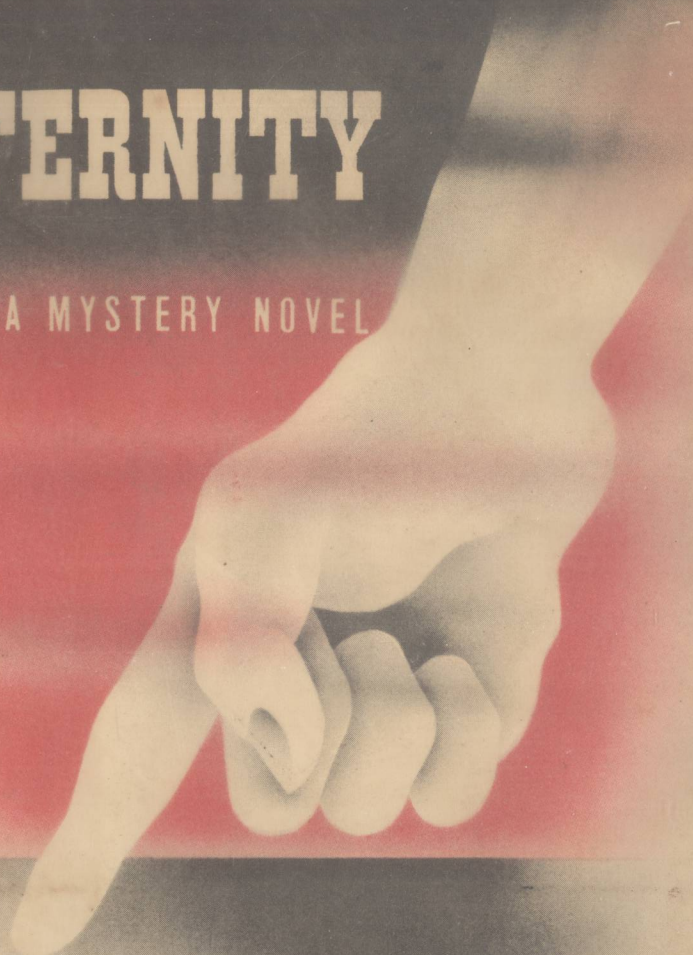


MOUSE IN ETERNITY

◆ ◆ A MYSTERY NOVEL



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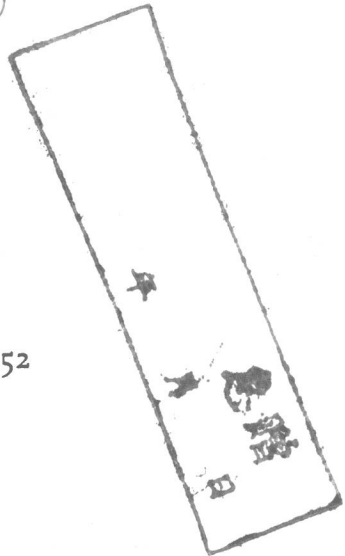
ETERNITY

N E D B A T Y R E



NEW YORK

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FIRST EDITION

❧ ❧ ❧ Her neck was Modigliani and the rest of her pure Neanderthal. The flat nose and large mouth in the sketch could have belonged to no one but Mrs. Patch. The rope around her throat and the distended eyes and tongue showed that she had been hanged by her neck until dead.

When it actually happened though, it happened differently. Her head was lying on the desk, her hands outstretched as if she were taking a brief nap and her skull was crushed. Not even the standard Atlanta cure-all of two aspirins and a Coke could help her any longer. . . .

It is always hard to believe that someone you like or someone you love can kill, however much the victim may deserve to be killed. But certainly someone at the Social Service Bureau had murdered Mrs. Patch.

Who? Bea, the girl to whom everything happened?

Mary? Miss Mary, the gentle, tender one?

Smitty, the career girl?

Gwen, whom everyone liked most?

Or one of the others? Peg, Margy, Miss Reeves, someone in the Children's Division, Mrs. Martin . . . who?

Who indeed would have also tried to kill Miss Fitzpatrick, poor half-crazy woman that she was? Or old Mr. Ricks, who came every day to the Bureau just to sit and watch suspiciously . . .

But someone had tried, and come close. And was almost to succeed before Jane Wallace began to sense the truth.

