

# THE KNIGHT-WIZARD

by Janice Law

**T**here was something on the wind, Henry thought. *Something on the wind* was what Armand, the wisest of the Wizards, said in Henry's very favorite book, *The Kings of Seaforth*, and Henry was beginning to understand the feeling. It was the momentary pause when he stepped off the Chauncey Day School bus instead of tearing up the drive, throwing off his cap at the door, and shouting to Bella.

That was the usual program, followed by milky tea and scones or gingerbread. Now he always had a moment when he felt torn between disastrous knowledge and painful uncertainty, the moment when he was afraid that Bella might be gone for good.

Henry had faced that dreadful possibility ever since *The Conversation*. He was sure now that it had been about Bella, although, on the day, he'd been distracted. He'd been imagining himself as his favorite Seaforth character, the Knight-Wizard, the King's son, although not his heir, a situation Bella had not quite managed to explain to Henry's satisfaction. In compensation for his many dangers and troubles, the Knight-Wizard could become invisible.

Henry was fascinated by that possibility and liked to pretend that he, too, could move in a psychic cloud like his literary hero. "It would be wonderful," he told Bella. "The Knight-Wizard must know everything."

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"Likely things he'd be happier not knowing," Bella said.

At the time, he'd laughed, and her caution certainly didn't keep him from pretending. He liked creeping about the big shingled mansion, once the summer "cottage" of his grandparents, now the permanent residence of the Oakleys, whose town house had been sold the previous autumn. His parents might grumble and miss the city, but Henry loved the shore and the big, rambling, money-eating building, so suitable for hide-and-seek and for pretending to be a knight-wizard who was invisible.

Henry hadn't even been out on a Knight-Wizard mission. He had been sitting on the ground, his back against the warm shingles of the house, eating some of the last of the cherry tomatoes that grew intermingled with sunflowers and marigolds along the foundation. His mother was above on the porch with Pam Wing, her committee and fundraising and yacht-club friend, and they were

talking about the boring things they usually talked about: money, principally, and domestic problems, and complicated yacht-club politics, until Mother said, “. . . getting too big, really . . . Oh, very good . . . way above grade level, I’ll give her that. But once he’s in boarding school . . .”

“Expensive just for the holidays,” Mrs. Wing agreed.

“Impossible! Even with the town house sold . . . Besides, we couldn’t keep her occupied. And with tuition as it is!”

“I don’t know what they do with it,” said Mrs. Wing. “The food’s no better than it ever was.” And they both laughed.

Every time he replayed the conversation, Henry felt dread. He didn’t want to go to boarding school. He understood that he’d have to go eventually, but not yet! And if some stroke of fate—*stroke of fate* was what characters in Seaforth called disaster—sent him to school, he didn’t want to lose Bella, who would write him and send him packages of books and treats and who would be waiting when he got home.

What to do? Henry knew enough not to ask outright, sensing that even bringing up the topic might make him seem interested rather than horrified. He tried a roundabout approach with Bella, instead. He asked her where she’d worked before, and she said western Canada, out on the great prairie, with real cowboys and horses and thousands of sheep, which was interesting enough to distract Henry temporarily.

When, on another day, he was more direct, she smiled. Bella had a wonderful smile, and kind, very dark brown eyes, curly brown hair, a nose of character, and a soft voice with a Scots burr. To his *What will you do*

*when I grow up?* she said, “Some other little boy or girl will need me.”

Henry protested that he would always need her, but Bella, who believed in sharing, shook her head. “You’ll see,” she said.

“But not for years and years!”

Bella smiled again but gave no guarantee, and uncertainty awaited him daily at the foot of the drive, as all encompassing as the Great Swamp Mist of Seaforth. More and more Henry envied the Knight-Wizard with his wonderful powers and his ability to get things done, although Seaforth characters never talked about an *ability to get things done*. It was Henry’s dad who was big on ability, and maybe that was why Henry began to shadow his father, a busy man with important things in hand but whose overheard conversations were, to Henry’s mind, even duller than Mother’s.

