

## Green Gables

By Dana King

Harvey Hastert's story is about a woman. Call her what you want: a dame, a broad, a skirt, a tomato, a babe. Just not a frail. This one was definitely not a frail.

Harvey made a mint selling equipment that fell off the backs of Patton's trucks driving across France and Germany, earning ten times his military pay on the black market by January of '46. Any normal crook would have sold his sister to a Tijuana impresario to stay in Germany. Harvey only saw homesick soldiers tired of occupation duty, agitating for a ticket on the next boat Stateside. And if someone else wanted it, Harvey had to have it.

That's how he got his extra Luger. The first one was mint: Harvey took it off a dead SS officer when he stole the guy's Iron Cross. He was showing it off to Luther Brumm when he noticed little Shep Hickey nosing around a couple of dead Krauts. Shep was from Kentucky - such a 'billy, he showed up at the induction station in his bare feet. His daddy told him the Army will give you boots, boy, leave your'n here. Kid so shy he even stammered on words that started with S. Harvey went to check out what interested Shep and saw the other Luger still in one Kraut's hand. The gun was in Harvey's pocket ten seconds later, Shep sniffing around like a kid with his candy stolen.

So Harvey's nature called him home, just because everyone else wanted to go. Got him involved in one of those demobilization riots the Army doesn't talk about, American soldiers in the streets all over the world, wanting to go home. California wasn't even home enough for some of them; they rioted there, too.

Harvey lucked out at his court-martial. He'd been so busy stealing stuff he didn't realize he had enough points to go home if he'd kept his mouth shut. The Army had plenty to do without providing three hots and a cot for a malcontent they were going to ship out, anyway. They traded his stripes for a general discharge and called it even.

Harvey started going to the Green Gables Ballroom in West Mifflin a month after he got back. No pressure to look for a job, he could live a couple of years off what he brought back if didn't spread it around too much. Kept wearing the uniform, general discharged be damned. Made him look like he was fresh off the boat. The girls liked that and Harvey was tired of paying for it. Every *fraulein* he knew was on the make for something: cigarettes, food, even chocolate. Harvey screwed a girl in Stuttgart once for a can of Heinz ketchup and a Hershey bar he'd stolen out of a POW's Red Cross package.

The skirts loved medals. The court-martial killed his chance for a Good Conduct, but Harvey still had a unit decoration and an ARCOM he got for moving more diesel farther and faster than any other supply sergeant. The medal was a bonus; Harvey made five hundred bucks profit on the champagne and scotch he had stashed in the trucks. The Bronze Star he filched when its rightful owner stepped on a mine was gravy.

Harvey went to the Green Gables two or three nights a week. He didn't mind spending money on the girls and he had a lot more of it than most GIs coming home. Harvey was cooling, considering his options. The end of the war freed up a lot of money. Schmucks were climbing over each other to work for it. Harvey only had to find a way to pick up what fell through their fingers.

The first time he saw her was a Thursday night, May 9th. Good-looking, not a knockout. Nice figure, brunette hair cut in a bob. Every time her dance partner twirled her, the polka dot dress showed more thigh than the Hayes Office would let you see in a movie.

She didn't lack for partners. A dance or two with one guy, then one with another. She doled out slow dances like water in Death Valley, never ignoring anyone so much he'd lose interest.

There were ten girls as pretty in the Green Gables every night. This one had more. Call it charisma, an indefinable something that attracted men even if they knew it was a bad idea. Her sugar drew them like bees. Harvey had to have her.

He moved like smoke through her admirers, not waiting his turn, not quite cutting the line. When he got his dance, he saw she wasn't as tall as he'd thought, and her nose was bigger. She still wore that aura like perfume.

Her name was Stella Postelwaithe. "Like Stella Dallas," she told Harvey.

"Who?"

"You know. Like in the movie. Barbara Stanwyck?"

Harvey heard of Barbara Stanwyck. He didn't know Stella Dallas from Stella D'Oro. Stella Postelwaithe sounded like some stuck-up society dame, which this one definitely was not. Hers wasn't the kind of class money bought. Stella wore it like the polka-dot dress: a nice introduction, but the real attraction was the possibility of seeing her without it.

Just two dances that first night. Stella made a pout when the second ended. "I have to go," she said. "I come here every Thursday night." She leaned in and pecked Harvey's cheek like he was her brother. Not quite like a brother. Second cousin, maybe.

She left with an older guy, a heavy-set stiff in an expensive suit who looked like he might be a gimp. Hard to say for all Harvey saw of him. Her leaving with him made Harvey want Stella even more.

