

MR. CODMAN'S WOMEN



Stephanie Carpenter

IT HAS BEEN three days since Mr. Codman took off his pants. He wears his drawers to dinner, laying his handkerchief over his lap during meals. His wife and daughter seat themselves at the far end of the table. They don't care to sit too close to his elbows; he finds himself, these days, struggling with his knife and fork. He eats less, drinks more, and comes out all right in the balance.

Mr. Codman overhears remarks made in muttering, feminine tones. His daughter disdains him—once, in London, she refused to take his arm walking in to dinner. She refused him, his Josie. He can remember her as an imp in sausage curls, dragging her kittens around the house and stealing sugar. She used to sit with him while he cut and smoked his cigars; she used to hold a cigarillo, unlit, between her baby lips and prop her heels next to his. There'd been her brother, too, for a while, the youngest member of their gang, and then there'd been the bad time in Paris, with only Josie understanding the French doctors,

and John Jr. getting thinner and thinner. When Johnnie died, Codman's wife had the audacity to cry. As though it hadn't been entirely her doing—their being in France in the first place, eating strange foods and walking in damp neighborhoods. And Codman had said to her then—what was it? Well, he'd told her the plain truth: if she hadn't had the kids, they'd have had better times all along. She might have lived with him as his mistress. That had been exactly what he'd said.

Mrs. Johnson is to him now what Mrs. Codman might have been. In Mrs. Johnson he has found beauty and charm, girlishness, decency. Mrs. Johnson spoils him as Mrs. Codman never has. He thinks of her bosom, her voice, her perfume; he shuts his eyes. Mrs. Johnson decanting the wine, Mrs. Johnson turning down the bed. She is delicious.

The feminine muttering increases in volume. He raises his head to see the Codman women stalking out. His wife is a reproachful woman, whom his daughter has come to resemble. His daughter, who once rode horsey on his knee, now leaving him alone with his full plate. It should not be so. A man should not be made a pariah in his own home. His forefathers built this house, earned this fortune. *His* forefathers, whose portraits line the dining room, a gallery of bold Codmans. It is only thanks to him that his wife and daughter are Codmans at all. But before he can point this out, the women are gone.

Alone, Mr. Codman bends to his plate—and stifles a shriek! There is a face looking back at him from his

potatoes—a nose and mouth in relief—terrible! He shoves himself quickly back from the table. His handkerchief flutters after him as he flees the room.

DARLING BABY, writes Mrs. Johnson, *dearest of men! It's too hard to go a whole week without seeing you! Can't you get away soon? Won't you try for your Helene? I should love nothing better than a carriage ride with you in the park this Sunday! Only, I haven't anything to wear. Shouldn't you love to see me in a new dress? I know you should; I have been to the dressmaker already and forwarded the bill to your accountant. You won't think it too bold of me, I know—not of Helene who is your wife in spirit. Oh, how I wish I could live with you in that great house and keep you company in the evenings! We would do things in proper style, you and I, John darling. I send you every bit of my love, dearest John. I kiss you and kiss you! XOXO, Helene.*

The letter awaited him in his study. Written on pale peach paper, it is scented with the cologne he gave to Mrs. Johnson last week. He rereads it, then tucks the pages into the pocket of his great coat (which he habitually wears over his drawers). A second letter came in the same mail. Despite her attempts to disguise her handwriting, despite her omission of a return address, he knows it is from Mrs. Smyth-Hurst. There's no sloppiness about Mrs. Smyth-Hurst; he appreciates that about her, even if she is no longer his favorite. He breaks the seal on her letter.

John, she writes. A disturbing story has reached me concerning

you and that scandalous woman, the supposed "Mrs. Johnson." It is widely known that she is the widow of no one. I have most often heard her roots traced to Toronto, where it is said she managed a saloon. That is the nicest of the stories, be assured. I won't lower myself to repeat the others.

You will appreciate that the Codman name is sullied by any such association. My own reputation, I hardly need say, is also jeopardized.

John, as you love me and your good name, I beg you to cut this woman.

Thank you for the sable you sent over Friday last; it is just the thing and what everyone is showing for next season. You are, as ever, a dear man.

I hope this finds you well.

Your affectionate, Cassandra Smyth-Hurst.

P.S. I have implemented your advice as to security windows on the garden floor and am most satisfied with the results.

Mrs. Smyth-Hurst is a woman of taste and it is gratifying to him how often their tastes coincide. He will never forget their first meeting, years ago, at the gunsmith's shop. She had been still in her widow's weeds then, like a small, sad-faced child, turning in her gloved hands the most delicate of pearl-handled pieces. She felt vulnerable, she said, in her large house. The late Mr. Smyth-Hurst had hired the staff; she'd never quite trusted them. And then there was the matter of the neighborhood! A teacher's training college stood just down the block; she had a mortal fear of independent women. Mr. Codman had understood.

He writes quickly to both of his mistresses, making a date on Sunday to see Mrs. Johnson, a date on Monday to see Mrs. Smyth-Hurst. He is not inclined to answer Mrs. Smyth-Hurst's accusations in writing. She can scold and he, supplicate, when they are alone. Then, too, she is apt to brandish cunning little weapons. Mr. Codman takes a pull from his nipper. Clamps and gags and stoppers: he shivers to think of them.