By turns violent, tender, intense, and humorous, this is a mystery that is at all times original and arresting. We think you will mark it down as one of the best of 1952.

*When I measure myself by the grasses
Then I am good and tall;
When I measure myself by the mountains
I do not exist at all.*

*It is very, very curious
How one may either be
A cat that nibbles a moment,
Or a mouse in eternity.*

PAULA LECLER

MOUSE
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ETERNITY

Mouse in Eternity

THE cold November rain hit hard against the windows. Peg squinted and looked down on Whitehall Street from the third story of the Social Service Bureau. The sad Monday morning procession started; clients swarmed below, pushing through the swinging front doors. Social workers dodged in and out of the crowd trying to get to work on time.

"Here comes Mr. Ricks," Peg said. "The week has officially begun."

I joined her at the window. Our perspective distorted everyone; we looked down directly on heads with no bodies. Every now and then large feet darted out to carry the heads forward. On the corner Mr. Ricks, who got Old Age Assistance from the Bureau, looked at the traffic light with the same suspicion he looked at women, especially women who were social workers, Republicans, politicians, and the people he referred to in a vague, general way as All them that's runnin' and ruinin' the country. The light changed. He watched it without trust as if it might turn back at once to red; a few cautious steps took him to the middle of the street, then he ran to the curb. He had gained another small victory over the world and its perverse ways.

Peg walked to her desk. She lit a cigarette, then came back near me and peered out of the window again. "There's Mary," she said. "She shouldn't be coming back to work so soon. I went by her house last night. She's paralyzed with grief."

Soon, one by one, the workers would enter the stalls, which was what we called the slim partitions where our desks were placed; four stalls on one side of the huge office, four on the other. The desks were clear; in a few moments they would be piled high with case records, clothing orders, check lists, change-of-address forms, incoming and outgoing mail.

As the workers in our section entered with a greeting I thought of a theater program, the way it deftly places everything and everyone. I went ahead with the thought; my usual Monday morning reluctance to get started helped me with the idea.

TIME: *November*. PLACE: *Social Service Bureau, Atlanta, Georgia*. CHARACTERS, *in order of their appearance*:

First, discovered as the curtain rises, Pegeen Kelly and Jane Wallace, social workers, whittling time away with small chores and small talk before the new week began.

Enter Beatrice Shaw, called Bea, the girl to whom everything happened. She would go out calmly like the rest of us to make home visits and come back with startling tales. Once she was bitten by a mad dog and had to have anti-rabies treatment. Twice she had acted as *accoucheuse*. Once a client, old Mr. Smith, had talked to her quietly and then had grabbed a

butcher knife and had chased her up and down stairs. After an hour or two of this he came to and begged her to pay no attention to what he had done. "I certainly didn't mean no harm," he said, "was just one of my spells." After that when anything happened to us or among us that was somehow unaccountable or without tact we said: "I certainly didn't mean no harm, was just one of my spells."

When Bea went on leave in the summer she had said she was going to Oregon. While she waited for her train at the Terminal she had met a sailor's wife with five children on their way to Key West; the wife needed help traveling with the children, so Bea went to Key West instead of Oregon. Her latest adventure involved two black French poodles. Two weeks ago she had come back to the office from a visit leading a tandem of French poodles, named Joe and Bill. All that afternoon they did their tricks for us, a prodigious repertory. As night approached their housing became an acute problem; Bea couldn't take them to her attic apartment, so she farmed them out to Peg. Peg was the one among us who always obliged. The walls of Bea's partition were covered with Low's cartoons; she looked at them with wonder, then pulled a slender book from a desk drawer, *British Cartoonists*, by David Low; she glanced at her watch, measuring the time she could devote to the book before office hours began.

Enter Mary. Miss Mary to the clients, officially Mrs. James Allison. Last week a telegram had come from the Adjutant General's Office informing her with

regret that her husband had been killed in action. She had been away from the office since then. Our poor useless words of comfort had already been said to her at her home; we could only smile at her as she entered. She was the gentle, tender one, worshipped by the clients, loved by us all. She felt of her desk, experimentally, as if for the first time; she walked to the file cabinet for case records, trying to teach herself that it all still existed exactly as before, though her husband was dead and life had stopped for her until she could accept his death.

