at precisely the right instant. And every one of his criticisms helped it on.

Then one day, when I came to The Eyrie, she had a touch of influenza and was in bed. He was obviously worried about her, but insisted on my staying to tea because I always had. I had my own worries at the moment and was glad for a breath of serenity. All his courtliness came into play and he told me a couple of mild theatrical jokes, but you could feel his eyes wandering, his ears listening for any sound from upstairs. If he had not been worried, I wonder—but worry makes people confidential. I thought it a good chance to congratulate him on his part in her work. He listened abstractedly, but I could see he was pleased.

“Glad you think so, my dear fellow, glad you think so,” he said. “Often I have said to myself, ‘No! This time, old boy, let genius burn unhampered! Who are you to profane the—um—the sacred flame?’ But genius—even genius—must have its trammels to bring it down to the level of us workaday folk. And, as the—er—appreciative trammel, perhaps I have played my part. I hope so,” he said, quite simply. “She means a great deal to me.”

“I know that, sir,” I said, but he wasn’t listening.

“Yes,” he said, “we mean a great deal to each other. I hope she’s taking those drops; you know, she hates drops. Yes, indeed, my dear fellow. Our first meeting was like a flash of lightning.” He stared at me solemnly. “I wish that Mr. Wedge, her first husband, could have understood it better. But he was an earth-bound soul. He could not comprehend a marriage of true minds.”

“Mrs. De Lacey was married before?” I said, and I could not keep the shrillness of surprise from my voice.

“My dear boy,” said Mr. De Lacey, looking surprised in his turn, “I forgot that you did not know. She was Mrs. Marvin Wedge when we first met,” he said, reflectively, “and beautiful as a just-unfolding rose.”

A thousand unphrasable questions rose to my lips and died there. For Mr. De Lacey continued.

“I used to call her the Rose of Goshen,” he said. “Goshen, Indiana, dear boy—I was—er—resting there at the time, after my tour with Barrett. I played both grave-diggers and Charles, the wrestler. Charles, the wrestler, is not a large part, but one can make it tell. It was hard to return to Goshen, after that, but there are financial necessities. But as soon as I met Angela, I knew that I had been led. Wedge was—um—proprietor of our hay-and-feed store—rather older than I am; he used to chase me and call me Slats when I was a boy. But I had not known Angela before. She came from Zook Springs.”

He paused and stared at me with his Hamlet eyes. I could see the whole scene so plainly—the dusty streets of the small town and the young, down-at-heels actor, back home discouraged, after his trial flight. I could see Angela Poe, forty years ago, in the simple gingham dress of one of her heroines. It must have all been so innocent and high-minded—innocent and unreal as a stage melodrama, even to the cynical figure of the burly hay-and-feed merchant. I could see him, somehow, in his shirt sleeves, roaring with laughter at the timid respectful speeches of—but the boy could not have been called Everard De Lacey, then. And yet, Romance had triumphed in Goshen. I wondered how.

“So Miss Poe was divorced—divorced Mr. Wedge, I mean,” I said.

My companion looked curiously shocked. “Dear boy,” he said, with dignity, “never once, in any of her books, has Angela Poe drawn a divorced woman.”

“I know,” I said feebly, though I didn’t. “But in real life—”

“The books of Angela Poe are real life,” said Mr. De Lacey, crushingly. Then he relented.

“No,” he said, “Mr. Wedge is not living. He passed over.”

“Passed over?”

“Within a year of my return to Goshen. As a matter of fact, he was murdered,” he said, with his Hamlet eyes fixed upon me so sternly that, for an instant, I had the horrific idea that I was about to listen to an incredible confession. But I was not. “By a tramp,” he said at last. “In his feed store. For purposes of robbery. It was very upsetting for Angela.”

I opened and shut my mouth, but no words came forth.

“Yes, really very upsetting. I was glad I could be with her,” he said, naïvely. “Though, naturally, we were not married till later. She was married in a tailored dress, but she held a bouquet of orange-blossoms and lilies-of-the-valley. I insisted upon that,” he said, with some pride.

“And the tramp?” I said with youth’s delight in horrors. “Was he—”

“Oh, he was never found,” boomed Mr. De Lacey abstractedly, as a small sound came from upstairs, “but Angela bore up wonderfully. She is a wonderful woman.” He rose. “If you’ll just excuse me one moment, my dear fellow—”

“I must catch my train,” I said. “But thank you, Mr. De Lacey. And be assured I shall respect your confidence,” I said, trying to equal his manner.