Things are more straightforward with Mrs. Johnson. A pretty dress and she's satisfied. So is he. With her bright complexion and smooth limbs she is like one of the dolls that Josie used to unwrap on Christmases. He used to wonder at the child's delight in dressing and undressing her babies. Now he understands. But whereas little Josie tired of her Christmas dolls by Valentine's Day, he has been enraptured by Mrs. Johnson for six months now. He leans back and thinks of her dimpled cheeks and of the ticklish way she wiggles when he helps her into the carriage. They will roll together on Sunday through the dowdy old park, laughing at the statuary, the ducks, the silly, conventional families out for their weekly strolls. Let those strollers stare! No doubt Mrs. Johnson will be the prettiest woman at the park, with her new dress and wafting hair. She is not shy about public displays. And with her beside him, neither is he. What is there to be ashamed of in the company of such a doting darling? Let eyebrows raise: he is a Codman, not some trembling businessman; his ancestors erected this park for their own pleasure.

Mr. Codman rummages through his pockets for his nipper. Mrs. Johnson will be decked out in blue silk, and he will look sporting beside her in his straw hat and . . . and what? His drawers? His greatcoat? He shoves back his desk chair, rushes to his dressing room, tears open his wardrobe. There must be something decent here but—how have his things grown so tattered? Shirts out at the elbows, suits greasy and dated. His best day suit was stained by Mrs. Johnson's poodle on their last outing. He spoiled the jacket of his second-best, laying it across a puddle for Mrs. Smyth-Hurst's convenience. How could he have forgotten? Dapper John Codman, with nothing to wear. He reaches deep in the wardrobe for his mourning suit. Perhaps with a pink boutonnière . . . he holds it up, steps in front of the mirror—screams! The suit is fine—too morbid for a drive in the park—but what is this substance on his face? A white crust, caked to his chops and his chin. A gritty paste, a concrete of sorts—perhaps someone tampered with his shaving lather? And now a delayed reaction, a poison weeping from his pores—he will suffocate! He dashes down the hall to the bathroom, bursting in on his wife. Out! she shrills. Out! As though he wanted to see her in the buff—as though he wanted anything to do with her! Emergency! he yells. Murder, you witch! But she pelts him with her sponge. He slams the door and races away, down the back stairs, into the kitchen. He forces his head under the spigot. The water takes the concrete away, dissolves it immediately. He dries his face on a towel, falling into a

kitchen chair. Safe.

The astonished housecats creep out from beneath the stove, and he strokes their backs. Good kitty, says Mr. Codman. That's a mouser. These are his daughter's aging darlings, whose names he once knew. Blackie? Snowie? Each had been christened years ago, at a ceremony held over the bird bath. Little Josephine clutching the cats in old table linens while he touched their heads with water and intoned about the Holy Spirit. They'd persuaded Johnnie that Mother didn't need to know. What fun they'd had back then, what conspiracies! Mrs. Johnson has a giant poodle called Saucepan—Saucie for short. She is the most charming woman of his acquaintance, Mrs. Johnson.

There is a scratching at the other side of the cellar door. Mr. Codman's hand snaps to the handle of his pocket pistol. Who is it? he calls. Move along, at once! He sidles from the table to the wall, extinguishing the electric light. The scratching continues. Be gone! Mr. Codman roars. He throws his bedroom slipper at the door, throws its mate. Shoo! he cries. The noise stops. His slippers are now on the far side of the room. He creeps toward them. He can hear the beast chirruping quietly. It is either a rat or an intruder making rat noises. More likely, he thinks, the latter. He slips his feet back into the damp interiors of his woolen slippers. Have strength, he tells himself. He thinks of Mrs. Smyth-Hurst, who is nervous of strangers but shoots sparrows from her bedroom window. He thinks of the determined look she gets before she takes a shot. She is

so sure of hand! But her charms cannot compare to those of Mrs. Johnson. Mr. Codman shoves open the cellar door and fires. The chirruping beast flips head over paws down the stairs. It is neither man nor rat, but—he cringes—cat.

Mittens! shrieks Josephine from behind him. She is unnervingly quiet on her feet. She shoves Mr. Codman as she sprints past. I'll shoot *you*, you beast! You ought to be locked up!

Yes, declares another voice. Mr. Codman turns to find his wife standing on the threshold of the dining room. Her damp hair, lit from behind, emits a frizzled aura. You *ought* to be locked up, she says. She turns on her heel and glides away, silent as a ghost.

Mr. Codman drops his pistol on the kitchen table. His hands have begun to shake. He crawls to the cupboard beside the sink, drags Cook's bucket forward. She keeps her jug beneath the washrags. He has no idea what it is—whiskey or rye or applejack—but a swig always sets him right. He is sitting sprawled-legged on the floor when his daughter passes by with the cat. Let Father help you, he says. We'll bind that right up. As usual, she ignores him.

MR. CODMAN IS NOT at his best the next afternoon. He had been awakened that morning at an unreasonable hour. Cook's scream was his alarm. She had discovered him curled against the stove, his great coat having fallen open during the night. Goodness, sir, she repeated, after

the initial fright. You shouldn't scream at an armed man, he told her. It is a lesson they go over almost weekly. Mr. Codman has long suspected that Cook is a bit daft, but her puddings are delectable.

