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Bittersweet

Written by Colleen McCullough

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Colleen McCullough



BITTERSWEET



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PART ONE

Four New-Style Nurses

Edda and Grace, Tufts and Kitty. Two sets of twins, the daughters of the Reverend Thomas Latimer, Rector of St. Mark's Church of England in the Shire & City of Corunda, New South Wales.

They were sitting on four slender chairs in front of the vast maw of the fireplace, where no fire burned. The very large drawing room was filled with chattering women invited by the Rector's wife, Maude, to celebrate the event looming in less than a week: the Rector's four daughters were quitting the Rectory to commence training as nurses at the Corunda Base Hospital.

Less than a week to go, less than a week to go! Edda kept saying to herself as she endured the embarrassment of being on display, her eyes roaming about because she preferred not to look at her stepmother, Maude, dominating the talk as usual, natter, natter, natter.

There was a hole in the wooden floor to the side of Edda's chair, the last in the row of four; a movement inside it caught her attention and she stiffened, grinning deep within herself. A big rat! A rat was about to invade Mama's party! Just an inch more, she thought as she watched the head, then I'll emit a loud gasp and screech "*Rat!*" at the top of my voice. What fun!

But before Edda could find her voice she actually saw the head, and froze. A polished black wedge with vibrating tongue – huge for what it was! – followed by a polished black body as thick as a woman’s arm – a black body, yes, but beneath it a red belly. And the thing kept on coming and coming, seven feet of red-bellied black snake, lethally venomous. How had it found its way in here?

It was still emerging, ready the moment the tip of its tail was free to make a bolt in some unpredictable direction. The fire tools were on the far side of the hearth, with the oblivious Tufts, Grace and Kitty in between; she’d never reach them.

Her chair had a padded seat but no arms, and its frail legs tapered to fine round points no bigger than a lipstick tube; Edda drew in a great breath, lifted herself and the chair a few inches, and brought the left front leg down on the middle of the snake’s head. Then she sat, hard and heavy, hands clenched grimly around the sides of the chair seat, determined to ride out the tempest as if she were Jack Thurlow breaking in a horse.

The leg pierced its skull between the eyes and the snake, all seven feet of it, reared high into the air. Someone gave a shrill scream and other screams followed, while Edda Latimer sat and fought to keep the chair leg embedded in the snake’s head. Its body whipped, pounded, crashed around and against her, dealing her blows more savage and punishing than a man’s fist, raining on her so thick and fast that she seemed surrounded by a whirling blur, a threshing shadow.

Women were running everywhere, still screaming, eyes filled with the sight of Edda and the old man snake, unable to get past their panic to help her.

Except for Kitty – pretty Kitty, gritty Kitty – who leaped across the hearth wielding the tomahawk used for last-minute splitting of over-chunky kindling. Wading through the lashing snake’s blows, she severed head from spine in two hacks.

"You can take your weight off the chair now, Eds," Kitty said to her sister as she dropped the hatchet. "What a monster! You'll be black and blue from bruises."

"You're mad!" sobbed Grace, running tears of shock.

"Fools!" said Tufts fiercely to Edda and Kitty both. The white-faced Reverend Thomas Latimer was too occupied in dealing with his second wife, in rigid hysterics, to do what he longed to do – comfort his wonderfully brave daughters.

The screams and cries were dying down now, and the terror had diminished sufficiently for some of the more intrepid women to cluster around the snake and inspect its mortality for themselves – an enormous thing! And for all that Mrs. Enid Treadby and Mrs. Henrietta Burdum assisted the Rector in soothing Maude, no one except the four twins remembered the original purpose of this ruined gathering. What mattered was that that strange creature Edda Latimer had killed a lethally venomous old man snake, and it was time to run home, there to perpetuate Corunda's main feminine activity – Gossip and her attendants, Rumour and Speculation.

The four girls moved to an abandoned trolley of goodies, poured tea into frail cups and plundered the cucumber sandwiches.

"Aren't women fools?" Tufts asked, waving the teapot. "You would swear the sky was going to fall in! Typical you, though, Edda. What did you plan to do if the chair leg didn't succeed?"

"Then, Tufts, I would have appealed to you for an idea."