Enter Miss Reeves, the girl without a first name. She signed herself M. Reeves. Surely she must have been conceived in passion; her creation must have taken nine months and, though none of us had evidence, she must have physiological habits like the rest of us. She smiled her fleeting, scared rabbit of a smile, hung up her shabby black coat and her shabby black hat and disappeared into her stall to be erased by her work, to become invisible by her duties.

Enter Elspeth Smith. Smitty. The career girl, the psychiatric caseworker, with experience in private agencies and hospitals, now doing a stint of generic casework in public welfare because she wanted her work history to include everything in the field. Her motto, we said to her face as well as behind her back, was Go to Freud, thou sluggard, and be wise. Her arms were heavy with editions of Menninger, Horney, and Adler. She now placed these along with the other books that lined her desk, then she blew on the weekend's accumulation of dust that had gathered on her

collection of social work publications: *Survey Monthly*, *Survey Graphic*, and *The Family*.

Enter Gwendolyn Pierce. Gwen. The one we liked most, yet envied most because she made a prodigious amount of money writing confession stories. We didn't envy the hard work she did writing, just the large checks that came with her name on them. She was a success story: a poverty-stricken child who had worked her way through school, found the work she liked, and from it got material to write. Her charming and sumptuous house, furnished like every woman's dream, had been paid for, she said, by illicit love, juvenile delinquency, and illegitimate births.

Peg looked worried. "Where's Margy?" she said.

We glanced at Margy's empty desk, then at each other. The week before, the supervisor's bitterest censure had been for Margy and her lateness. Margy had spent tearful hours in the restroom recovering from Mrs. Patch's tongue; at her desk she had been listless and without hope. Peg and I moved to the window. As we looked down a battered car drove up; that would be Margy and her husband. We watched Margy get out of the car. Already her tasks had descended on her; even so far away we could see that she was groggy. Sleep hadn't rested her; she had jumped into the morning's demands, neglectful of the task she was doing because her mind was on the next job. Now she turned with a robot's gesture to get her husband's good-bye kiss, her mind already on the long day ahead at the agency and in her district. She rushed through the front door; after a while we heard the elevator

jolt to a stop, steps raced up the hall, and Margy entered, wrestling to get her coat off, her blouse-tail hanging out of her skirt, her hair uncombed, and yet full of self-congratulation that somehow, in some way, she had got to work on time.

We waited for the grand entrance. It came. Mrs. Patch, our supervisor, entered. Bea had said once that her neck was Modigliani and the rest of her pure Neanderthal. None of us saw any reason to correct or to improve upon Bea's description. The politest names we called Mrs. Patch were hag, harpy, vixen. She entered as to a fanfare, as if she expected us either to stand at attention or to get down on our knees. She didn't say good morning; she looked at Peg's cigarette and ordered her to put it out. The rules were that we didn't smoke at our desks during office hours. Peg and I glanced at each other and our eyes said, but it's not eight thirty. Gwen looked at her watch. I picked up the telephone on my desk. The switchboard wasn't open and it had never been late in opening. I walked to the telephone on the clerk's desk which was left connected with outside. I dialed for the time. A flat, mechanical voice said eight twenty-four. The small triumph made me happy; then I was depressed, realizing that once again Mrs. Patch had reduced me to pettiness.

While I was making my infantile gesture of trying to prove Mrs. Patch wrong Peg had already put out her cigarette and was poking at an invalid geranium plant on her desk. She looked at it sadly and said: "On the bleakness of my lot, bloom I strove to raise."

Miss Reeves peered out of her stall; her tragic face lighted up in recognition and gratitude. "Emily Dickinson," she said.

Peg threw the flower pot into the wastebasket.