Mr. Codman dresses himself to the best of his ability, in a pair of charcoal trousers frayed at the seam and a jacket of lighter gray pinstripe. He seems to have lost weight since the pieces were cut—the trousers are loose at the waist, the jacket slumps on his shoulders. Well, he has not eaten heartily in some months, not since the loss of his boon companion. He and Jack Whitcomb had met at the club back in '85 and dined together nearly every day thereafter. His wife had still been skulking around in mourning back then, three full years after Johnnie's death; his morbid wife hated to see him enjoy himself, as he did with old Jack. During the Whitcomb era, that riotous half-decade, she made Josie eat with her in the upstairs parlor. Meanwhile, downstairs, each dinner became a contest. To what excesses had they pushed one another, he and Jack Whitcomb! But old Jack had given way in the end—not to dyspepsia, or cirrhosis, as they'd always joked he might, but to a brain stroke. The last he'd seen of Jack, the old fellow was lying, slack-faced, in a nursing home. He'd failed quickly; he'd died. Jack Whitcomb, his boon companion.

Mr. Codman pats his face briskly with cucumber water. He can't be tear-stained and sappy when he sees Mrs. Johnson. Sentimentality—his sentimentality—upsets her. He must be strong for her, he reminds himself. A poor

widow, depending upon him for cheer, and for sustenance besides. He can't imagine what kind of man Mr. Johnson must have been, to have left his wife with so little.

It is almost one-thirty when Mr. Codman sets out for the park. Walking, he sees that his suit is not as matched as he'd hoped: the jacket is a bluish-gray, the pants closer to black. But his appearance can only lend greater brilliancy to hers—star of creation, darling woman. He hires a pair of white geldings, and waits just inside the park gate. It is not long until he spots her in the distance. He ties the horses and hurries toward her.

The new dress is not blue at all but rose, with a very becoming décolletage. Her white furs look splendid against its warm hue; her lovely blond curls bounce and wave around her face. Beside her, Saucie is clean and white, and gambols when he sees Mr. Codman. There, boy, says Mr. Codman, catching the dog's paws before they touch his jacket. There's a boy. Mrs. Johnson smiles sweetly as he offers his arm; her gentle weight seems to buoy him. He takes the dog's leash in his free hand.

Mr. Codman, she says. And how do you like my frock?

She has exquisite taste; he is happy to tell her so.

I only hope you aren't depriving yourself for my sake, she says, looking him over with a playful frown.

My dear, he says. I would wear a potato sack if it meant you could have another such gown.

He helps Mrs. Johnson into the hired phaeton—for a moment, her shapely rump is on a level with his face—

and then they are seated side by side, with her arm tucked through his and Saucie behind them on the groom's seat. The horses clip along, and all is just as he'd imagined it.

MR. CODMAN RETURNS home shortly before eight. He and Mrs. Johnson had driven into the country; they had stopped at a farm house for cider and to relieve Saucie. The farmer took them for a handsome married couple (Mrs. Johnson of course still wears her late husband's ring). Later, at a wayside, at dusk, they had caressed beneath the carriage top. He visits Mrs. Johnson at home on Thursdays; it is never soon enough.

He has missed Sunday dinner, as he often does. Cook left a light for him in the kitchen, and he unlocks the back door. He likes to play a game of entering the house as quietly as possible. It is important that he know just how quietly it can be done, so that he can train himself to detect the softest noise. The Codman home will not be burgled, not while he has breath in his body and a pistol in his pocket (and, against those occasions when he is pocketless, he has stashed pistols in every room in the house).

Mr. Codman finds his plate in the oven. He is about to bite into his yeast roll when he hears a distinct female "shhh." He creeps to the door.

David . . . no . . . later . . . father . . . madness.

It can only be his daughter, whispering at this hour.

But—David?

Please, Josie . . . tonight? The man's voice is deep.

Yes, Josephine says. Yes.

Mr. Codman begins to perspire. There is a man in the house, conspiring with his daughter! It cannot be proper. She is twenty-four, old enough to have a lover, but he does not approve of a girl carrying on in such a clandestine manner. He taps the handle of his pocket pistol. Surely he could run this fellow off. What hold could Josephine have on a man that couldn't be broken with a bullet? Assuming that they are lovers and not something else. He heard her say "father." What could she mean, mentioning him? He hears their footsteps; he crawls under the kitchen table. He can only hope they won't notice him beneath its cloth.

Their two sets of feet pass his hiding place. Josephine is wearing crepe-soled slippers; it's no wonder she gets around so quietly. The man wears tall black boots, like a highwayman or a pirate. Absurd affectation! That his own daughter would condone such foppery! The back door opens; they say goodnight. Mr. Codman hears a soft smack as if of lips. His daughter is as shameless as her mother is frigid. Josephine turns the door's three locks—at least she is still conscientious in this respect—and then he hears the oven open and close. A small *tsk* sound.

Here is my plate, his daughter says. How odd of Cook to leave it out in the open, when I told her I wouldn't be back from the theatrical society until seven-thirty. Shall I sit down to eat? She lays hold of one of the chairs, shakes

it. Its legs bump against Mr. Codman's ribs. No, says his daughter. It's nicer upstairs, I think. Goodnight, Blackie, she coos. Goodnight, Snowball. Goodnight—well, I don't guess there's any others around.