He made appearances Saturday night and the next Tuesday. He took a girl home on Tuesday and thought of Stella. Spent all day Wednesday and Thursday thinking about Thursday night.

He got to the Green Gables earlier than usual with no desire to be part of her entourage. Once Harvey knew what he wanted, knew what the others wanted, he knew how to get it. Too fast and she'd see it coming and string him along. He'd play Stella Postelwaithe like the prize fish in the pond. Which she was.

They met at the Green Gables six weeks running. Each time they danced more, and each time she left with the fat guy. He seemed fatter every time Harvey watched Stella leave with him. Definitely a gimp. Must be loaded, too. Just walked in and Stella would finish that dance and beg off for the night.

Harvey asked about him on the fourth Thursday. Stella put him off. He pressed a little the next time and a little more the week after that. Each time she put him off with less enthusiasm.

The seventh Thursday was June 20th. Harvey remembered because it was his old man's birthday. When Harvey asked her to dance she took him by the arm and said, "Let's get out of here."

He took her to a joint a few blocks away, a nice place where the booze wouldn't break him. Harvey drank highballs; Stella favored gimlets. After the usual banter, Harvey pushed ahead with the sixty-four dollar question.

"Do we have to talk about him?" Stella said. "This is so nice."

"We have to sooner or later," Harvey said. "It took me six weeks to get you all alone and you still have to be back to meet him at ten-thirty. You married, or what?"

"What if I was?"

Harvey gestured to include the whole lounge. "We're here, aren't we? This can go either way. It's up to you."

Stella looked around the dark bar. "Not here. Is there someplace we could go? Close by?"

"Sure. The Green Gables?" Harvey paused for effect. "Or someplace else?"

Stella didn't pause at all. "Someplace else."

So there it was. Harvey knew a flop a few blocks away that didn't advertise the hourly rates in neon. He paid the check and they took a cab. So Stella wouldn't be seen.

No one asked any questions of the single man with no luggage taking a room. Harvey let Stella in a side door. They didn't talk much upstairs, not after the polka-dot dress came off, which was before the light reached every corner of the room. Harvey barely got Stella back to Green Gables in time to meet the gimp. She hadn't even told him the guy's name.

They didn't waste time going to the bar the next week. Harvey brought a hip flask with him and Stella packed a few cosmetics in her purse so she'd look more like a woman flushed from dancing than a cat in heat.

The third week Harvey and Stella were out the side door before the band got all the way through "Come Rain or Come Shine." They knocked off the flask almost as fast as Stella lost her dress.

When the time came to leave, she sat on the edge of the bed with her stockings half up. Harvey stopped knotting his tie when he saw her just sitting there.

"You know I don't want to rush you," he said, "but we have to get a move on."

"I know." Stella pulled a stocking over her knee, hooked it to her garter. Then she started to cry. "I hate this."

"Hate what? We don't have to come here. It's just that it's so close and we don't have much time."

"No, the place is all right." Stella wiped an eye with her wrist. "It's this part I hate. Going back."

"Then don't go. You never said one way or the other, but if this guy's your husband, you're not a fanatic about it. Leave him."

Stella breathed deeply and looked away from Harvey, then back, then away again. "It's my father."

"What about your father?"

"My husband." Stella spit it out like a bad cherry. "He's a big shot in the little town I'm from. Brookville. Ten years ago my father made some bad crop investments and had to mortgage the farm. Things didn't turn around and Dad couldn't pay the note."

Harvey looped the tie around his neck for a second attempt at the knot. "So? This guy run the bank or something?"

“Or something.” Stella finished fastening the first stocking. “It was a personal loan. If Dad defaults, title goes to...to...I don’t even want to say his name. God, I hate him!”

Harvey checked the knot in a mirror over the dresser and slid into his jacket. “He’d do that to his father-in-law?”

“Not so long as Dad *is* his father-in-law. That’s why I can’t leave him.” Stella stood and gripped Harvey’s arms, rested her head on his chest. “I hate the thought of that slob on top of me, especially after I’ve been with you. It makes me sick to think what he did while you were winning those medals you wore the first time I saw you.”

Harvey grunted something Stella took to mean she should go on.

“His father – he’s dead now, thank God, he was as bad as my husband – got him classified 4-F. We’d see them driving their big cars. Always had plenty of gas. Sugar, butter, whatever everyone else had rationed.”

“There’s nothing you can do?”

“Not while Dad’s still alive. He’d have nowhere to go if David – that’s his name, David Postelwaithe – threw him out. I’d lose everything if I left, too, but I wouldn’t need much. A good man. I could be good for the right man.”