I thought again of each one in our division separately: Miss Reeves, the panic-stricken, the terror-stricken, doomed to quake before friend or foe or co-worker, the victim of wrath imagined or real; she found her refuge in poetry—those precious books set precisely on her desk, standing lean and thin: Shakespeare's sonnets and Donne's love poetry. Peg, the calm one, equal to any situation, good-looking; in college she had been voted the best all around, the president of the senior class, of student government; she had a quiet anger against the world for the heartsickness of too many of its people, for wars that ravage and for children crying for food; now she was waiting for her husband's return, her self divided by the necessary absence of her beloved, fighting in a war. Margy, the oldest one, tossed about by anxiety and insecurity, morbidly afraid of Mrs. Patch. Bea with her abiding love for painting and her equal love for people, her wild, erratic way of getting mixed up in everything, of being the innocent bystander who is dragged into all kinds of complications. And Gwen, well-dressed, finicky in her grooming, sweet-looking, every moment budgeted. Smitty, with her fine brain, the most intelligent one among us, her faculty of being impersonal; neat, but completely unadorned, no interest in clothes, yet with no hint of masculinity. And Mary, who was the symbol of love and unselfishness.

They all sat near me; we surrounded each other; each so different, yet each dedicated in her own way to social work, not all of us dedicated as Smitty was, as a lifelong profession, but we were conscientious about it: Margy until her young sons were educated; Peg until her husband came home from the army; the rest of us until love found us. Nowhere among us was the stereotype social worker: dowdy, stringy hair, flat-heeled Oxfords, mannish topcoat, a critical, didactic, unyielding attitude.

Then along with the others I settled down to work; the stalls were silent except for the whirring sounds made as we skimmed through the pages of the Budget Manual searching for figures to enter on the budget sheets, the quiet murmur of pencils, the faint crackling of forms as we bunched them together and inserted carbon paper.

At last Peg's voice jolted the quietness. In desperation she said: "Does anyone here have the slightest idea how much nine and seven are?"

"Sixteen," Smitty said. "If you'll just remember when you add nine to anything it's one less than if you were adding ten."

"That kind of information demoralizes me," Peg said. "Please keep it to yourself."

Hours passed. Ten thirty had come and no one moved. Usually we took ten or fifteen minutes off then for coffee or cokes. We became grimmer and grimmer. Mary borrowed a typewriter from the Stenographic Section and staggered in with it. She started typing at her desk.

Sometime after eleven Mary took an armful of case records to Mrs. Patch's office.

"Just a moment, if you don't mind." Mrs. Patch's voice struck us all. I saw Miss Reeves quiver; Peg shook her head in disbelief over Mrs. Patch's rudeness. I looked toward Mrs. Patch's office and saw Mary turn around and go back inside.

The screech that was Mrs. Patch's voice began again. "I've told you repeatedly that you are not to type records."

Harmony answered dissonance. Mary said in her clear, soft voice: "But I've been away for a week and Mrs. Carson is out today because her little girl is sick. They're days behind with the work. I thought—"

"The case records look bad enough without your wretched typing. When a stenographer is out the supervisor of the Stenographic Section can make arrangements for someone else to do the work. I will not have this repeated disregard for instructions and standard routine."

Mary stood in the door of Mrs. Patch's office, bludgeoned by the words that were shouted at her. I looked across at Peg; her face blazed in anger. Whatever the rules, she dragged out a cigarette and lit it. I took a pencil and punched at the calendar on my desk; soon the day was gouged out, only November and 1942 were left.

I shoved my chair back, grateful for the rasping sound it made, and walked toward Mrs. Patch's office. I tried to wait for her to finish a sentence, then saw there would be no end. I interrupted.

"I've a client to see at my desk."

Mrs. Patch's gross features reflected her pleasure in sadism; she almost smiled at me. "You haven't a client to see. You simply can't stand for Mrs. Allison to get criticism. None of you can take criticism."

"Mr. Ricks is waiting to see me," I said.

Mary went back to her stall and put her head on her desk. I had seen her like that when she was full of the sudden knowledge of her husband's death. I expected her to cry but after the sad week behind her she had no tears left; her body curved in the very shape of grief. I looked again at Mrs. Patch; her glare blotted me out.

At my desk I telephoned Mrs. Brown, the receptionist.

"Is Mr. Ricks in the waiting-room?"

"Save your breath for sensible questions," Mrs. Brown said. "You know he's here. He hasn't missed a day since the place opened."

"Send him up, please. Tell him I'll meet him at the elevator."

"Look, Jane."

"Yes."

"Before you hang up. Mrs. Logan was in a few minutes ago looking like death. I promised her you'd be out to see her some time today. She needs you. I know you're rushed with reviews but this is special."

"All right, Brownie, I'll go. It'll have to be after work."

Mrs. Patch's voice continued its shrieking.