His plate lifts from the table above him. The light is extinguished and the door swings open and shut. Theatrical society, indeed! Apparently Josephine is his match for play-acting. Well, he is glad she has wit enough to be sly, if she cannot be sweet. But what a nice girl she was, once—in that long-ago time when Sunday was *their* day at the park. He dries his eyes on the tablecloth. When he is composed again, when he's sure that she's gone, he creeps from his hiding place. She has taken his dinner—a good joke on him. Perhaps he will find a way to tease her about it in the morning. He'll keep her secret, so long as they can reach an understanding about the apportioning of food. Mr. Codman rummages around the kitchen until he finds a wedge of cheese, some molasses cookies. If he must eat scraps he will eat them in style. He pushes through the swinging door, into the dark dining room.

Hello, Father, Josephine says.

He just manages to keep hold of his plate.

Hello there! In the scant light from the foyer, he makes her out, sitting tall and straight at the end of the table. Goodnight to you, he says.

No. Something gleams in her hands. Sit down, Father, and have your dinner with me. She laughs. Not much of a dinner, considering.

I haven't much of an appetite, my dear. He takes his place at the head of the table.

Did you eat with that huzzy?

His hackles rise at the word. I ate a light supper earlier, he says, with a good friend.

A very good friend, says his daughter. She waves her hand. She is holding one of his pistols. What can you be thinking, Father?

Those are for protection, he says. Not stage props.

I was asking about your friendships. I know what *this* is for.

She seems to be pointing the gun directly at him. Mr. Codman lays his own piece on the table. He raises his empty hands.

What's this about, Jo?

I hate to bother you with my expenses, Father, when I know your income is stretched so thin. But I'm afraid this time it's necessary. I need to take a long trip. For my health. And I need you to finance it.

At the word "health," Mr. Codman's stomach seizes. My dear—what do the doctors say?

His daughter laughs. The doctors have not been consulted.

Then what's the problem, Jo? You haven't been . . . indiscreet? He thinks of the man in the black boots.

No, Father. Her voice hardens. I leave because of your actions, not mine. I am sickened by the name Codman.

Well! He looks to the wall for succor, to the ranked

portraits hidden in the dark. You have nothing to be ashamed of in your name, Miss Josephine. Your grandfather was a senator.

And my father is a fool and a philanderer.

A fine allegation to make in the dark. But he breathes, calms himself. You're making mountains out of molehills, child. You'll stay right here and learn to let your parents mind their own business.

I'm asking for what I can as easily take, Father—as my inheritance.

Again, he sees the pistol waver up from the table. She is likely hysterical. He thinks of offering Cook's jug, but thinks better of it.

Josephine, he says, quietly. Where do you reckon you'll go? Don't tell me that you want to be a governess or some foolish thing.

I will go with David, she says. He'll act, and I'll manage him, and we'll get by on the money from you and what he earns.

An elopement? I won't hear of it.

It's not for you to decide, she says sharply. But I won't marry David. Nor any other man I've known. As you must know, the appearance of it helps one get by.

And if I won't give you the money?

I heard a noise, says his daughter. I came downstairs. I saw you struggling with a burglar, and your gun went off. But it didn't hit the burglar.

I see, says Mr. Codman. Do you think you could hit me?

Beside his head, a mirror shatters. The report echoes back from the stairwell.

His ears ring. I see. Then your mother must be in on this, too?

Mother's out like a light. She takes to her laudanum like you take to your whiskey.

Mr. Codman rubs his ears. Since when?

Oh, Father! Josie scoffs. How else is she to sleep through your shenanigans? "Hark" every ten minutes and "fire" and "alarm!" It's enough to wake the dead.

The expression hangs between them like gun smoke. He can't see Josie's face, can't see whether there is any sadness there, or mercy.

I would miss you, he ventures. My own girl.

You might have thought of that sooner. Her voice is still clipped and angry. Will you give me the money and live—or not?

Mr. Codman sighs. It's yours.

Something heavy slides toward him. His checkbook.

Cook keeps a pen in the kitchen, Josephine says.

He lets his daughter bully him into the next room and signs away \$1,000. It's the better part of his liquid assets. The house consumes his monthly dividends and Mrs. Codman swats him away from her fortune. He will make do; there is always a way to wheedle funds from his trusts—the money will grow back, as it were. But under the kitchen light his daughter is dressed for travel. She checks her watch—Johnnie's gold pocket watch—and he

understands that she will leave immediately. His child.

Will you write to your mother? he asks. Will you let her know where you have gone?

She shakes her head. If in a few years I come through with a traveling show, I'll send word then.

She will feel this terribly, says Mr. Codman. Pray for her, sometimes.

His daughter snorts. I'll pray for her to learn temperance and leave you.

Well, he says. When did Josephine become so cool and hard? Maybe you'll pray for your father.

What can God do for you? Didn't he already tell you not to covet your neighbor's wife? And you've decided it's all right, anyway.

Mrs. Johnson is a widow, he says. And so is Mrs. Smyth-Hurst.

She blinks at him. Father, she says, you astonish me.

Good-bye, dear. He opens his arms to her.

Good-bye, she answers, picking up her carpet bags. I hope you'll be happy, at least—as I shall.

She unbolts the three locks, and is gone.

MR. CODMAN WAKES the next morning with an immediate sense of dread. What has changed? He reviews his losses: Johnnie, dead of pleurisy; Jack Whitcomb, lost and gone. And now Josephine, run off. The list only increases. Who is there left that loves him? Who is there

left to love?