Harvey took a second to add things up. He knew there was more here, just not how much. “This sounds pretty dramatic,” he said while Stella finished with her stockings and slid that polka-dot dress over her head. “I mean, Mack Sennett would have you tied to the railroad tracks by now.”

Stella slapped his face. “You don’t believe me? You think it’s funny, I made this up as a joke for you? Go to hell.” She picked up her purse. “I’m going to be late. Let me out, please.”

“Whoa! Slow down.” Harvey almost rubbed his face, redirected the hand to take Stella’s wrist. “I didn’t mean anything by it. You have to admit it’s kind of a screwy story to feed someone all at once. Is there something I can do to help?”

Stella smiled, her eyes wet. “You are helping. These little two-hour vacations you give me every Thursday help. You give me something to look forward to for the rest of the week. There’s nothing more you can do. It’s up to me, since Dad had the stroke. I just have to find some way to get Dad out from under.”

They avoided the subject the next Thursday and it hung over them like snow clouds, cold and dismal. Harvey waited until they were almost dressed again before he brought it up.

“How’re things with your old man and the farm?”

“The same.” Stella kept getting dressed while she answered. “They won’t change. The doctor says Dad won’t ever get better. He can take care of himself pretty well, but he can’t work, and he can’t afford to take on any more help. When he dies, the whole farm reverts to...him.”

“And you.” Stella shot Harvey a look. “As the wife, I mean.”

“I suppose, though I’ll never see the farm again. He’ll sell it before Dad’s cold. Then I’ll have nothing. Not Dad. Not the farm. Just...him.”

“That’s a bum deal.” Harvey tried to slide it in so smoothly Stella would answer without thinking. “What kind of money are we talking about here?”

“A hundred and forty thousand dollars,” she said, buttoning her dress.

A hundred and forty grand! And that not the full value of the farm, just what the old man had to borrow. The economy was heating up with so many coming back from the service. So was inflation. Harvey's German nest egg got smaller every month. A chance to move in on that kind of dough wouldn't come along again, not for a guy in Harvey's league.

This was one of those times when you found out who had their boots on. Harvey knew opportunity only knocked once; this was the first time it ever danced with him. He checked her story. There was a Griffin farm in Brookville. Big one. He drove his Packard up there, two-and-a-half hours each way. Read the plats and tax rolls. The place worth at least two hundred and the old man already had the down payment on his final, permanent address. Harvey didn't push for too much on the mortgage angle. People in small towns don't share secrets with strangers.

The way Harvey saw it, Stella's father was the fly in his ointment. Harvey didn't know if the old man would die in two weeks or two years. When he went, Stella would be as free as she'd ever be. Postelwaithe could do what he wanted. Stella would get over losing the farm when she had no more family there.

Of course, she'd have nothing. Someone like Postelwaithe would have no trouble rigging the divorce. He could even trump up some evidence to show Stella had been sleeping around, how he was the injured party. The fact that Postelwaithe wouldn't have to trump anything up never entered Harvey's mind.

If Harvey wanted Stella *and* the money – which he did – it was Postelwaithe who had to go. Harvey could hire it done. Frank Amato was thinking of giving him something better to do than making money in feds and twos loan sharking. That meant someone else would know. Frank could move in on him, maybe even rat him out... Harvey had to do it alone.

He smiled thinking of it. Through North Africa, Sicily, France, and Germany he'd never fired his weapon except on a qualifying range. Didn't know where it was half the time. Now he was home, safe and sound, planning to kill a man.

He'd do it, too.

He almost killed that Jew adjutant in Metz, the one who threatened to write him up for not getting ice cleats forward quick enough to support Patton's push to Bastogne. Threatened to send Harvey forward himself, Harvey busy trying to get a thousand cartons of Luckies into Germany while things were still in flux. Funny, he would've used the Luger for that one, had it all planned out, but Captain Greene found something more important and left Harvey to fight the war his own way. Postelwaithe wouldn't be so easy.

Harvey saw only one downside: he might get caught. Everything else was aces. Stella would be free, with all of Postelwaithe's money, the farm waiting in the wings for the old man to cash in so Harvey and Stella could cash out. Harvey could play golf all day if he wanted, shoot pool all night, finish up with some Stella. Frank Amato would find a place for someone with Harvey's initiative if things got boring.

Casing the job was easy. People were used to seeing him around Green Gables, so he came and went as he pleased. Harvey'd excuse himself to use the mens or catch a smoke, sneak outside to explore the alley beyond the side door where Postelwaithe always came for Stella.

One Thursday in August he brought Stella back early, said he had someplace to be. She looked at him funny, like maybe her feelings were hurt. Didn't say anything. Harvey didn't worry about it. He'd make it up to her in spades.