Until the fateful day, that is. The Seaforth Kingdom, as was predictable for establishments full of armed knights, tended to have lots of fateful days, so, at least in retrospect, Henry knew how to recognize one. It was the day the man arrived, walking up the drive on a warm day in early October. He wore a white shirt and a bright striped tie and had a blazer slung over his shoulder, so Henry knew at a glance that he was not a tradesman or someone looking to pick up work. Although a proper visitor should have worn his jacket even in the heat, the visitor’s speech and his assured manner were right, and Henry, who picked up class clues readily, felt it proper to say, *Yes, Father’s home*. He directed the visitor along the big wraparound porch to the office, where Father made the never-to-be-interrupted calls to his broker and to the home office, which

wasn't at home at all, but up in Boston.

Because many of these calls were about money, and money, or the saving of money, seemed to be connected with Bella's employment, Henry was eager to understand his father's business. Although most of the summer plants had been cleared from along the house, the sunflowers remained, their leaves brown but their big black-and-white seed heads intact. Henry planted himself among them, pretending that he was the Knight-Wizard spying on his archenemy, Lord Gruen.

Unintelligible murmurs from the office continued long enough that Henry was considering a run to the beach when Father raised his voice. "Out of the question," he said. "Absolutely out of the question. I don't know what you think . . ."

"What I know is more to the point." That was the visitor. His voice was curious, neither loud nor soft but penetrating, and Henry sensed that he was missing something going on underneath the words.

The voices dropped again, although Henry could tell that Father was angry. What could be so important about this stranger, who arrived on foot and casually dressed?

"For the last time, you have my answer."

"You'll regret this," the visitor said.

The door opened. Henry slipped between the hairy stalks of the sunflowers. He ran around the house to the cluster of tall hydrangeas that served as the "sea cave" where the Knight-Wizard hid when there were dangers ahead. Although Henry could not have said why, he guessed that he would be in difficulty if his Father realized he had been standing below the porch.

The Oakleys' driveway was a long

curving track, and it was a minute or two before the man emerged onto the road below, walking briskly with his jacket still slung over his shoulder. Then came the sound of an engine, not the smooth purr of the station wagon or Father's Lincoln, but a throaty unmuffled rumble of acceleration, and Henry caught a glimpse of a low-slung red car.

"European, most likely," Bella said, when he described this novelty. "A sports car of some sort. They are popular overseas. There were a couple of imports around last summer."

"It had an open top," said Henry.

"Well, there you are: a summer car, one of the summer people."

"In October," Henry said, and Bella agreed that the visitor was out of season. They found no reason to discuss him further, although when they next walked into the village, Henry was on the lookout for a loud, sporty red car. There was no sign of it, and he might have forgotten it entirely if he had not sat up suddenly in the darkness one night. He'd heard a car, and not just any car but the red sports car with the defective muffler.

Henry climbed out of bed and went into the playroom that separated his bedroom from Bella's. The clock was ticking loudly, the hands just visible in the weak moonlight: well after one. Henry wasn't sure he'd ever been up so late. The house was silent except for the clock, and Henry thought that he'd maybe dreamed the sound of the car—and maybe the sound of a door? Now fully awake, he couldn't be sure, and though he would have liked Bella's opinion, he understood that waking her would not be the best idea. Waking Bella in the middle of the night was for serious stomachaches or fevers or really big nightmares.

Everything feels different at that hour, he told Bella at breakfast, and

she agreed that the wee hours were a strange time. "When your imagination can run away with you," she said. Henry agreed one hundred percent, and yet a little niggling uncertainty remained: Suppose he hadn't been dreaming, but had really been awakened by the sound of the unwelcome visitor's car? What would that mean?

The next day was Sunday. On Sundays the Oakleys had an early dinner and Henry ate with his parents instead of eating in the kitchen with Bella and Adele, the cook. For Sunday dinner, he wore a jacket and tie and sat up straight and answered Mother's questions about schoolwork and usually Father's questions about sports. But when his father was uncharacteristically quiet, Henry felt nervously eager for a topic of conversation and mentioned the red sports car.

"Have you seen it? It doesn't have a muffler or has a bad muffler." He imitated the sound, until Mother made it clear that this was a bad idea at the table.

Father shook his head. "You get all sorts here now in the summer," he said and helped himself to some more of the roast. It was gospel that the summer people were no longer the "best type" and that the whole area had been "going downhill" since the war.

"It's not summer now," Henry said. "The man was here the other day, the owner, I mean. I saw the car drive away. An open-topped car. Bella said it was a sports car."

Father gave Henry one of the close, sharp looks that meant trouble. "Bella saw it too?"

"I described it to her and she says they have a lot of them overseas. Fun cars—aside from the noise," he added.