"Huh! You didn't need to appeal to me because our other brilliant thinker and schemer, Kitty, came to your rescue." Tufts looked around. "Stone the crows, they're all going home! Tuck in, girls, we can eat the lot."

"Mama will take two days to recover from this," Grace said cheerfully, holding out her cup for more tea. "Rather beats the shock of losing her four unpaid Rectory housemaids."

Kitty blew a rude noise. "Rubbish, Grace! The shock of losing

her unpaid housemaids looms far larger in Mama's mind than the death of a snake, no matter how big or poisonous."

"What's more," said Tufts, "the first thing Mama will do when she has recovered is serve Edda a sermon on how to kill snakes with decorum and discretion. You created a rumpus."

"Dear me, yes, so I did," Edda said placidly, smearing rich red jam and a pile of whipped cream on top of a scone. "Yum! If I hadn't made a rumpus, the four of us would never have managed to get a scone. All Mama's cronies would have gobbled them." She laughed. "Next Monday, girls! Next Monday we start lives of our own. No more Mama. And you know I don't mean that against you and Tufts, Kitty."

"I know it well," said Kitty gruffly.

It wasn't that Maude Latimer was *consciously* awful; according to her own lights she was a saint among stepmothers as well as mothers. Grace and Edda had the same father as her own Tufts and Kitty, and there was no discrimination anywhere on the remotest horizon, Maude was quick to tell even the least interested observer of Rectory life. How could four such gorgeous children be irksome to one who adored being a mother? And it might have worked out in reality as it had within Maude's mind, were it not for a physical accident of destiny. Namely that the junior of Maude's twins, Kitty, had a degree of beauty beyond her lovely sisters, whom she surpassed as the sun dims the brilliance of the moon.

From Kitty's infancy all the way to today's leaving home party, Maude dinned Kitty's perfections in every ear that came into hearing distance. People's private opinions were identical to Maude's public ones, but oh, how *tired* everybody got when Maude hove into view, Kitty's hand firmly in hers, and the three other twins walking a pace behind. The consensus of Corunda opinion was that all Maude was really doing was making three implacable enemies for Kitty out of her sisters – how Edda,

Grace and Tufts must hate Kitty! People also concluded that Kitty must be unpleasant, spoiled, and insufferably conceited.

But it didn't happen that way, though the why was a mystery to everyone save the Rector. *He* interpreted the love between his girls as solid, tangible evidence of how much God loved them. Of course Maude usurped the praise her husband gave to God as more fairly due to her, and her alone.

The Latimer girls pitied Maude quite as much as they disliked her, and loved her only in the way that bonds females of the same family, whether there be a blood tie or not. And what had united the four girls in their unshakable alliance against Maude was not the plight of the three on the outer perimeter of Maude's affections, but the plight of Kitty, upon whom all Maude's affections were concentrated.

Kitty should have been a brash and demanding child; instead she was shy, quiet, retiring. Twenty months older, Edda and Grace noticed well before Tufts did, but once all three saw, they became very concerned about what they recognised as their mother's effect on Kitty. Just how the conspiracy among them to shield Kitty from Maude gradually began was lost in the fog of infancy, save that as time went on, the conspiracy became stronger.

It was always dominant Edda who took the brunt of the major upheavals, a pattern set when the twelve-year-old Edda caught Kitty attacking her face with a cheese grater, took it off ten-year-old Kitty, and hied her to see Daddy, who was the sweetest and kindest man in the world. And he had dealt with the crisis wonderfully, approaching the problem in the only way he knew, by persuading the little girl that in trying to maim herself, she was insulting God, Who had made her beautiful for some mysterious reason of His own, a reason that one day she would understand.

This held Kitty until the beginning of her last year of school, at the Corunda Ladies' College, a Church of England institution.

By postponing the start of his elder twins' education and advancing that of his younger, all four girls went through primary and secondary school in the same class, and matriculated together. The headmistress, a dour Scot, welcomed the eleven girls who stayed at school into their final year with a speech designed to depress their expectations from life rather than encourage them.