He splashes his face at the basin, dons his slippers and his great coat. He's slept late, but Cook will have saved the bottom of the coffee pot for him; Cook might be persuaded to make him some toast. He takes a great pull from his bottle of cheer. There's only Cook left to care for him.

She stops shelling peas when he enters the kitchen. Sir, she says, rising from the table. You'll want some breakfast. An egg, perhaps?

He frowns. Cook doesn't approve of late breakfasts. Toast, he says. Just my toast will do.

Of course. She hurries to the counter, cuts two thick slices from the loaf. It is not like her to be so brisk and solicitous.

Cook, says Mr. Codman. Is something the matter?

She puts the bread under the broiler and turns to face him. Sir, she says. I don't like to be the bearer of bad news, but I don't know where the missus has gone, nor when she'll be back.

Is something wrong with Mrs. Codman? Why wasn't I wakened?

No, sir, says Cook. It's not Mrs. Codman. It's that no one knows what's become of Miss Josephine.

What's become of Josie? What d'you mean?

Cook grips the rim of the sink. When the maid went to her room this morning, there was a ladder of torn sheets hanging out the window, and a postcard from Niagara

mostly burned up on the hearth. Mrs. Codman's gone to the police station, sir.

Rather obvious. But who besides him knows the true extent of Josephine's cunning? Who besides him would question her apparent carelessness? He takes a seat, as if overcome.

My daughter, he groans. It is too much, Cook. But are you sure she's run off? Perhaps she just left the house early this morning?

Perhaps, sir, but it looks very much like an elopement. I'm terrible sorry, sir.

If this is the scene Josie has concocted, he will take up his role. He waves away the toast that Cook sets before him.

Who is the young man? he asks. If she's eloped, there must be a young man missing, too.

Of course, sir, and the missus thought of that. She's after the police to investigate the matter, but they say there's not much they can do yet with Miss Josephine only gone one night. I'm dreadfully sorry, sir.

And a note? Did she leave any word?

Cook shakes her head. Only that burned-up postcard. It's a sad case, Mr. Codman.

He nods. What would he be feeling right now if he hadn't seen her last night, in her traveling suit, in her theatrical mood?

Cook, he says, what happened to the dining room mirror?

Oh, sir! I'd nearly forgotten. That's the principal reason that Mrs. Codman has gone to the police station. When I came in this morning, I found the mirror shattered. By a bullet, sir. And one of your pistols lying here on the kitchen table.

Then she's been kidnapped, he says, and senses Josie nodding from the wings.

Cook wipes her eyes. It's a terrible thing, sir. And with all the precautions that you take—why, didn't you hear anything last night?

Mr. Codman shakes his head. The house was quiet when I came home. I left off my rounds at eleven because I'd grown so unaccountably tired. If only I'd stuck to my routine!

Mr. Codman! Cook cries. You were drugged! Of course you were, to have slept through a gunshot and Lord knows what else! Sir, we must call the doctor right away!

Mr. Codman furrows his brow and nods. Quite so, he says. It will be quicker, though, and perhaps better for me, if I go there myself, straightaway. He takes a desperate bite of toast. Thank you, Cook, for your counsel.

He hurries upstairs. What has he done? He's played his part—he's played dumb—and now how will he explain that check? Well, she could have forged his signature. Or, if he was drugged, perhaps he made it out in a stupor. But the bank will never pay it, if Josephine's disappearance is ruled a kidnapping . . . unless of course he acts the magnanimous father—"the money may help my dear daughter; *that* is the

important thing.” As for the drugging . . . didn’t Jo say that her mother kept laudanum? He pauses outside his wife’s room, listens closely. He can hear the maid humming in his study. He slips quickly through his wife’s door. The bottle sits on her dressing table, nearly full. He takes a great pull from his bottle of cheer, and replaces what he’s drunk with a strong dose of the opiate. In the evening he will notice a strange taste, and submit the bottle to the investigators as evidence. He adds a few drachms of water to his wife’s medicine. Is he helping his daughter or not? *Should* he help her?

It is noon by the mantel clock, and he is not yet dressed for his engagement with Mrs. Smyth-Hurst. How much can he tell her? She is so discreet, and yet. . . . And yet it might be best to keep the truth of it to himself. Assuming, of course, that what he knows is the truth. There is nothing for him but to wear the mismatched grays again. He combs his chops, pats his throat with scent, and rushes down the stairs.

SHE MUST BE sent away, Mrs. Smyth-Hurst is saying. There can be no real question on that score, John. You’ll find her a nice private clinic and say she’s gone off visiting.

Mr. Codman paces the hushed Smyth-Hurst sitting room. He can’t eat her finger sandwiches today; he can’t stomach her damned mineral water and her nervous hands. He has told Mrs. Smyth-Hurst simply that Josephine has

run away.

Cassie, he says. I don't believe that they will find her.

Of course they will, says Mrs. Smyth-Hurst. Where could a girl like her hide? She's gone to the city, thinking to lose herself, but the police have enough sense to check the obvious places first. She's in a cheap hotel, under a false name.

Well, says Mr. Codman. But what if she's disguised herself?