He wanted to ask if they might have such a car but Father shook his head. "No one has been up to the house with a red sports car."

"He left it parked down on the road," said Henry, who could be stubborn when contradicted. "I saw him."

"Could have been anyone," Father said, and something in his voice stopped Henry from saying that he'd not only seen the man at the house but that he thought he'd heard the car again. It bothered him that Father had as good as lied about the visitor, who indeed hadn't *driven* up to the house but who had certainly come and gone and run a noisy car. It bothered him even more that there was tension in the house, rather like the cloud that had descended before they sold their place in the city.

Once again, Mother and Father were blaming each other for mysterious failings that neither Henry nor the Knight-Wizard seemed capable of unraveling, although surely money was at the root of it. "The place is too big for them," he heard Adele say one day when he came quietly into the kitchen. "You'll see that whatever they get for it won't be enough and what it will mean for us . . ."

"There's Henry," said Bella quickly. "You must have smelled cake baking, Henry."

He said he had, although he hadn't really, having been drawn by the particular soft voices that adults use when they don't intend to be overheard. Adele cut him a slice of cake and asked him if his school didn't feed him lunch.

"He's a growing boy," said Bella.

"You need cake to grow," said Henry and all three laughed, but soon enough the cloud descended again. *You said you'd end it, he heard Mother say one day. And haven't I? Haven't I taken care of everything? That was Father. In what a way! We're worse off than ever, Mother said. And how long are we going to have to live under . . .*

The household tension gave Henry a stomachache, and he began to be rude to Adele and even sometimes to Bella. When she scolded him one Saturday, he burst into tears like a baby and couldn't stop. Bella put her arms around him. "Whatever is wrong, Henry?"

"I don't know," he wailed. "But ever since that man came in the red car there's been something wrong."

Bella patted his back and explained that grownups had worries and problems just like children, and that his father had lots of important business dealings. "They can't all be profitable, you know. Lots of things can happen besides the man you saw." After she explained about coincidences and how they were different from causes, Bella made him go apologize to Adele, which surprisingly made him feel better. When Bella said they could take the rowboat out and "clear away the cobwebs," Henry knew that he was forgiven.

He loved rowing and the water and always begged to go farther out in the bay, something Bella, who only swam the dog paddle, always resisted. As a compromise, they packed a picnic, and she said that they could row along the shore to a cove that was exactly like the one that lay below Seaforth Castle. Because the private beach on the cove was off limits in season, Henry liked to pretend that it belonged to the Knight-Wizard's archenemy. But once the big summer place was closed for the winter, only the caretaker, Jessie Urquehart, remained in residence and the cove became where the Knight-Wizard beached his longboat.

When she got lonely in the big house, Jessie visited Bella, who repaid her visits with picnics on the shore, just below the mansion's fine garden. Jessie was a short, stout Glaswegian

who always contributed a thermos of tea and the homemade macarons that were Henry's favorite. The three of them would have a cheerful lunch on the wrought-iron bench that overlooked the cove before Henry went exploring and Bella and Jessie had what they called a *wee natter*.

Henry was wading around the wrack-covered rocks and peeking into the pools that had formed when the tide went out, trying to skip any flat-tish stone he found across the calm water. Whenever he got one to skip more than twice, there was applause from the bench, and Henry would turn and wave. He had just managed a four-skip throw when a flash of color caught his eye. Something too bright for seaweed was floating in the water, wavering just below the surface on the soft heave of the tide. He waded out, soaking his shirt and his sweater to the elbow, to grab the striped ribbon that turned into a bright red, blue, and gold striped tie.

In the Seaforth stories, this would be considered a bad omen, and Henry felt his breath jump the way it sometimes did when he was stumped on a test question or knew he had to stand up to one of the bigger boys at school.

"What have you got?" Bella called, for she was cautious about what he scavenged at the beach.

"Just an old tie." He would have thrown it back if Jessie hadn't called, "Hold on a minute, son," and come bustling down to the edge of the water. She examined the tie carefully. "That's expensive silk. Not long in the water either." She showed the label to Bella. "The police will be wanting that."

Bella and Henry were surprised.

"You hadn't heard? They found a car they think belonged to that man who disappeared a week ago. Didn't you see the story in the paper?"

Bella shook her head. The household took the *Boston Globe* and the *Wall Street Journal* in preference to the local paper.