"Your parents have permitted you to enjoy the fruits of two to four extra years of education by keeping you at C.L.C. until you matriculate," said she in the rounded tones of one educated at Oxford, "which you will do at the end of this Year of Our Lord 1924. By the time that you matriculate, your education will be superb – as far as education for women goes. You will have university-entrance grounding in English, mathematics, ancient and modern history, geography, basic science, Latin and Greek." She paused significantly, then reached her conclusion. "However, the most desirable career available to you will be a suitable marriage. If you choose to remain single and must support yourself, there are two careers open to you: teaching in primary school and some few secondary schools, or secretarial work."

To which speech Maude Latimer added a postscript over lunch at the Rectory on the next Sunday.

"What drive!" said Maude with a snort. "Oh, not the suitable marriage! Naturally, girls, you will all achieve *that*. But no daughter of the Rector of St. Mark's needs to soil her hands by working for a living. You will live at home and help me keep house until you marry."

In September 1925, when Edda and Grace were nineteen and Tufts and Kitty eighteen, Kitty went to the Rectory stables and found a length of rope. Having fashioned a loop in one end and flung the rope over a beam, Kitty put her head through the loop and climbed onto an empty petrol drum. When Edda found her, she had already kicked the drum over and hung,

pathetically quiescent, to rid herself of life. Never able to understand afterward where she found the strength, Edda got Kitty free of the choking rope before any real harm was done.

This time she didn't take Kitty to the Rector at once. "Oh, dearest baby sister, you can't, you can't!" she cried, cheek on the silky mop of hair. "Nothing can be this bad!"

But when Kitty was able to croak answers, Edda knew it was even worse.

"I loathe being beautiful, Edda, I abominate it! If only Mama would shut up, give me some peace – ! But she doesn't. To anyone who'll listen, I'm Helen of Troy. And she – she won't let me dress down, or not make up my face – Edda, if she could, I *swear* she'd marry me to the Prince of Wales!"

Edda tried being light-hearted. "Even Mama must have realised you're not His Royal Highness's type, Kits. He likes them married, and much older than you are."

It did get a watery chuckle, but Edda had to talk for far longer and with every ounce of persuasion she owned before Kitty consented to take her problems to her father.

"Kitty, you're not alone," Edda argued. "Look at me! I'd sell my soul to the Devil – and I mean that! – for the chance to be a doctor. It's all I've ever wanted, a degree in Medicine. But I can't have it. For one thing, there isn't the money, and there never will be the money. For another, Daddy doesn't in his heart of hearts approve – oh, not because he's against women in the professions, but because of the terrible time everyone gives women in Medicine. He doesn't think it would make me happy. I know he's wrong, but he refuses to be convinced."

She took Kitty's arm and squashed it between strong, slender fingers. "What makes you think you're the only unhappy one, eh, tell me that? Don't you think I haven't considered hanging myself? Well, I have! Not once, but time and time again."

So by the time that Edda broke the news to Thomas Latimer that Kitty had tried to hang herself, Kitty was malleable clay.

“Oh, my dear, my dear!” he whispered, tears running down his long, handsome face. “For the crime of self-murder, God has a special Hell – no pit of fire, no company in the suffering. Those who commit self-murder wander the vastnesses of eternity forever alone. They never see another face, hear another voice, taste agony *or* ecstasy! Swear to me, Katherine, that you will never again try to harm yourself in any way!”

She had sworn, and adhered to her oath, though all three of her sisters kept a special eye on Kitty.

And the attempted suicide turned out to have happened at exactly the proper time, thanks to the fact that the Rector of St. Mark’s was a member of the Corunda Base Hospital Board. The week after Kitty’s crisis, the Hospital Board met, and among its business was a mention of the fact that in 1926 the New South Wales Department of Health was introducing a new kind of nurse: a properly trained, educated, *registered* nurse. This, saw the Rector at once, was a career fit for a girl brought up as a lady. What imbued the Rector with greatest enthusiasm was that the new, properly trained nurses would be required to live in the hospital grounds so that they were on a moment’s call if needed. The pay after deducting board, uniforms and books was a pittance, but his girls each had a modest dowry of £500, and the pittance meant they wouldn’t need to touch it; Maude was already complaining that four extra mouths at the Rectory were too many to do the housework. Therefore, said the Rector to himself as he sped home in his Model T Ford, why not dangle a nursing career under the noses of his girls? Fit for a lady, living at the hospital, paid a pittance – and (though he was too loyal to voice it, even in his mind) freedom from Maude the Destroyer.