He needed to know what time Postelwaithe arrived, and if he came alone. Harvey's reconnaissance had found a good place to see the door without being seen himself, next to a trash bin near the service entrance.

Postelwaithe pulled up in a Caddy at 10:20, sat in the car and smoked until exactly 10:30. Alone. Harvey kicked himself. He could have taken Postelwaithe right there and been done with it, but he hadn't brought the extra Luger and didn't have his escape route planned yet. Harvey made himself calm down; he'd be back. Three more times Harvey checked Postelwaithe's habits. Sometimes he came five minutes earlier, sometime five minutes later. Always alone.

By mid-September Harvey was ready. Cancelled his date with Stella. Said he had to work. Met a couple of friends, right gees who'd know on their own to say he left them later than he did, if it came to that. Picked up a car from a curb in Lawrenceville where the owner really should have known better. Mapped a route back to his car that gave him a chance to dump the Luger in the river. Even if the cops came around to him, his hadn't been fired, and the slugs wouldn't match. Worst could happen was it would look like a frame.

He crouched by his trash bin at ten o'clock, listening to the occasional rustlings of rats on the inside. Overcast night, no light except what the streetlights showed, which wasn't much after Harvey broke two of them.

Postelwaithe parked at 10:17 and sat in the car smoking. Snatches of Frankie Carle's "Rumors are Flying" floated through the alley. Harvey saw the glow of Postelwaithe's cigarette when he turned his head, smoke wafting out the driver's window.

At 10:28 by Harvey's watch the car's dome light came on as the door opened. Postelwaithe walked around the front of the car, his right shoe making a rasping sound on the gritty pavement as his bad leg turned in the toe. Harvey walked quickly, didn't run. He made it as far as the car's trunk when Postelwaithe reached for the door to enter the Green Gables.

Harvey called out, "Postelwaithe! Mr. David Postelwaithe!"

Postelwaithe stopped and turned. Harvey walked toward him from behind the car. Postelwaithe built half a smile, like he might know Harvey. *He'll know me in a minute*, Harvey thought, holding the Luger out of sight down against his right leg.

Close now, no more than five feet apart. Postelwaithe looked younger from here, no more than thirty. Unblemished face, clear blue eyes. Hatless, a thick head of blond hair combed straight back off his forehead. He said, "Yes? I'm sorry, I don't recognize you."

Funny thing, Harvey thought he might have recognized Postelwaithe just as he pulled the gun level and shot him in the belly. The Luger made more noise than Harvey expected in the alley, reverberating between the close-in brick walls like thunder in a canyon. The noise fazed him for a second, long enough for Postelwaithe to recover from the initial impact of the shot and move toward him.

Postelwaithe came after Harvey with the assurance of someone who knew how to handle himself in a tough spot. The leg made his move jerky, slowed him down. Harvey

pushed the gun into Postelwaithe's fleshy midsection and shot him again. This time he went down.

Harvey risked a quick look up the alley. Trouble could only come from one side. Escape lay the other direction, over a fence to the hot car parked a block away. No footfalls sounded. Only Postelwaithe's moans as he struggled to catch his breath.

Harvey placed the muzzle of the Luger to Postelwaithe's head an inch above the right ear. Their eyes met, Postelwaithe's searching for some explanation. Harvey said, "You should treat women better." His shot made a Rorschach pattern of brains against the Green Gables's wall.

Harvey ran back past the trash bin thirty yards to the fence, scaled it in one jump. No one on the street, the car right where he left it. He threw the gun into the Mon from the Rankin Bridge. Harvey was home, in bed, by midnight. He never even heard a siren.

He dozed off and on all night, waiting for the morning news. Never occurred to him to turn on the radio, like it wouldn't be real until he saw it in writing. None of the three major papers had anything until the *Post-Gazette* came out with a special around ten o'clock. Harvey bought a copy from a newsie outside a drug store on Braddock Avenue. He snapped the paper under his arm like his interest was no more pressing than what the Pirates did last night and made himself take his time walking home.

He made the headlines.

#### **ATTORNEY GENERAL'S NEPHEW SHOT TO DEATH IN WEST MIFFLIN**

Harvey's guts coiled as he read down the page.

*David Postelwaithe, 28, nephew of Pennsylvania Attorney General Byron W. Dworkin, was shot to death outside the Green Gables Ballroom in West Mifflin last night.*

Harvey's mind ran on two tracks, part reading, part thinking of what he'd got himself into. He kept reminding himself he was clean. No one had seen him, the gun was in the river. He had an alibi as long as Lou and Brownie didn't play the wrong riff. The attorney general's nephew. Harvey wondered how much heat Lou and Brownie could handle if it came to that.