Oh, what if? says Mrs. Smyth-Hurst. What if she's cut her hair, or dyed it? What if she's wearing men's clothes, or speaking with a Scottish accent? She can't keep it up forever, John. These girls act bold, but they always get their comeuppance.

Mr. Codman bites his tongue. It is his own fault that Mrs. Smyth-Hurst should dare to speak of his daughter so—as though she were a common schoolgirl, and not a Codman.

May I have a brandy tonic? he asks, in a strangled way. She mixes him a weak one and he tosses it back. She may have run off with anyone, says Mr. Codman. A gypsy or a circus clown, or *an actor*. He gives Mrs. Smyth-Hurst a significant look.

Even so, says Mrs. Smyth-Hurst. Even so. Did you hear that the minister's daughter has been recovered? And she'd gone quite native, out west. They found her wearing a deerskin and answering to a heathen name.

And they brought her back?

Kicking and screaming, Mrs. Smyth-Hurst affirms. They're giving her bromides and teaching her English all over again.

He swirls the dregs of his brandy. In such a case, Mr. Codman says, wouldn't it be better to let the girl alone?

Oh, John! says Mrs. Smyth-Hurst. Can you bear the thought of your grandchildren growing up in the gutter? A girl is never choosing just for herself, however much she may wish to think so. Your daughter has behaved with gross indelicacy, and you must correct her! You are still her father, are you not? I will not pretend, says Mrs. Smyth-Hurst, that you are blameless in this disaster. You must see now that this Johnson association is beneath you. It lowers you in the esteem of any sensible person.

Mr. Codman harrumphs. He draws his nipper from his coat pocket, then remembers the laudanum and puts it away. He pictures what she's described: a Codman child busking in the streets—or Josie on a golden prairie, with the open sky above her. His head has become an empty drum.

Mrs. Smyth-Hurst lays her hands on his shoulders. She is as small as a girl, as small as Josephine was, at sixteen, on their Grand Tour. He danced with his daughter in five European capitals before Johnnie took sick . . . before Josie knocked aside his arm on that last night in London. Those had been Jo's first ball dresses and she'd been so embarrassed and proud. Mr. Codman puts his hands now on Mrs. Smyth-Hurst's waist, draws her to him gently. She

is no bigger around than a girl, and Jo had a white dress for her coming out; Jo's hair wouldn't take a curl but it looked just right anyway, done up in loops and swirls, and her eyes nearly popping out of her head from excitement. He had been her best beau, then—and now she's gone, his daughter, his first-born, his only living child. He wraps his arms around Mrs. Smyth-Hurst, he squeezes her, he cannot stop himself from breaking down weeping in her skinny little arms.

DAYS PASS WITH no developments. No one answering to Josephine's description has been spotted in Niagara. No news has come from investigators elsewhere, and Mr. Codman begins to believe that his daughter will get away with it. She will outrun them all—the decaying Codman he faces in the mirror, the distinguished Codmans hanging on the walls. His own father takes pride of place above the dining room mantel. Augustus Codman—the picture of liberality! Perceiving that his son was no banker or statesman, Augustus had carried on with his work and left John Codman to find his own way. Now it is *his* turn to let Josephine live in the world. Such permissiveness is hard, in practice, but he bolsters himself by consulting his father's frowning face. *To each his own* had been Augustus's motto. Codman strains now to recall that graveled voice. Instead he is fixed by his father's heavy gaze. No matter what Augustus had said, he'd rested his hopes for the family

business on John Junior. Why else sell the bank so suddenly after the boy died; why else truck off to California? Thanks to his father, Mr. Codman can't even find distraction in a sham job at Codman Bank & Trust. Instead he spends his afternoons shut in the dining room, mulling Josie's secret. Meanwhile, his wife drives daily to the police station. She seems to expand under a new sense of self-importance. Her lady-friends dine at the house most nights, and Mr. Codman is forced to put on his britches or vacate his seat.

His routine is disrupted in other ways, too. Mrs. Smyth-Hurst has gone to the country for a fortnight; it is where she learned to handle a gun, she's told him. Their parting had been strained. It is unclear whether he will continue with Mrs. Smyth-Hurst when she returns. The Johnson affair is one thing; the scandal of a runaway daughter is another, in her eyes. He tried at first to carry on as usual. I've been a very bad boy this week, he'd confessed at the start of their last meeting. But instead of leading him to the bedroom, she'd just nodded. At the end of an awkward quarter-hour, she'd shaken his hand without taking off her gloves, and invited him to call on her visiting day, once she'd returned to town. He tells himself that he does not mind this loss—she is showing the smallness of her character by cutting him now. Still, it would have been manlier to have instigated the break himself.

Mrs. Johnson is the same darling as always. She surprises him with new dresses on Sundays, and with the most charming lingerie on Thursday evenings. Her concoctions

are bewitching—now black satin, now virginal white, now a series of straps and garters that he cannot make sense of unassisted. But something is different. Well—*he* is different. He cannot exercise moderation, these days, with the champagne she always has waiting. Whereas before he did his best to split the bottle evenly, now he swills most of it while she is undressing—and then apologizes, again and again, when he is of no use to her. My baby, she calls him, and nurtures him tenderly. Her restorative potions give him indigestion; her mouth does not move him. He tries his best to mount her, with his head swimming and his stomach clutching, but, ever since Jo ran off, he has been forced to admit defeat. Thursday nights, often as not, he's prostrated on Mrs. Johnson's chaise lounge, nipping off a bottle of bourbon and weeping for the good old days. Saucie licks his face and Mrs. Johnson rubs his temples with cologne. One evening as they are enacting this sad tableau, he notices another change.