He tackled Edda first, and of course she was madly, wildly enthusiastic; so even Grace, the most reluctant, was relatively easy to enlist. If the thought of being free of Maude worked more powerfully with Grace and Kitty than the prospect of the work itself, did that really matter?

Far harder for the Rector was the single-handed battle he fought on the Hospital Board to persuade his twelve fellow members that Corunda Base should be among the pioneer New Nurse hospitals. Somewhere inside Thomas Latimer's gracefully gangling gazelle of a body there lurked, so forgotten it was positively moth-eaten, a lion. And for the first time in Corunda's memory, the lion roared. Teeth bared, claws unsheathed, the lion was a manifestation of the Reverend Latimer that people like Frank Campbell, the Corunda Base Hospital Superintendent, didn't know how to deal with. So that, highly delighted at what leonine aggression could do, the Reverend Latimer found himself victor on the field.

Sated if not quite gluttoned, the four Latimer twins looked at each other in quiet triumph. The drawing room was deserted and what tea was left in the pots was stewed, but in each young breast there beat a happy heart.

"Next Monday, no more Maude," said Kitty.

"Kitty! You can't call her that, she's your genuine mother," said Grace, scandalised.

"I can so too if I want."

"Shut up, Grace, she's only celebrating her emancipation," Edda said, grinning.

Tufts, who was the practical one, stared at the corpse of the snake. "The party's over," she said getting up. "Clean-up time, girls."

Eyes encountering the snake, now surrounded by blood, Grace shuddered. "I don't mind getting the tea leaves out of the pots, but I am not cleaning *that* up!"

"Since all you did when the snake arrived was screech and snivel, Grace, you most certainly are cleaning it up," said Edda.

Tufts chuckled. "Think that's a mess, Grace? Wait until you're on the hospital wards!"

Generous mouth turned down ungenerously, Grace folded

her arms and glared at her sisters. "I'll start when I have to, not a minute before," she said. "Kitty, you created all that blood by chopping off its head, so you do it." Her mood changed, she giggled. "Oh, girls, fancy! Our days as unpaid housemaids are over! Corunda Base Hospital, here we come!"

"Messses and all," said Edda.

The Reverend Thomas Latimer, who had some Treadby blood but was not a native of Corunda, had been appointed the Rector of St. Mark's Church of England in Corunda twenty-two years earlier. It was that dash of Treadby had made him acceptable to the largely Church of England populace despite his youth and his relative lack of experience; neither of these latter qualities was felt to be a major handicap, as Corunda liked shaping raw clay to its own ends. His wife, Adelaide, was from a good family and was very well liked, which was more than most could say about the Rectory housekeeper, Maude Treadby Scobie, a childless widow with the right blood and an insufferable idea of her own importance.

Thomas and Adelaide settled down to become increasingly loved, for the Rector, extremely handsome in a scholarly way, was a gentle and trusting soul, and Adelaide even more so. Pregnancy followed after a decent interval, and on 13th November 1905, Adelaide gave birth to twin girls, Edda and Grace. A horrific bleed drained her; Adelaide died.

With the efficient Maude Scobie already well versed in all Rectory matters, the Governors of St. Mark's thought that the broken-hearted Thomas Latimer should retain Mrs. Scobie's services, especially given the presence of newborn babies. Maude was six years older than the Rector and on the wrong side of

thirty into the bargain. Awesomely genteel and remarkably pretty, she was delighted to continue as housekeeper. Her job was not a sinecure, but it was a comfortable one; the Governors were happy to fund nurserymaids as well as scrub women.

The entire congregation understood when, a year after his first wife's death, the Rector took a second wife, Maude Scobie. Who fell pregnant immediately and bore slightly premature twin girls on 1st August 1907. They were christened Heather and Katherine, but later became known as Tufts and Kitty.