He nodded seriously. “Yes, yes,” he said. “Perhaps I should have said nothing—but, well, my dear boy, we have grown to know you and value you, in your visits to The Eyrie. And they must not cease with this book—my dear fellow, no. Only, I would not bring up the matter in talking with Miss Poe. She does not like to dwell upon those days; they were not happy ones for her. Mr. Wedge was really—” Words failed him. “Mr. Wedge was really not a very sensitive man,” he said.

I assured him of my entire understanding and took my leave. But, all the way home, certain thoughts kept revolving in my mind. I was not surprised that Providence, in the shape of a burglarious tramp, had seen fit to remove the insensitive Mr. Wedge. That was just the sort of thing that happened to Angela Poes. But why had she ever married him, in the first place, and how, having touched real life in her own person, had she been able to forget it so completely in her books? But those were the sorts of questions one could not ask.

And yet in the end I asked them, with youth’s temerity. I asked them because I had come to like her—to like them both. And when you like people, you are apt to be more honest with them—that is the trouble.

We had planned to have a little celebration—the three of us—when the book was actually published. But it was not I who put the first copy in her hands. I brought out the dummy and the jacket. That particular Saturday Mr. De Lacey had made one of his rare excursions to New York. I was glad to find her alone, as a matter of fact, for I thought I had noticed a slight constraint between us since my conversation with him. At least, I was conscious that I knew a secret—and kept wondering if she knew that I knew. And I meant to tell her, in all honesty, how much the security and peace of The Eyrie had meant to me through the year. I was only waiting a good opening. But, naturally, we started by talking publishing. Her comments were shrewd and I enjoyed them—though the influenza had left its mark, and she looked frailer than before. And then suddenly she startled me by asking what I really thought of her work.

Six months before, I would merely have buttered her, buttered her with a trowel, for the good of Thrushwood, Collins, and let it go at that. But now I had come to like her—and, after all, one has one's convictions. It wasn't the best butter, and she knew it. And monotonously, relentlessly, in her small, gracious voice, she kept pressing the point. That should have warned me, but it didn't. If authors were not megalomaniacs, no books would ever get written. But I forgot that first rule of publishing and floundered on.

"And yet, Mr. Robbins, I can feel that you don't really believe in me—you don't really believe in Angela Poe," she would say, gently and maddeningly, till at last with the rashness of youth I took my courage in both hands.

"It isn't that, Miss Poe," I stammered, "but if you'd only once—why don't you? It mightn't please your audience, but a woman of your experiences—of your life—"

"My life?" she said, with dignity. "And what do you know of my life, young man?"

"Oh, nothing," I said, blundering from bad to worse, "but Mr. De Lacey said you both came from small towns—well, now, a *real* novel about an American small town—"

"So Everard has been telling tales—naughty boy! I must scold him," said Angela Poe brightly. But the brightness was all in the voice. I suddenly had the impression that she thought me a tedious young fool and wished me away. I began to long for Mr. De Lacey's return. But though I strained my ears I heard no echo of his rich boom from any corner of the house.

"Oh," I said, "please don't. They were *such* delightful stories. He—he told me you were married in a traveling dress."

"Dear Everard!" said Angela Poe. "He remembers everything. A dove-gray silk, with white

collar and cuffs. I looked very pretty in it. And you think I might make a story of that, Mr. Robbins?"

"We have always hoped—your memoirs—the readers of Angela Poe—" I said.

She shook her head, decisively. "I shall never write my memoirs," she said. "Authors' memoirs never sell, you know—not really. The publishers think they are going to, but they don't. And then, it would lift the veil. Do you know who I am, young man? Do you know that people write me from all over the country, every day? They write me asking me what to do with their lives. And I tell them," she said, sitting up very straight. "I tell them. Very often they do it, too. Because I'm Angela Poe—and they know my picture and my books. So they can write as they might to Another," and she bowed her head for an instant. "And that is not bad for a woman who writes what you think trash, Mr. Robbins. But I always knew I could do it," she ended, unexpectedly. "I always knew I could do it. But things were put in my way."