What is this? He sits upright and snatches the bottle of scent from her hand.

I'm surprised at your forgetting, she laughs, when you picked it out for me, special!

I never did! The cologne he holds has a tawdry scarlet label and an underlying smell of rubbing alcohol.

Then it must have been the bottle I bought myself, she says. The druggist recommended it when I purchased your . . . goatweed.

He tosses it into her lap. I wish you'd get rid of it and

use what I gave you.

Of course, darling, she says. It was silly of me not to. Your lovie only wants to make you comfortable.

But had she just been silly? Or is Mrs. Johnson sly, too? What might she hope to communicate to him, by soothing his head with that cheap cologne? He is not such a simpleton—or such a prude—that he imagines her not to have other friends, but it is unsettling to think that they might be of a common order. The kind of men who can only spare second-best presents to their mistresses. He will watch her for other such lapses; he will be on his guard against Mrs. Johnson, too. He lets himself indulge in another fit of weeping, there on the velvet chaise with his head in her lap. What is left for him now?

FULLY THREE MONTHS pass this way, in doubt and secrecy and mourning lost friends. Mr. Codman adds Mrs. Smyth-Hurst to his list of dearly departed. She is, after all, as good as dead to him. And Mrs. Johnson . . . well, with Mrs. Johnson, he is now on a death-watch. Meanwhile the \$1,000 sits in his bank account, accumulating interest. When will Josephine cash it? Or is she so flourishing, having left him, that even his money is useless to her?

Mrs. Codman devotes herself to a society for wayward girls. It is closing the barn door when the horse is already loose, but it keeps her busy, and Mr. Codman does not reproach her for her interest. Her absence makes the

house seem bigger. He resumes his daily patrol of the fine old rooms, checking the window latches, the state of his pistols. On one such circuit through the parlor, he finds the maid sniffing over family photos. Both gone! the poor girl sobs. She holds a tinted portrait of the two children, gray overshot with lurid pinks and yellows. What an object to weep over, and yet Mr. Codman does his best to offer comfort. It is hardly proper to console a woman while wearing one's drawers and great coat—and then it is not proper at all, whether done in the parlor or the green bedroom or the linen closet. Mr. Codman learns to look past the maid's rough knees, her freckles. She is most adept at *umm*making the beds, he is happy to find—and if he fails to perform, she shrugs her thin shoulders: that's one less set of linens to bleach.

Mr. Codman is thus surprised to find his wife at home, one afternoon when he returns from the club and the tailor's. His quarterly dividends have come in; he is finally seeing about new suits; he has paid up his club dues and re-opened his tab. John Codman, he'd reminded the bartender, in a voice loud enough for the new members to hear. Let others come and go: he *will* be himself again.

Oh, John, Mrs. Codman says, as soon as he comes through the door. She is sitting, unaccountably, in the foyer. Here you are reeking of alcohol, and we have to get to the station just as quickly as we possibly can!

Looking up at him, his wife seems almost young: neck stretched taut, eyes liquid and bright. For a moment she

could be a girl again. And maybe, too, her playfulness has returned. Mr. Codman smiles: Are we taking a trip?

Not the train station, you fool, the *police* station! They've found her, John—they've found Josephine at last—only, she won't own up to it, and they want us to come down and make an identification. Oh, John, I am trembling all over—feel my hand—and what will we do if she won't know us? John, say something!

Well, he says. His stomach feels peculiar. Where has she been?

They found her in Sault Saint Marie of all places; they say she's gone thin and wild; she'd been left behind by a traveling show, half-dead with pneumonia. Oh, John—if we had lost her, too!

His wife is clutching his arm with her thin, strong hands. It may have been years since she touched him.

She's back, says Mr. Codman. Well, Susan, we must go to her.

Yes, says his wife. Oh, hurry!

The carriage has been waiting for him—Mr. Codman suspects that his wife is afraid to see their daughter alone. In truth, so is he. He had thought her sly enough to get away with it; he had hoped for it. Hoped that Josie might make a fresh start of things, away from her mother's influence. Well, it could happen still. After all, because she's back doesn't mean they will be able to keep her. He will not consent to locking her up, if that's what Mrs. Codman has in mind. And if she has in mind to send them both

away . . . it will be his word against hers that he is of sound mind. A Codman's word means something, after all.

The carriage draws up in front of the station; one of the detectives is at the curb to greet them. Mrs. Codman, he says. The girl has been ill with fever—and I must caution you that you will find her altered.

We have expected as much, says Mrs. Codman. Please, we are ready.

The same talon-hand that held him before takes hold of Mr. Codman's forearm. They are ushered past the desk and into an interrogation room. And then the women's matron is brought in, with Josephine.

Only, it is not Josephine.

Mr. Codman feels his spirits lifting, so that he seems pressed against the ceiling of the dingy room. What a mistake! His wife does not see it at once, she takes this poor creature's hand, and repeats Jo's name, quietly. But the girl only blinks, the girl with pocked skin and a furtive way of glancing around. In the acting troupe, she must have played a crone, with her terrible posture and hollowed cheeks. This is not his quick daughter, no matter that she was found with Johnnie's gold watch. They are the same size, yes, their eyes are the same blue—but this urchin is no more his daughter than the warden is.