However, Maude had no intention of dying; her intention was to outlive the Rector and, if possible, even her own children. Now she was the Rector's wife she became far better known within the community, which – with some exceptions – loathed her as pushy, shallow and social-climbing. Corunda decided that Thomas Latimer had been tricked into marrying a designing harpy. A verdict that ought to have crushed Maude, but didn't even dent her conceit. For Maude was the sort of person whose self-satisfaction is so great, so ingrained, that she had no idea whatsoever that she was detested. Sarcasm and irony rolled off her like water off feathers, and snubs were things she administered to other people. With all this came an incomparable luck: disillusioned very early in their marriage, her husband regarded matrimony as a sacred and lifelong contract never to be broken or sullied. No matter how unsuitable a wife Maude was, Thomas Latimer hewed to her. So he dealt with her patiently, humoured her in some things and manoeuvred her out of others, bore her tantrums and megrims, and never once contemplated even the mental breaking of his vows to her. And if, sometimes, a tiny wisp of a thought popped into his mind that it would be wonderful if Maude fell in love with someone else, he banished the thought even as it formed, horrified.



Neither pair of twins was quite identical, which led to fierce debates as to what exactly constituted “identical” in twins. Edda and Grace had their mother’s height and slenderness as well as their father’s ability to move beautifully. Both lovely to look at, their facial features, hands and feet were identical; each had hair so dark it was called black, highly arched brows, long thick lashes, and pale grey eyes. Yet there were differences. Grace’s eyes were widely opened and held a natural sadness she exploited, whereas Edda’s were deeper set, hooded by sleepy lids, and held an element of strangeness. Time demonstrated that Edda was highly intelligent, self-willed and a little inflexible, while Grace was neither a reader nor a seeker after knowledge, and irritated everybody by her tendency to complain – and, worse, to moan. With the result that by the time they started to train as nurses, most people didn’t see how like each other Grace and Edda were; their dispositions had stamped their faces with quite different expressions, and their eyes looked at dissimilar things.

Maude had never really liked them, but hid her antipathy with subtle cunning. On the surface, all four girls were kept equally neat and clean, clothed with equal expense, and disciplined fairly. If somehow the colours she chose for her own twins were more flattering than those bestowed on Adelaide’s – well ... It couldn’t – and didn’t – last any longer than mid-teens, when the girls appealed to Daddy to choose their own styles and colours. Lucky for Edda and Grace, then, that after this adolescent fashion revolution was over, Maude’s selective deafness allowed her to ignore the general opinion that Edda and Grace had far better taste in clothes than Maude did.

Tufts and Kitty (Tufts was born first) were simultaneously more and less identical than the senior set. They took after their mother, a pocket Venus of a woman: short, with plump and shapely breasts, tiny waists, swelling hips and excellent legs. Owning the perfect kind of beauty for girl children, they

were genuinely ravishing almost from time of birth, and it thrilled people to realise that in the case of Tufts and Kitty Latimer, God had used the mould twice. Dimples, curls, enchanting smiles and enormous round eyes gave them the bewitching, melting charm of a kitten, complete to domed forehead, pointed chin and a faintly Mona Lisa curve of the lips. They had the same thin, short, straight noses, the same full-lipped mouths, the same high cheekbones and delicately arched brows.

What Tufts and Kitty didn't share was colouring, and that was the difference between Kitty's sun and Tufts's dim moon. Tufts was honey-hued from the amber-gold of her hair to the peach glow of her skin, and had calm, dispassionate, yellow eyes; she toned in a series of the same basic colour, like an artist with a severely limited palette. Ah, but Kitty! Where Tufts blended, she contrasted. Most remarkable was her skin, a rich pale brown some called "*café au lait*" and others, less charitably inclined, whispered that it showed Maude's family had a touch of the tar-brush somewhere. Her hair, brows and lashes were crystal-fair, a flaxen blonde with hardly any warmth in it; against the dark skin they were spectacular; only time scotched the rumours that Maude bleached Kitty's hair with hydrogen peroxide. To cap Kitty's uniqueness, her eyes were a vivid blue shot with lavender stripes that came and went according to her mood. When she thought no one was watching her, Kitty gazed on her world with none of her twin's tranquillity; the light in her eyes was bewildered, even a little terrified, and when things got beyond her ability to reason or control, she turned the light off and retreated into a private world she spoke of to no one, and only her three sisters understood existed.

People literally stopped and openly stared at first sight of Kitty. As if that weren't bad enough, her mother constantly raved about her beauty to anyone she encountered, including those she

encountered every day: a shrilly simpering spate of exclamations that took no notice of the fact that their object, Kitty, was usually within hearing distance, as were the other three girls.

“Did you ever see such a beautiful child?”