"You'll have the police at your place too, I should think. They're working their way down the coast was what the sergeant told me. Showed me a photo, asked if I knew the chap, if I'd seen him even, and wanted to know if anything odd turned up on the shore. Yes, they'll be wanting this for certain."

Bella agreed that was likely. Henry bit his lip and said nothing.

"I'd better give them a call," Jessie said. She wrung the salt water out of the silk and hustled through the fading rose gardens to the house.

"News is like a sweetie in her mouth," Bella said when she was gone. "A bit of an adventure for us, right, Henry?"

"I want to go home," he said. Without another word, he hoisted the stone that served as anchor into the boat. He pushed off from the shore before Bella could collect their picnic hamper, and she got the bottom of her skirt wet getting aboard.

They each took an oar, but though they usually rowed nicely together, Henry was all at sixes and sevens, splashing and losing the rhythm. When they were in the bay and the current was running and making the going hard, Bella stopped rowing and asked what was wrong.

"The man who came with the sports car wore a tie like that."

"Dear, it's a regimental tie or a school tie or just stripes! There are lots of ties like that. We don't know what sort of car they found either."

"Jessie didn't know?"

Bella shook her head. "She'd have told us if she knew."

Henry managed a smile at that and rowed more calmly so they got home in reasonable time. They found Adele,

as gossipy as Jessie, full of news. An officer had come, asking about visitors, strangers.

"Routine," said Bella quickly. "We were up at the cove, and Jessie said police had come by there too."

"Perhaps she could tell them more than me and Madam," said Adele. "But they'll have to come back."

Henry spoke up. "Why do they have to come back?"

"To speak to your father, I shouldn't wonder. They'll want to talk to everyone, seeing they've found that car."

"What kind?" Henry asked before Bella could intervene.

Adele shook her head. "They didn't tell me anything, but it must have been something unusual, for they seemed very sure it belonged to that chap who's missing."

Henry felt almost sick with anxiety, although he would have been hard pressed to explain why. Bella was unable to comfort him, even though she warned him several times about letting his imagination run away with him. But this wasn't imagination and he wasn't making anything up. He just felt *something on the wind*, even after a cheerful Sunday dinner when Father appeared perfectly relaxed.

"Were you frightened, Old Boy?" he teased Henry. *Old Boy* was the term when Father was in an especially good mood. "Most boys are excited by seeing policemen at work."

"I didn't see the policemen," Henry said, keeping his eyes on his plate. "And I didn't like finding that tie in the water."

"Sharp eyes." Father's tone hinted disapproval. "But a good thing," he added, causing Henry to look up. "Our missing chap must have discarded it, trying to suggest a fatal dip, I reckon. I imagine he was trying to escape debt collectors—of one sort or another."

"But he couldn't have gone far without his car."

"The whole point," said his father impatiently, "would be to suggest that he was gone for good. God knows, a fresh start is sometimes very desirable."

Mother gave him a look, causing Father to turn surly and pour himself more wine, effectively closing the topic.

Everything would be all right, Henry told himself, and yet, there was *something on the wind*, he knew it. Mother was on the phone too much; Father drank more than was good and took unusual trips to New York, and a man with a clipboard arrived to look over the house. More unsettling than anything else were the regular visits from the police, always when Henry was at school, so that neither he nor the Knight-Wizard understood what was going on.

Then came the terrible day, the day that separated Henry's life into two parts, before and after, security and uncertainty. He got off the school bus and ran up the drive, determined to put doubt behind him. He stamped on the porch steps, extra noisy so that Bella would hear him even if she was on the second floor, threw open the door, and called, *Hello!*

No answer. "*Bella!*"

"That you, Henry?" That was Adele's voice.

"Where's Bella? What's happened?"

Adele hurried into the hallway. "Bella's gone home to Scotland. Her mother's not well, and Madam managed to get passage for her at the last minute."

"Oh," said Henry, struggling to be the grown-up boy he knew was required at the moment. "I am sorry about Bella's mother. But she's coming back, isn't she? When is Bella coming back?" He clutched Adele's hand.

"I don't know the arrangements,

dear. You'll have to ask your mother."

Henry broke away and ran upstairs to Bella's room. He found it stripped bare, closet empty, the hatbox for her treasured Sunday hat gone; summer dresses gone; winter boots and what she called her dancing shoes gone. Bible gone, books of poems gone, photos of her mother and some of her many brothers and sisters, all gone. She wasn't coming back.