Is it she? asks the detective. She was signed in to the last two hotels as J. Codman.

Mr. Codman laughs aloud. His daughter, so careless as to use her own name!

They are somewhat like, says Mrs. Codman. She squeezes the girl's hand again. What is your name, dear?

It's Susan Montgomery Codman, answers the girl, baring her teeth in a smile.

His wife stumbles backward. This is her own full name, of course.

What's that, asks Mr. Codman. What's that again?

As if you didn't know, the girl says. She crosses her arms.

Does she have Josephine's mark? his wife asks the matron. A strawberry birthmark, on the back of her neck?

The matron turns the girl and lifts her black, bobbed hair to show a nasty scar.

Looks as if she's had it removed, ma'am.

No, says Mr. Codman. Anyone could have a wound like that—a boil, a bite.

Ma'am? asks the detective.

Mrs. Codman begins to weep. I don't know! Josephine, if it is you, won't you tell us plainly?

The girl only smiles. Her teeth do not look like Josephine's. Several on the bottom row are chipped. There is nothing familiar about her, head to toe. And yet . . . under what circumstances would Jo have parted with her brother's watch?

John, Mrs. Codman begs. John, do something!

Was anyone with her? asks Mr. Codman. He rubs his chops. Perhaps—a man?

John! gasps his wife.

Well, ma'am, there was somebody—we've got him in

the holding cells. A fellow named David Tucker.

Yes, says Mr. Codman, that's right.

Pardon? asks his wife.

May I see him? asks Mr. Codman.

The detective leads Mr. Codman away from his gasping wife, down a narrow corridor, then unlocks him through to the holding cells. At the end of the line, by himself, waits a tall man with ridiculously long hair. He is not wearing boots.

Tucker! barks the detective, and the man stands. Mr. Codman to see you.

They face each other through the bars.

You were with that girl, says Mr. Codman.

Tucker nods. I was. His deep voice resonates from the stone walls.

What is her name?

Sir?

That girl's name—do you know it?

Sir, her name is Josie Codman.

No, says Mr. Codman. Her real name.

I suppose it's Josephine, sir, but I'm surprised at your asking.

Mr. Codman shakes his head. Mr. Tucker, he says. I'd like a straight answer. My daughter left with you; where has she gone?

Tucker frowns. I don't wonder at your not knowing her, sir, with her hair dyed and . . . and she's been sick for some time. I tried to send her home when she first started

coughing, but she's stubborn, you know. I thought if I put her name on the register somebody might see . . . and now here I am like a kidnapper. We've both been awfully hungry, sir—so if you could see about sending some food back, I'd be in your debt.

But you're already in my debt, says Mr. Codman. If your story is true. What have you done with her money—the money I gave her?

Money? Tucker blinks. There never was any money, sir. We was in a hotel fire in Ladysmith, Wisconsin, and after that we had just the clothes on our backs. And I've been hungry for months now, sir, what with medicines and always sparing the best for her, so if you could just see about some food—

That'll do, says the detective. Mr. Codman's head throbs—what is it lately that's always wrong with his head? There's not much to Tucker—he seems thin enough to slide through the bars of his cell. But the story is growing plumper. Could his daughter—his dear one!—really have survived such mean conditions? Not a prairie or a garret but a scabbling, itinerant existence. Mr. Codman is scarcely aware of the detective pulling him along and then he is in the examination room again. His wife has been given a chair, given salts; she is having trouble bearing up. And the girl is still standing, with her back to him. She's holding herself up more proudly now, head high, and he begins to make out Josephine in her—his unrelenting girl. They will take her with them—they can't leave her in jail with

common criminals. The Codman house—*his* house—will have to accommodate her.

Josie, he says, and the girl turns to him. Her eye twitches.

He steps toward her. Father and Mother have been worried about you. We're glad you are back. And now . . . well, you must regain your strength. We'll take you to the mountains, get you some good mountain air. He coughs; he straightens his tie. We'll take care of you, Jo.

What more can he say to her? He can think of nothing—he can't continue. He has begun to shake, but he doesn't reach for his nipper. Whatever this is, he must bear it: he is, after all, a Codman. And maybe she is, too. An actress, a diplomat, a banker: everything that he has never been. Mr. Codman moves closer to the girl. He looks down at the chestnut roots of her tar-black hair; he traces the blackened curve of her eyebrows. It has been many years since he has been in the world with her, many years since she refused to know him. He adjusts his lapel, he checks the buttons of his jacket. He offers her his arm. The girl reaches out with her thin, familiar hand—and when he begins to weep, she pats him, not unkindly. ☺☹☺



STEPHANIE CARPENTER'S fiction has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *turnrow*, *Avery*, *LITnIMAGE*, and elsewhere. She is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan-Flint. "Mr. Codman's Women" was inspired by "The Codman Will Case," an 1888 article in *The American Journal of Insanity*. That Codman left a great deal of money to his mistresses; his wife and daughter contested his will on grounds of insanity. The fictional Codman shares some of his namesake's predilections—but finds a far different fate. Stephanie is putting the finishing touches on her first novel, set in a nineteenth-century psychiatric hospital in rural Michigan.