“When she grows up, she’ll marry a rich man!”

The kind of remarks that had led to a cheese grater, a rope, and the decision Edda made that all four of them would join the new trainee nursing scheme at Corunda Base Hospital at the beginning of April 1926. For, her sisters agreed, if they didn’t get Kitty out from under Maude, the day would come when Edda might not be on hand to foil a suicide attempt.

Because the only world children know is the one they inhabit, it never occurred to any of the four Latimer girls to question Maude Latimer’s behaviour, or stop to wonder if all mothers were the same; they simply assumed that if anyone were as ravishing (Maude’s word) as Kitty, she would be subjected to the same remorseless torrent of attention. It didn’t occur to them that Maude too was unique in her own way, nor dawn on them that perhaps a child with a different nature than Kitty’s would have relished the attention. All things being as they were, the Latimer girls understood that it was the main task of three of them to protect the vulnerable fourth from what Edda called “parental idiocies”. And as they grew and matured, the instinct and the drive to protect Kitty never faded, never diminished, never seemed less urgent.

All four girls were clever, though Edda always took the academic laurels because her mind grasped mathematics as easily as it did historical events or English composition. The quality of Tufts’s mentality was very similar, though it lacked Edda’s fierce fire. Tufts had a practical, down-to-earth streak that oddly dampened her undeniable good looks; through their adolescent years she displayed scant interest in boys, whom she thought stupid and oafish. Whatever the essence was that boys

emanated to waft under the noses of girls and attract them utterly failed to stir Tufts.

There was a male equivalent of Corunda Ladies' College: the Corunda Grammar School, and all four Latimer girls associated with the boys in the matter of balls, parties, sporting and other events. They were admired – even lusted after, in school-boy fashion – kissed as much or as little as each desired, but things like breasts and thighs were unplundered.

Rules that were no hardship for Tufts, Kitty and Edda, though irksome for the more adventurous, less bookish Grace. Perpetually submerged in gossip and women's magazines about film stars, stage actors, fashion and the world of royalty as represented by the Windsor family who ruled the British Empire, Grace was not above local gossip either. Her brain was self-centred but acute, she was an expert at wriggling out of trouble or work she disliked, but Grace had one inappropriate passion: she adored the steam locomotives of the railways. If she disappeared, everyone in the Rectory knew where to find her: down in the shunting yards watching the steam locomotives. In spite of her many undesirable characteristics, however, she was naturally kind, immensely loving, and devoted to her sisters, who put up with her tendency to moan as her nature.

Kitty was the one with the romantic imagination, but was saved from a spiritual beauty the equal of her physical by a tongue that could be caustic, or salty, or both. It was her defence against all those rhapsodies of praise, for it took people aback and made them think there must surely be more to her than just a beautiful face. The bouts of depression (though they called it "Kitty's dumps") that assailed her whenever Maude pierced her defences were an ordeal helped only by her sisters, who knew all the reasons why, and rallied themselves behind her until the crisis was over. In school examinations she did well until mathematics reared its ugly hydra heads; she it was who took the essay prizes, and expressed herself extremely well on paper.

Maude loathed Edda, always the ring-leader in opposition to her plans for her girls, especially Kitty. Not that Edda cared. By the time she was ten years old she was taller than her step-mother, and, when fully grown, towered over Maude in a way that complacent lady found as uncomfortable as menacing. The pale eyes stared like a white wolf's, and on the rare occasions when Maude suffered a nightmare, her dream tormentor was always Edda. It had given Maude great pleasure to talk the Rector out of making the monetary sacrifices that would have let Edda do Medicine, and she counted it her most satisfying triumph; every time she thought of denying Edda her life's ambition, inside herself she purred. Had Edda only known who exactly had cast the deciding vote in her parents' debate on her medical career, things would have gone harder for Maude, but Edda didn't know. Caught between the irresistibly iron pressures of a wife and his own conviction that, in denying Edda, he was sparing her a life of pain, Thomas Latimer never breathed a word to anyone. As far as Edda knew, there simply had not been the money.

Edda and Grace, Tufts and Kitty, all four packed the single suitcase she was allowed to take with her into this hospital world, and at the beginning of April 1926 reported for duty at the Corunda Base Hospital.

"Typical!" said Grace mournfully. "It's April Fools' Day."