I could not leave, for it was not my train-time yet, but I began to feel more and more uncomfortable. There was something odd in the sweet, tinkling voice—the note of a fanatic egoism almost religious in its sincerity. I was used to the egoism of authors, but this was in another key.

She passed a handkerchief across her lips for a moment. "Dear, dear, I forget so many things since my illness," she said. "What were we talking about? Oh, yes, you were suggesting an idea to me—a story about an American small town. Do you know them, Mr. Robbins?"

She asked the question so suddenly and fiercely that I almost said no instead of yes. Then she relaxed.

"But of course," she said, a trifle primly, "you do know them. You know how cramped one's cultural opportunities are. And how one is mocked, perhaps, for striving after them? Or perhaps you do not know that?"

It was a rhetorical question, obviously. So I nodded, hoping against hope for the sound of Mr. De Lacey's footfall in the hall.

"Even so," she said sweetly, "you are not a member of the female sex. And they are more easily wounded than gentlemen think. Even Everard has wounded me now and then—oh, not intentionally and I soon forgave him," she said, with a regal gesture. "Still, he has wounded." She was, evidently, talking more to herself than to me, now, but the fact did not increase my comfort.

“I could have forgiven Marvin everything else,” she said, “his drinking, his unbridled passions, his coarse jests. That is woman’s mission—to submit and forgive. He made jokes about my housekeeping, too. And it would have cost him only eighty dollars to publish my poems. I had the sweetest wreath of field daisies for the cover. I thought he would be a way to higher things; after all, one has so little opportunity in a small town and the feed store was quite successful, financially. But I was mistaken,” and she sighed, gently. I was now past wishing for Mr. De Lacey’s appearance; I only wished for my train to roar into the room and bear me away. But such things do not happen, unfortunately.

“But I never thought of divorce,” the mild, tinkling voice went on. “Never. It crossed my mind, once or twice, but I firmly put it aside. I have always been glad of that. I don’t think he really *cared*,” she said, opening her pansy eyes widely. “But he might have hurt Everard badly—he was such a very strong man. Sometimes, in the early days of our marriage, he used to carry me around the room on one arm. It frightened me, rather, but I always submitted and forgave. It was always so dusty in the store, too. It used to make me sneeze and then he would laugh. He laughed when Everard read Shakespeare to me. I sneezed that evening, as I was wiping the handle of the hatchet, but no one heard me.”

“As you were what?” I said, and my voice was thin and high.

“I suppose it wasn’t necessary,” she said thoughtfully. “It would be, now, with the fingerprints, but they were quite stupid people and we knew little of fingerprints then. But it seemed tidier—I’d let it fall on the floor and the floor was dirty. They never really swept the store. He was sitting with his back to me, reading my poems and laughing. I’d hidden the new ones, but he’d found them and broken open the drawer. The hatchet was an old one—they used to cut the wire on the feed bales with it. You know, he didn’t say anything at all. He was still laughing and trying to get out of the chair. But he wasn’t quick enough. I burned the money in the stove and nobody even asked me about the dress. They say salts of lemon will take out blood stains *immediately*,” she murmured. “But it seemed better not to try though it was quite a nice dress.”

“But weren’t you ever—didn’t they ever—” I babbled.

“Why, Mr. Robbins, of course,” she said, with perfect placidity, “you have no *idea* of the petty malice and gossip of a small town. But I was in bed, you know, when they came to tell me—in bed with a bad cold. Any emotional strain always gives me a very bad cold—I had quite a bad one the day Everard and I were married. And everybody knew he used to sit up in the feed store till all hours, drinking and reading vile atheist books like that horrid Colonel Ingersoll’s. The old cats said it was because he was afraid to go home. Afraid of me!” she said with perfect ingenuousness. “There’s no limit to what people will say. Why, they even talked about Everard, though everybody knew he was driving a load of vegetables to market with his father. I thought of that before I went to the store.”

“And yet,” I said, “you lived in Goshen—you didn’t marry Mr. De Lacey till a year later—”

“A year and a day,” she corrected. “That seemed more fitting. But I went into half mourning at the end of six months. It’s rather soon, I know, but I thought I might. As long as I was to be engaged to Everard,” and a faint blush colored her cheeks. “I told him I could discuss nothing of the sort while I was still in full mourning and he appreciated my wishes—Everard has always been so considerate. At first, I thought the time would hang very heavy on my hands. But, as a matter of fact, it passed quite quickly. I was writing my first novel,” she said, in a hushed voice.