He found Mother in the flower room doing vases for a dinner party. "You're too old for a nanny, and with your new school you'll be away much of the year. How would Bella fill her time?"

Henry insisted he liked day school and he wanted Bella.

"The timing was fortuitous," his mother said. "We were able to make arrangements for you to join in the middle of term, a great concession on the school's part, thanks, no doubt, to the Oakley Arts Building." She raised her eyebrows to emphasize the power and influence of Henry's grandparents. "It would have been so desirable for Bella to stay a week longer to see to your clothes and what not, but Adele and I can manage."

"She didn't say goodbye," Henry cried.

"I only got the wire about her passage this morning. Your father drove her to the dock before lunch. Most inconvenient, but the Cunard line waits for no one."

"You wanted rid of Bella and you want rid of me," Henry shouted, grief making him reckless. "And I know why."

He didn't, really, having only snatches of conversation and his imagination but no conclusions, although maybe the Knight-Wizard had, because the cloud of suspicion never lifted. Not after Henry was settled at his boarding school. Not after the trail of the missing man, indeed

the owner of a red sports car, went cold. Not after Adele helpfully remarked that the man was “probably halfway to China” by now and that, anyway, “there was no case without a body.” Not even after the beach house was sold, Adele retired, and the family moved back to the city. There, Mother was out day and night and Father drank too much, which was strange since their money

troubles had magically disappeared. Henry knew that money had ceased to be a problem, because he was indulged in everything except the one thing he wanted: Bella’s return, which was really a return to his old life before the stranger arrived with threats and Father lied and the Knight-Wizard whispered that *something was on the wind*. ●

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### THE JURY BOX (Continued from page 87)

\*\*\* Susan Scarlett, *Murder While You Work*, Dean Street Press, \$17.99. Susan Scarlett wrote twelve novels, mostly romance, without revealing her true name: Noel Streatfeild, well known for her “Shoe” children’s books (such as *Ballet Shoes*). Her only mystery, *Murder While You Work*, was published in 1944. During WWII, a young woman leaves hospital work for the challenges of an English village, a munitions job (reflecting the author’s WWI experience), and a likely serial killer in the vicinity. In this whydunit and howdunit, Scarlett/Streatfeild deftly portrays the steadfast heroine undeterred by a domestic monster, danger, and even blossoming love. Don’t miss the eccentric but levelheaded aristocrat with atypical dogs.

\*\*\* E.C.R. Lorac, *These Names Make Clues*, Poisoned Pen Press, \$14.99. Detection Club member E.C.R. Lorac (a.k.a. Edith Caroline Rivett) employs lively elements of Golden Age detection in this clever 1937 novel chockful of anagrams, repulsive victims, and colorful suspects with multiple pseudonyms. Chief Inspector Macdonald and other guests are invited to a publisher’s house party/treasure hunt; after a power failure, a guest is found dead, and another death later muddies the case. Lorac’s crisp prose, vivid characters, intricate plotting, and a narrative approach that suggests Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* are just a few of the pleasures offered.

\*\*\* Eleanor A. Blake, *The Jade Green Cats*, Coachwhip Publications, \$14.95. Journalist Eleanor Blake (a.k.a. the mother of actor Wally Cox) salutes her cynical Chicago newspaper world in this snappy tale originally published in 1931. Reporters John Kymmerly and Dawn Carson pursue clues to an obsession of a doctor and his associates with two green cat figurines, which is marked by death. Amid their developing relationship, Kymmerly and Carson are spurred by the allure of a scoop and the desire to protect the poor and vulnerable.

\*\*\* J. Harvey Bond, *Mike Lanson for Murder*, Coachwhip Publications, \$29.95. This collection of four energetic and entertaining mysteries with the shrewd and intrepid crime reporter Mike Lanson from the Creston (clued as Kansas) *Gazette* reflects the background of author J. Harvey Bond (a.k.a. Salina-born journalist and cartoonist Russell Robert Winterbotham). In *Bye-Bye, Baby!* (originally published in 1958), Lanson’s investigation of the mysterious death of his newspaper’s former editor triggers two additional deaths. In *Murder Isn’t Funny* (originally issued in 1958), Lanson takes on the shooting of a cartoonist linked to missing comic-strip artwork. In *Kill Me with Kindness* (originally published in 1959), Lanson probes the killing of an anti-vice crusader who was a busy blackmailer. (Continued page 130)