The *Post-Gazette* article had more.

*Postelwaithe, a Marine who earned a Navy Cross on Guadalcanal, had returned to the area to rehabilitate his right leg, almost severed by a mortar round on Okinawa.*

Things Stella told him crowded the newsprint from Harvey's mind. About how Postelwaithe knew someone on the draft board. Hoarding ration coupons. He pushed the thoughts aside. All politicians had pull with the papers. A good flack could make Bruno Hauptmann sound like Pope Pius XII.

*Police are looking for a man seen in the company of Mrs. Stella Griffin Postelwaithe several times over the past few months. Details are unavailable, but Mrs. Postelwaithe is rumored to have described a man who had accosted her on multiple occasions at the Green Gables.*

Harvey turned to the continuation on an inner page thinking she might have described anyone. Everyone there danced with her.

Page 13 had more facts of the crime, comments from the police and not-quite witnesses from the Green Gables. Nothing more about the investigation or whether they had any good leads.

A sidebar story covered four inches of three columns near the inner fold. People who knew Postelwaithe, led by a comment from Stella.

*"Dave and I met dancing, he knew how much I loved it," Mrs. Postelwaithe said. "He couldn't even walk when he got back from the war. He told me he would rather have died over there than to see me shut up in the house all the time, so he encouraged me to go dancing at least once a week while he got his therapy. He gained a lot of weight when he couldn't get around and was finally starting to get back into shape. He said he was looking forward to going with me in another month or so."*

What else would she say? Name one woman who says her dead husband was a malicious SOB who manipulated her. Harvey still knew – *knew* – he only had to let some time pass and Stella and the whole setup would be his.

Another quote caught his eye, three inches down the sidebar.

*"A wonderful man," said Homer Griffin, Mr. Postelwaithe's father-in-law. "I would have lost the farm when I got sick. Davey took care of everything, even gave me the mortgage to burn at their wedding rehearsal dinner."*

Harvey was still trying to reconcile that with what Stella told him when the police kicked in the door to his apartment.

Stella made a great witness. Sobs were heard on several occasions in the gallery when she bravely and without tears told how much she loved her husband. How Harvey accosted her and didn't want to take no for an answer. Under cross-examination she admitted to leaving the Green Gables a time or two for a drink, to avoid causing a scene. No one could identify her at the flop they'd used for their trysts; Harvey had been too careful getting her in and out.

The jury took less than three hours. The judge's grim smile as he read the verdict form and passed sentence showed his satisfaction at a rare opportunity for real justice.

Harvey barely had time to get the routine of Death Row down before he read a three-day-old article in the *Press* about Stella. Story below the fold in the Regional section, how her beloved father fell down the cellar stairs in Brookville reaching for a Mason jar. Broke his neck, dead when the ambulance got there, despite Stella's frantic attempts to revive him.

A sidebar had an interview with Stella, recapping her tragic year. "I can't stay in Brookville anymore," she said to the reporter. "Not losing David and my father within a year. There's nothing here I can bear to look at." The article went on to say she was selling the farm and moving to New York. Already looking for an apartment in Manhattan to take advantage of the year's single saving grace: rising property values.

Harvey kept looking for an angle. Saw guys get weaker as their day approached, like they were disappearing before his eyes. The electric chair just gave someone an excuse to pronounce them. Not Harvey. He asked for the paper every day, stayed current on world events. Acted as though it mattered, like it would be important to him when he got out. The guards gave him a grudging respect. Always on the grift, never giving up. He told them war stories they didn't believe, even though the most outrageous ones were true.

The warden at Western Pen thought of himself as enlightened, wanted the inmates to feel connected to life around them as much as possible, even the walking dead. Let them join the general population for movies twice a month, if they wanted to. Most didn't. Harvey went every time. Wrists and ankles shackled, he sat in the back of the mess hall, no other prisoner within twenty feet, his chair chained to a table so he could see. Caught a lot of good movies that way. *Casablanca*, *All the King's Men*, *Going My Way*.

The last one he saw – a week before they ran the current through him – starred Barbara Stanwyck. Not *Stella Dallas*, the one his Stella recommended to him. This one he'd missed, it came out while he was in Europe. Harvey's minute sense of irony was pretty well shot by then – four days and counting – so he didn't recognize his kinship with the Fred MacMurray character in *Double Indemnity*. Walter Neff. A man who killed a husband for money, and for a woman. He didn't get the money, and he didn't get the woman.

Pretty, isn't it?

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