I do not know yet how I got out of the house—I hope with decency. But I had left The Eyrie behind and was well along on my two-mile tramp to the station before I really came to myself. It was her last words—and the picture they gave me—that sent the cold, authentic shudder down my spine. I kept wondering wildly how many successful authors were murderers or murderesses and why the police did not arrest them all. For I could see the whole story and fill in every detail. It was fatally plausible, even to Angela Poe’s primness. I could even believe that if the unfortunate Mr. Wedge had paid a printer eighty dollars, he might have lived. For there are egoisms which it is not safe to mock or dam up—if you do, you are tempting the explosion of primal forces.

And then, when I had almost reached the station, I suddenly began to laugh—the healing laughter of sanity. For the whole thing was ridiculous and Angela Poe had taken an impeccable revenge. I had told her what I thought of her work—and subtly, tinklingly, convincingly, she had made me swallow the most preposterous farrago of nonsense she could think of; swallow it whole. And, in doing so, she had proved her powers as a story-teller past cavil. But, once away from the monotonous spell of her voice, it was merely impossible to think of her as a murderess, and yet more impossible to think of Everard De Lacey as an accomplice. For accomplice he must have been—after the fact if not before it. Or else, she had hidden the truth from him all these years—and that was impossible, too.

For a second, I even thought of turning back to The Eyrie and humbly admitting to its mistress my folly and my defeat. But my train, after all, was due in fifteen minutes, and I had a dinner engagement in New York. I would write her a letter instead—she would like a letter. I walked up and down the station platform, composing orotund phrases in my mind.

The late afternoon train from New York arrived some six minutes before my own, and I was pleased to see it disgorge the statuesque form of Everard De Lacey. He shook hands with me and boomed apologies for missing my visit. “And how did you leave Miss Poe?” he said, anxiously. “I have been away since early morning.”

“Oh, she was perfectly splendid—I never saw her looking better,” I said, warmed by a glow of secret laughter. “We talked for hours—she’ll tell you.”

“That’s good—that’s good, my dear fellow—you relieve me greatly,” he said, while his eyes roved for the carriage that had not yet arrived. “Jenks is tardy, today,” he said. Then he gave me a quick look. “You didn’t happen to mention what you told me in our little chat when she was so ill?” he said.

“Mention it?” I said with a broad grin. “Oh, yes, indeed.”

He seemed curiously relieved. “I am much indebted,” he said. “Then you really do feel—and it means something coming from you—that I am of some genuine help to her? To her books, I mean—her career?”

“I do, indeed,” I said, though I was now puzzled.

“Excellent,” he boomed. “Excellent.” He took me by the lapel with the old actor’s gesture. “You see,” he said, “oh, it’s foolish of me, I know—and we are old now, of course. But every now and then I have the feeling that I may not really be indispensable to her. And it worries me greatly.”

For the instant, as he said it, I saw fear look out of his eyes. It was not an ignoble fear, but he must have lived with it a long time.

I did not go back to The Eyrie; indeed, I did not go back to Thrushwood, Collins. To do the latter without doing the former would have required explanations and I did not feel like giving them. Instead, I changed my boarding-house, and went to work as a salesman of aluminum-ware. And, after six months of that, I went back to Central City and the place in my father’s cement business that had been waiting for me. For I had come to the decision that I was not made for New York, nor the life of letters; I did not have the self-confidence of Angela Poe.

Once, during the six months, I thought I saw Mr. De Lacey on the street, but he did not see me and I fled him. And, naturally, though I tried to escape them, I saw advertisements of the last completed novel of Angela Poe. She died when I had been three months in Central City, and when I read that she was survived by her husband, the actor, Everard De Lacey, I felt as if a weight had been lifted from my breast. But he only survived her a few months. He missed her too much, I suppose, and some ties are enduring. I should like to have asked him one question, only one, and now I shall never know. He certainly played Shakespearian rôles—and there must have been quite a period, after they left Goshen, when he was playing. In fact the obituary mentions Othello and Hamlet. But there is another rôle—and I wonder if he ever played it and what he made of it. I think you know the one I mean.